

**HOW PEOPLE DRAW ON SPIRITUALITY AND UTILIZE COUNSELLING TO  
CREATE EXPERIENCES OF HEALING AND WELLNESS**

by

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## **Abstract**

This narrative study explores the stories and experiences of people who draw on spirituality for healing and wellness. Twelve participants in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia were identified through the purposive sampling of educational and social networks. In order to qualify for the study, participants self-identified as drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness and as having received professional counselling services. Participants identified spirituality as integral to both their experiences of healing and to their experiences of facilitative counselling. In response to a broad variety of mental and physical health crises, participants developed a seven step process of spiritual exploration and development through which they created experiences of healing and wellness. This process includes: (1) openness, (2) shifting to a spiritual perspective, (3) going within, (4) connecting with spirit, (5) clearing, (6) setting a healing intention and (7) following one's inner guidance to healing and wellness. A minority of participants experienced counselling as lacking in spiritual integration and moved onto more spiritually focused practitioners or to other spiritually-based healing modalities. The majority of participants experienced counselling as a spiritual endeavor and identified the spiritually-infused counselling they experienced as an important part of their process of healing. Participants described spiritually-infused counselling as centred in the counsellor's ability to connect to the client on the level of soul and to demonstrate their own holistic development and personal healing in their approach to practice. This study demonstrates the importance of considering spirituality as a dimension of counselling practice.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
Preface .....	viii
Acknowledgements .....	ix
Chapter One-Introduction .....	1
Overview .....	1
Definitions of Major Concepts .....	2
Spirituality .....	2
Wellness and Healing .....	5
The Rise of Spirit in the Discipline of Psychology .....	6
Rationale for the Study .....	9
Chapter Two-Review of the Literature .....	13
Spirit and Psyche: Friends or Foes .....	13
Consequences of the Marginalization of Spirituality .....	16
The New Discourse on Spirituality .....	18
The New Discourse on Spirituality and the Discipline of Psychology .....	23
The New Discourse Impacts the Discipline of Psychology .....	25
Roots of Spirituality in Psychological Research and Practice .....	26
Theoretical Roots of Spirituality in Counselling .....	28
Spirituality, Health and Healing .....	31
Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health .....	34
Spirituality as a Psychological Resource .....	38
Spirituality as a Counselling Intervention .....	41
Gaps in the Quantitative Literature .....	45
Qualitative Research .....	47
Gaps in the Qualitative Literature .....	49
The Current Study .....	51
Chapter Three-Research Methodology .....	53
Research Questions .....	53
Research Design .....	55
Rationale for Narrative Methodology .....	57
Role of the Researcher .....	60
Sample Selection .....	62
Participant Profile .....	63
Data Collection .....	65
Data Management and Analysis .....	72
Reflexivity Revisited .....	76

Representing the Findings.....	77
Criteria for Assessing the Credibility and Contribution of the Study.....	78
Chapter Four-Results.....	81
Section One: Participants' Stories.....	83
Bruce's Story.....	84
Anne's Story.....	86
Eva's Story.....	90
Lila's Story.....	94
Janet's Story.....	96
Katherine's Story.....	99
Robert's Story.....	103
Michaela's Story.....	106
Sigrid's Story.....	109
Silke's Story.....	112
Mia's Story (Re-written by the Participant).....	116
Miriam's Story (Re-written by the Participant).....	120
Section Two: Spirituality and the Path to Healing.....	124
Participants' Definition of Spirituality.....	125
Spirituality is a Unique and Personal Experience.....	125
Spirit is All There is and We are Spirit.....	126
Spiritual Not Religious.....	127
Religion Also Provides an Avenue for Spiritual Expression.....	129
Participants' Journeys to Drawing on Spirituality for Healing and Wellness.....	131
Spirituality is a Journey.....	131
A World of Magic and Wonder: Feeling the Presence of Spirit in Childhood.....	132
The Healing Crisis: Illness and Trauma as a Doorway to Spiritual Exploration.....	133
A Journey of Many Steps.....	136
Reading: the Door to a New Vision of Spirit.....	136
Learning Through Attraction and Experience.....	137
Finding a Community of Support.....	139
Spiritual Experiences Provide Support and Affirmation.....	140
The Journey Becomes the Goal.....	142
Participants' Reflection on the Journey.....	143
Spirituality is an Intrinsic Part of Who I Am.....	143
A New Way of Life.....	145
Summary.....	146
Section Three: Creating Healing and Wellness through Spirituality.....	147
Step 1: Openness.....	148
Step 2: Shifting to a Spiritual Perspective.....	150
Developing a spiritual purpose.....	152
The world comes alive.....	153
And the earth moved.....	155
Step 3: Going Within.....	156
Step 4: Connecting with Spirit.....	158
Step 5: Clearing.....	160



(a) Watching the pattern.....	161
(b) Entering the felt experience.....	163
Patterns are built around unresolved experiences .....	165
Family of origin issues .....	167
Unresolved issues create disease.....	169
(c) Acceptance and surrender.....	171
(d) Making a choice and committing to the process of change.....	173
Step 6: Setting a Healing Intention .....	175
Step 7: Following Your Inner Guidance .....	178
Clearing Brings Us Home .....	180
The Process of Healing: Putting the Pieces Together .....	182
Section Four: Experiences of Healing and Wellness .....	185
Definition of Healing .....	186
Healing is an Experience of Personal Integration .....	186
Healing is About Acceptance.....	187
Definition of Wellness .....	189
Wellness is Being Fully Alive.....	191
Experiences of Healing and Wellness: The Outcomes of the Spiritual Journey.....	192
Healing the Original Issues .....	193
Healing Through Transforming the Self.....	195
Healing Relationships .....	197
Living the Spiritual Life.....	201
Changes on the Inside are Reflected in Changes on the Outside.....	203
Wellness and Generativity .....	206
Coming Full Circle: Seeing Obstacles as Opportunities.....	209
Healing and Wellness: The Outcome of the Spiritual Journey .....	210
Section Five: The Role of Counselling Psychology.....	212
Participants' Exposure to Counselling .....	214
Views of Psychology: Mainstream Approaches .....	215
Views of Psychology: Integrative and Spiritually-Infused Approaches .....	218
Benefits of Counselling.....	220
The Limitations of Counselling: Counselling is "Mental" Process .....	222
A Lack of Spiritual Integration .....	223
Counselling is a Vehicle for Spiritual Healing.....	227
Spiritually-Infused Counselling .....	228
Spiritually-Infused Counselling Facilitates Healing and Growth .....	231
Making a Spiritual Connection, Honouring the Soul.....	232
Effective Counsellors Demonstrate Spiritual Integration .....	235
Active and Proactive Clients.....	240
On My Own.....	241
Counselling is a Step on the Healing Path .....	243
Summary .....	244
Summary of the Results .....	245
Chapter Five-Reflections on the Research Process.....	249
Linguistic and Conceptual Challenges.....	250

Insider/Outsider Positioning.....	251
Finding Surprises.....	252
The Value of the Narrative Approach.....	255
Summary .....	258
Chapter Six-Discussion.....	260
Overview .....	260
Major Concepts and Definitions .....	261
Spirituality.....	261
Healing .....	262
Wellness .....	262
The New Discourse on Spirituality .....	264
Participants' Stories: The Journey of Spiritual Healing.....	267
The Study Reflects the Literature.....	267
The Study Differs From the Literature.....	273
Spirituality and the Process of Healing .....	276
The Study Confirms and Adds Significantly to the Existing Literature .....	276
Summary .....	291
Spirituality, Healing and Counselling.....	294
The Study Reflects the Literature.....	295
The Study Adds to the Literature .....	298
Summary .....	308
Contributions of the Study .....	310
Limitations of the Study.....	313
Recommendations for Future Research .....	316
Recommendations for Counselling Training and Practice.....	317
Conclusion.....	324
References .....	327
Appendix A Telling Their Stories.....	344
The Formal Analysis Supports and Extends the Content Analysis.....	345
It's Hard to Find the Words.....	346
Multiple Identifiers.....	348
Distinctive Vocabulary.....	349
Referring to Experience and Experiencing Emotion.....	350
Deploying Language to Create New Concepts .....	352
Deploying Language as a Tool for Healing .....	353
Demonstration as Confirmation .....	355
Summary: Formal Analysis.....	356
The Literary Analysis Supports and Extends the Content and Formal Analyses .....	357
An Epic Form.....	359
Participants as Spiritual Seekers .....	360
A Meandering Journey .....	361
A Magical World.....	361
Learning Through Experience.....	361

Demonstrable Wisdom.....	362
Coming Home .....	362
A New Kind of Epic.....	363
A New Kind of Hero .....	365
The Formal and Literary Analyses Add to Our Understanding of Participants’ Experiences .....	370
Appendix B Study Flyer.....	372
Appendix C Consent Form.....	374
Appendix D Interview Guide .....	377
Appendix E Demographic Questionnaire .....	379
Appendix F Ethics Approval Form .....	383

## **Preface**

Welcome to a study which investigates how ordinary Vancouverites draw on their spirituality for healing and considers the role that counselling plays in that process. The next few paragraphs are intended to orient you to the layout of the thesis you are about to review.

The following manuscript contains four levels of titles. Each chapter contains chapter titles that are in 14 pt. upper and lower case script, bolded and centred on the page. Major chapter divisions are centred on the page and bolded in upper and lower case script in regular size 12pt font. Section headings are in bolded upper and lower case script and appear on the left hand side of the page. Sub-headings within a particular section are indented and bolded in lower case script beginning with a capital and ending with a period. The thesis is comprised of six chapters and two appendices in total including: an introduction, a literature review, the methodology, results, a reflection on the research process, a discussion and appendices containing secondary formal and literary analyses and the documents used to recruit participants and collect data.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Chapter One-Introduction**

### **Overview**

Spirituality and psychology have always been intertwined in complex ways.

Shamans, witches, healers, and priests were the community leaders originally charged with responding to problems we would now describe as psychological. However, when psychology emerged as an independent enterprise in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fledgling discipline hooked its wagon to the rising star of science, eschewing its spiritual and religious roots in the process. Although the positivist tradition has dominated the discipline for the last century, spirituality has always played a role, particularly in counselling psychology. The awareness of counselling as a spiritual as well as an interpersonal encounter was preserved in the writing of seminal researchers, theorists, and clinicians such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Victor Frankl. A growing popular interest in spirituality over the last 20 years and novel forms of spiritual practice have created the opportunity for a reconsideration of the role of spirituality in the counselling process.

This thesis aims to contribute to the recognition of the role of spirituality in counselling practice. Counselling psychology focuses on helping people with a range of problems in living. These problems cover the gamut of experiences including mental health disorders, trauma, addiction, illness and death, family relationships, career transition, maturing through various life-stages and self-actualization. Depending on the problem at hand, a counsellor aims either to facilitate healing where there has been injury or wellness where current challenges call for ongoing development. The recent explosion of interest in spirituality in popular culture creates a situation where popular change

outpaces disciplinary development in many regards. People are increasingly returning to spiritual approaches to address the problems they face in day to day life. In this thesis, I will be turning to past and current counselling clients to understand how they are using spiritual approaches to facilitate healing and wellness in their lives. Their experiences may well serve to guide practitioners in understanding what clients are seeking from spiritual approaches and how best they might be integrated into counselling practice.

### **Definitions of Major Concepts**

#### **Spirituality**

The major constructs I am considering are spirituality, wellness and healing. The construct of spirituality has been a subject of considerable debate in the literature. In addition to the traditional complaints that spirituality is too “soft” or unscientific a topic for serious study (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Haque, 2001), the popular shift in spiritual practices and viewpoints represented by the new discourse on spirituality has turned the field on its head (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Prior to World War II, religion was viewed as the broader all encompassing category, and spirituality, when it was discussed, was conceptualized as a more personal or mystical experience of the divine experienced within a religious framework (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). The vast majority of scholarship on spirituality within the psychology of religion reflects this emphasis on religious variables and tends to conceptualize religion specifically within a Christian framework (Wulff, 2003).

As popular culture shifted with the counter culture revolution and the birth of a post-industrial society, spirituality emerged as a vital, lived experience of the divine posited against a backdrop of religion which was increasingly painted as formal, institutional, bureaucratic and meaningless (Sutcliffe, 2003). More recently, spirituality

has emerged to reflect the larger catch all category representing one's lived experience of god or spirit whether that exists within or outside of a religious context or tradition (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005; Sutcliffe, 2003; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). The sub-field of the psychology of religion has been slow to respond to the popular shift in understanding. As a result, a survey of the field reveals a confusing array of definitions of spirituality representing all three periods and views of spirituality, and a plethora of instruments each measuring a slightly different construction of spirituality, which promulgates ongoing conceptual confusion in the area (Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

More recently, researchers have started to return to the field and qualitative studies that seek to create an empirical basis for understanding spirituality by surveying popular conceptualizations have emerged. These studies reflect both an investigation of the meaning of spirituality within psychology in general and an investigation of the meaning of spirituality in relation to specific sub-disciplines such as organizational psychology. Common themes from these studies suggest that people view religion and spirituality as over-lapping but distinct concepts and that more people identify with the term spirituality than identify with the term religion (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Popular definitions of spirituality revolve around a personal, lived experience of spirit whether it is variously conceived as god, nature, a higher or greater self, or a greater force in the world. Themes of transcendence, immanence, love, integrity, forgiveness, peace, connection, vitality, and felt experience reflect the all inclusive and unique nature of each person's experience of the spirituality (Freshman, 1999; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).



In defining spirituality for this study, I have chosen to start with Sutcliffe's (2003) definition of spirituality as a "vivid, vital" personal experience of the transcendent, which may be variously conceptualized as a divine being, as nature, as a higher self or greater force within the self and/or the world, depending on the individual (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 214). Sutcliffe's definition recognizes and encompasses the uniquely individual nature and broad variety of people's experiences and understandings of spirit, reflecting the inclusive postmodern framework of the new discourse on spirituality.

In keeping with the empirical literature on the definition of spirituality, I will refine this definition to substitute the word divine for transcendent, encompassing a clearer recognition that the divine may be either or both transcendent and immanent. Qualitative studies further focus on spirituality in particular as an experience as well as a set of beliefs, values and behaviours. I will include the concept of spirituality as a lived experience in the proposed definition. I will also include the concept of one's relationship to the divine as essential to spirituality because the relational nature of spirituality and spiritual experience is the other major theme which emerges from qualitative studies. This theme is visible in the literature's focus on spirituality as providing a sense of connection and as encompassing love, forgiveness and other relational values, behaviours, and experiences (Freshman, 1999; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Thus, the definition of spirituality that will guide this study is that spirituality is conceptualized as a: vivid, vital and personal, lived experience of the divine and one's relationship to it. This definition is intended to create as broad a framework as possible to invite diverse traditional and non-traditional experiences of spirituality to emerge in the study.

## Wellness and Healing

There is considerably more clarity and agreement around the emerging concepts of healing and wellness. As a discipline, psychology tends to reflect a focus on the concepts of coping and development rather than healing or wellness. These concepts have emerged largely from the literature on health but are increasingly making their way into psychology through the influence of health psychology. Following Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky (2003), I am relying on the World Health Organization's (1948, p.100) definition of health "as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Wellness is conceptualized as including "psychological and physical health" (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003, p.198), but extending beyond it. Wellness not only encompasses the practices required to support health, but also practices that reach beyond basic health to further enhance mental, physical, social, and spiritual resources and experiences.

In contrast to the traditional constructs of finding a cure for disease, alleviating symptoms, or increasing coping that are most often reflected in the medical and psychological literature on health, concepts of wellness and healing at once reflect both novel and ancient conceptualizations of health that are in keeping with the holistic focus of the new discourse on spirituality. I draw on Jonas and Chez (2004) to define healing as:

processes of recovery, repair, renewal and transformation that increase wholeness....Healing is an emergent process of the whole system and may or may not involve curing. (p. 172)

Healing is sought when any dimension of health (physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual) and subjective well-being is experienced as being comprised. In keeping with a

holistic framework, these definitions reflect an understanding of the integrated role of mind, body, emotion and spirit in the process and experience of healing rather than being limited to the concept of mind/body dualism traditionally reflected in Western medicine and psychology.

These definitions serve to define and target the central area of investigation while still creating a broad enough framework to capture divergent experiences on the topic. Because of the conceptual confusion around the definition of spirituality in the literature and because the new discourse on spirituality suggests that there has been a shift towards a novel psychological view and use of spirituality for healing, participants' conceptualizations of all of these major concepts are also an important part of my investigation. Thus, investigating participants own understandings of spirituality, healing, and wellness will be an integral part of answering the study's research questions.

### **The Rise of Spirit in the Discipline of Psychology**

Although integral to the development of counselling psychology, spirituality has been marginalized as a topic in disciplinary research and as a resource or consideration in professional practice for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Religious and spiritual questions have traditionally been viewed as unscientific topics of study (Faller, 2001; Haque, 2001). Little funding or support has been available for research in the area, and consequently, in comparison with other domains, there has been relatively little research on spiritual and religious issues in psychology (Faller, 2001; Haque, 2001). Spirituality has also received scant recognition as a consideration in teaching or clinical practice. For example, Faller (2001) notes that very few introductory textbooks even mention religion as a variable in mental health. The relative absence of spirituality from disciplinary

discussions has largely gone unnoticed because psychological history has traditionally been written from the perspective of the dominant positivist paradigm (Leahy, 2000).

Within the clinical sphere, the ascendance of the psychodynamic model of practice in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fostered a general disregard and suspicion of religion and spirituality (Argyle, 2000; West, 2000). From this perspective religion was viewed as a defense mechanism, and potentially as a symptom of disorder (Freud, 1927/1968).

Although models of practice have expanded exponentially, until very recently, psychological training has continued in the long tradition of disregarding spiritual and religious issues (Brawer, Handel, Fabricatore, Roberts & Wajda-Johnson, 2002; Schulte, Skinner, & Claiborne, 2002). As a result, Brawer et al. (2002) estimate that fewer than five percent of clinical practitioners have any training in assessing or addressing spiritual or religious issues in counselling practice.

Over the last 10 years the tables have turned in psychology. Following a broad popular resurgence of interest in spirituality, psychologists have begun to reconsider the soul in psychology. Researchers and practitioners alike are rediscovering the roots of spirituality in psychological research, theory, and practice. Although modest by comparison to other areas, the research on spirituality and religion demonstrates that spirituality offers a rich potential resource both for healthcare and psychological practice and should, at a minimum, be considered in assessment in order to provide prudent and comprehensive psychological services (Lowenthal, 1995; Schulte et al., 2002; West, 2000).

At the optimum, spiritual beliefs and practices may protect against physical and mental disease, promote wellness through helping people cope and develop, and

contribute to the healing of ongoing mental and physical conditions. Spirituality has been clearly and convincingly linked to good mental and physical health and to the prevention of a variety of conditions including depression, suicide, addiction, high blood pressure, and mortality (Krebs, 2003; Larson & Larson, 2003; Mueller, Plevak, & Rummans, 2001; Townsend, Kladder, Ayele, & Mulligan, 2002). Spiritual strategies have been used successfully to cope with a wide variety of illnesses and misfortunes, and are linked to positive mental, physical, and psychosocial outcomes for people living with such conditions as cancer, HIV, and MS (Larson & Larson, 2003; Mueller et al., 2001). Emerging psychotherapy research further suggests that spirituality has considerable value in counselling intervention with spiritual interventions such as meditation and religiously-informed versions of cognitive behavioural therapy showing promising outcomes for treating such problems as depression and addiction (Harris, Thoresen, McCullough & Larson, 1999). The research that we do have suggests that spirituality has great potential for facilitating wellness, and contributing to helping people heal or cope with a broad variety of mental and physical diseases and conditions.

In addition, counsellors, in particular, have begun to acknowledge the role that spirituality plays or can play in psychological practice. A recent survey showed that 85% of counsellors rated themselves as spiritually oriented as compared to only 65% of other mental health professionals (Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). Hickson, Housley and Wage's (2000) survey of counsellors in the American Southwest further found that 90% of counsellors felt that spirituality was a powerful resource for change. In a survey of psychotherapists in the U.S., Canada, and New Zealand, 31% of psychologists said religion greatly influenced their work, while another 33% indicated

that it moderately influenced their interactions in the consulting room (Smith & Orlinsky, 2004). Although traditionally unacknowledged in research and teaching, this study points to the fact that religious and spiritual perspectives are having considerable impact on psychological practice for a significant number of practitioners. West's (2000) research further demonstrates that some counsellors view spirituality as an essential resource for personal grounding in psychological practice and others approach the process of counselling itself as a spiritual practice. Counsellors and counselling psychologists are clearly beginning to see, discuss, and reconsider the value and impact of spirituality in clinical practice.

Clients are similarly interested in the role of spirituality in counselling and health care. Several studies have found that a majority of people who cope with serious physical and mental health issues and personal crises use spirituality as an important means of coping with their challenges (Larson & Larson, 2003). A recent survey of seven community practice sites found that the majority of counselling clients were comfortable discussing religious and spiritual issues in counselling and felt that it was appropriate to do so (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2001). Twenty-five percent of clients in this study reported a clear preference for having these issues addressed as part of the counselling process (Rose et al., 2001). Thus, people who seek or could benefit from counselling services are expressing interest in spirituality as a dimension of healing.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The last 10 years has seen a rise of interest in reconsidering the role of spirituality in counselling practice. Research to date suggests that various forms of spirituality and spiritual practices have potential value as counselling and healing interventions.

Counsellors, counselling psychologists and clients alike are interested in exploring its

potential in practice. The time has come to begin reintegrating and benefiting from this traditionally marginalized resource.

Counselling psychology is in a unique position to facilitate the effective reintegration of spirituality into counselling practice. The American Psychological Association (1999) defines counselling psychology as a:

general practice and health service provider specialty in professional psychology.

... Counselling psychologists help people with physical, emotional and mental disorders improve well-being, alleviate distress and maladjustment, and resolve crises. (p. 589)

According to this definition, counselling psychology is fundamentally concerned with health, healing, wellness, and development. It is the sector of the discipline that addresses the broadest range of practice issues from facilitating wellness, to increasing coping, to generating healing. The strong humanist tradition in counselling psychology also makes it the sector most open to tools which cross or integrate the art of direct practice with the science of research. Counselling psychology then is in a unique position to lead the way in developing effective, evidence-based approaches to reintegrating this potentially valuable therapeutic tool into counselling practice. My study aims to add to the exploration of spirituality's potential contribution to counselling psychology.

The proposed study will add to counselling theory by investigating the conceptual frameworks of people who use spirituality for the purpose of psychological healing and wellness. By considering the diverse understandings and uses of spirituality as an avenue to healing in the postmodern context, this study can contribute to the elaboration of a conceptual framework for spirituality within psychology. A contemporary conceptual

framework for understanding people's process of drawing on spirituality for healing provides rich ground for the development of theoretical models explaining the relationship between spirituality and healing which can then be tested. This process spurs the development and integration of existing theory in the field as well as offering the potential for organizing the broad array of facts we've discovered into empirically-based frameworks which can lend them broader meaning and applicability.

The proposed study also adds directly to counselling practice by providing information on how people use spirituality to address the range of issues that counselling psychologists deal with on a day to day basis. By focusing on client experiences with drawing on spirituality as a psychological intervention, the current study may offer clinicians practical information that can guide their own creation of spiritually-infused interventions which can then be tested. Information that is drawn from clients' experiences is more likely than theory or expert driven models to contribute to designing interventions that work in the real world of clients' lives. This study will also add to the development and testing of practical and appropriate tools for using spiritual interventions in counselling practice.

In summary, the proposed study will contribute to the effective re-integration of spirituality into counselling theory, research and practice. Investigating the way people use spirituality to create wellness and healing promotes the development of theory which can guide and synthesize research findings. Gaining information on the actual practices of former and current clients also offers concrete information on designing interventions that are likely to be easily integrated into counselling practice, contributing to the development and testing of spiritually-infused interventions over time. The proposed



study offers an opportunity to add new and important information to the theoretical, empirical, and practical knowledge base of counselling psychology.

## Chapter Two-Review of the Literature

### Spirit and Psyche: Friends or Foes

Spirituality and psychology have a long, complex and contentious relationship. Shamans, witches, healers and priests were the community leaders originally charged with healing mental, emotional, and physical problems. With the Enlightenment, came new visions of science and reason gradually replacing religious hopes for salvation with the creation of a heaven on earth. Against this back drop of secular optimism, the emerging enterprise of psychology hooked its wagon to the rising star of science in order to establish its legitimacy as an independent discipline in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As part of this process, spiritual and religious questions and conceptualizations were pushed to the margins of the discipline, where they have remained for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although, currently defined as the science of mind and behaviour (Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary, 2002), psychology originally denoted the study of spiritual beings. Vande Kemp (2002) locates the first use of the word *psychologia* in late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, where it was used to delineate a subdivision of pneumatologia: "the science or doctrine of spiritual beings and substances" that particularly pertained to organic beings (p. 228). Leahy (1991) traces the etiology of the word psychology to the Greek terms *psyche* meaning soul and *logos* meaning word or knowledge. He attributes the modern use of the word psychology to 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy where it was defined as "the discipline that knows about the soul" (p. 40).

When psychology came into being in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a multidisciplinary enterprise owing as much to its philosophical and religious roots as to its wholehearted embrace of the scientific method (Jansz, 2004; Vande Kemp, 2002).

Early classes in psychology were taught in departments of philosophy and religious studies (Coon, 2000). Reflection and introspection were legitimate adjuncts to measurement and observation within the new discipline. Wilhelm Wundt, who is generally considered the founder of scientific psychology because he opened the first psychological laboratory in 1879 (Jansz, 2004; Leahy, 1991), viewed psychology as the empirical study of consciousness (Jansz, 2004). Even for Wundt, the distinguishing characteristic of the new science was that it brought novel positivist approaches to science to the task of answering traditional philosophical questions concerning consciousness (Jansz, 2004).

In this early period, religious and spiritual questions were explored alongside now standard psychological topics such as perception and behaviour. Seminal thinkers such as William James (as cited in Coon, 2000, p. 93) pondered the nature and structure of the soul in *Principles of Psychology*, the first text introducing the fledgling discipline to American students. Here his reflections led him to conclude: "I find the notion of some sort of an *anima mundi* thinking in all of us to be a more promising hypothesis, in spite of all its difficulties, than that of a lot of absolutely individual souls." The nature and treatment of the person revolved around questions of the nature and treatment of the soul or the mystery of the spirit during this early period.

Several prominent founders of the discipline including James and Gustav Fechner, who created the first objective system for measuring mental phenomena; a development which made Wundt's laboratory possible, envisioned science as the engine which could bring spiritual truths to light (Coon, 2002; Wilber, 2000). James had a profound interest in spiritualism; a philosophy and movement that suggested that the soul

was eternal and promoted séances as a means of communicating beyond the veil of time. James believed that providing “scientific insight into the eternity of the individual” (as quoted in Coon, 2002, p. 213) through proving the existence of communication with spirits beyond the grave, might form the foundation for a new secular faith. In this way, James looked to the new discipline of psychology to provide a basis for the moral regeneration of post-civil war America. Many of James’ contemporaries on the other hand looked to science to create progress by replacing the dogma of religion with rational explanations for behaviour that could guide the development of a better society.

Thus, while James was still considering questions of the soul, Freud, his European contemporary, was busy separating spirituality from science and therefore from psychology. Freud “conceptualized the psyche as an epiphenomenon of somatic processes,” reducing human consciousness itself to “an effect” of the biological organism (Penn & Wilson, 2000, p. 22). Freud regarded religion as a form of mythology, a primitive defense mechanism that man created to deal with the chaotic and challenging forces of nature. In the *Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1927/1968) argued that religion amounted to the ultimate in wish fulfillment for a father-protector to help provide a sense of justice and hope as a bulwark against the uncertainty of life. Freud believed that science, and by extension, psychoanalysis, offered a means of replacing the “neurotic relics” of religious teachings with “rational grounds for the precepts of civilization” (p. 44). In tune with the tenor of the times, it was Freud’s view that would take hold. Penn and Wilson (2000, p. 22) suggest that Freud’s writing marked a watershed moment in the history of the discipline heralding the “sacrifice of the unique powers generally associated with the human spirit” to the triumph of a rational-biological view of the

human animal and, I would add, a positivist view of science which came to dominate modern psychiatry and psychology.

By 1913, John Watson (1913/1994), the father of behaviourism, offered a radical new definition of psychology that set the tone for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behaviour. Introspection forms no essential part of its methods, nor is the scientific value of its data dependent upon the readiness with which they lend themselves to interpretation in terms of consciousness. (248)

Watson's declaration signaled the victory of a strict positivist paradigm of science in the discipline. From a behaviourist's point of view, even introspection and mental processes are viewed, respectively, as an inappropriate method and an inappropriate topic of inquiry. Questions of the soul and spirit are categorically rejected as religious and therefore unscientific questions within this paradigm of science. Although a consideration of mental processes re-emerged with the cognitive revolution (Leahy, 2002), religious and spiritual questions remained firmly at the margins of research and clinical practice for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Consequences of the Marginalization of Spirituality**

The traditional marginalization of spirituality and religion in psychology is reflected in both research and teaching. Haque (2001, p. 243) argues that the rise of the positivist conception of psychology generated an attitude of "neglect and ridicule" towards spirituality and religion. As a result there was little funding or support for research in the area. Religion was viewed as "soft" topic inappropriate for study in a "hard" science where scholars were interested in serious inquiry (p. 243). While research

on the psychology of religion, an area initiated by James, did continue, this sub-discipline has largely been left to languish unnoticed on the sidelines (Wulff, 2003). In fact, religion and spirituality are most notable by their absence in research and teaching over the course of the century. For example, a review of major psychiatry journals found that only 2.7% of studies published between 1991 and 1995 included religious variables (Weaver et al., 1998). Similarly, Faller (2001) notes few psychology textbooks even mention religion as a variable in human behaviour and functioning.

Religion and spirituality have also traditionally been regarded with suspicion among clinical practitioners. Psychoanalysis dominated early models of treatment from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1950s (Jansz, 2004). From a traditional psychoanalytic perspective, turning to spiritual and religious practices for help is at best a symptom of immaturity and at worst a form of pathology (Argyle, 2000; Lowenthal, 1995). Professional training has been marked by this dismissive attitude towards spiritual matters. Looking through a positivist and/or psychoanalytic lens, psychologists have frequently and falsely linked religion to psychosis because religious iconography shows up in the content of psychotic delusions and hallucinations for some clients (Argyle, 2000; Lowenthal, 1995). Although the field diversified and different theories of treatment emerged over time, the legacy of psychoanalysis persisted in that spirituality and religion by and large came to be viewed as non-issues within the secular scientific framework of counselling.

The marginalization of spiritual and religious issues in practice has had serious implications for clients and counsellors. West (2000) reviews research that suggests that one third of the population have spiritual experiences and are afraid of disclosing them

for fear of being thought crazy. Both British and American studies suggest that some clients do bring spiritual issues and concerns to counselling despite their apprehension (West, 2000). Few counsellors have received training in spirituality and may have difficulty in distinguishing between psychosis with spiritual features and a spiritual crisis with psychotic features (West, 2000). The literature is rife with stories of clients who have been treated inappropriately, first, as a result of counsellors perceiving religious and cultural customs as pathology, or second, as a result of counsellors overlooking religious or spiritual factors that are contributing to the client's problem (Lowenthal, 1995). The rational-positivist model of psychology has led to an over-emphasis on the rational and biological elements of the human experience while often overlooking the emotional, creative, and existential dimensions that give life most of its meaning. The marginalization of spirituality within the discipline has thus led many counsellors to overlook an important part of human experience that has direct relevance for the helping relationship.

### **The New Discourse on Spirituality**

Popular culture, on the other hand, has seen a huge resurgence of interest in religion and spirituality in North America over the last 20 years (Ellingson, 2001; Doyle Driedger, McClelland & Kar, 2001; McDonald, 1994). Immigration and globalization has sparked an interest in Eastern religions in a North American context (Chandler, 2001; Hunt, 2002). The ever quickening pace of change, the progressive decline of economic security that resulted from the recessions of the 1980s and early 1990s, the increasing concentration of wealth, competition for opportunities, and ever expanding work week is causing people to look for security and satisfaction outside of the work-a-day context (Clayton, 1996; Chandler, 2001; Savickas, 2000; Storey, 2000). Ever increasing national

and global mobility means that people are often separated from family, friendship, and community ties that traditionally functioned to create personal meaning and connection (Conlin, 1999). People are increasingly turning to spirituality to fill the void and keep them afloat on a sea of uncertainty.

In addition, secularization, immigration, globalization, and socio-economic changes have also impacted spirituality and religion. A distinctly new form of spiritual practice that reflects the context of a post-modern, post-industrial and global society has emerged on a large scale since the 1960s (Hanegraaff, 2001; Hunt, 2002; Sutcliffe, 2003). What Sutcliffe (2003, p. 223) terms this “new discourse on spirituality” has developed a much broader conceptualization of spirituality as “vivid, vital” personal experience of the transcendent, which may be variously conceptualized as a divine being, as nature, as a higher self or greater force within the self and/or the world, depending on the individual (p. 214).

This discourse challenges the traditional notion of spirituality as being contained within religion, and suggests instead that the experience of spirituality may or may not be expressed in religion (Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). People may adhere to a given creed without experiencing spirituality within that context, or people’s outward adherence to religious rituals and precepts may reflect or be undertaken to experience their sense of spiritual communion. The new discourse on spirituality then posits spirituality as the broader rubric under which both spiritual and religious beliefs and activities can be subsumed. Understanding religion within the context of spirituality is a fundamentally new way of thinking about spirituality which has led to completely new approaches to spiritual and religious practice.



Within the context of this new discourse, spirituality is an experience, an expression, and a practical tool for healing and self-development. While mystical experiences may be an important part of spirituality, the emphasis in this discourse is on its function. Spirituality is grounded in daily practices that serve to facilitate healing and development. The practitioner applies specific spiritual strategies to “make things work”, achieve goals, and “create meaning in everyday life” (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 221). This stands in sharp contrast to a traditional religious framework where spiritual practices take place to relate oneself to the divine first and foremost. If healings happen they are a by-product of faith and a blessing, not a central goal or proof of spiritual development.

Unity and holism is another central theme in this discourse (Hanegraaff, 2001). There is an emphasis on seeing the unity amidst diversity, whether that is appreciating the common threads of humanity across culture, or the common truths in religious writings from various traditions. In contrast to Cartesian dualism, body-mind-spirit holism is emphasized. Problems with the body are conceptualized as also being problems of the mind and spirit. Similarly, personal challenges are viewed as reflecting larger social and global problems. The tools used for healing within this context thus reflect a combination or synthesis of physical, mental, emotional, and social strategies as well as those that are traditionally considered spiritual. Treatment and healing for the individual and society centres around regaining a sense of unity and balance between aspects of the individual, between individuals, between nations, and between human society and the environment (Hanegraaff, 2001).

Syncretism is another feature of this discourse. Hammer (2001) traces the way in which popular authors identify similar concepts across traditions and “disembed” them

from their context, ignoring significant differences (p. 45). This allows them to reconstitute diverse ancient practices in new settings or to synthesize completely new practices under the rubric of ancient spiritual wisdom. Hence practices from traditions as disparate as Gnostic Christianity, Neo-Paganism, Hinduism, and Native North American Shamanism are practiced in combination with one another or synthesized outside of the traditional initiation that would normally take place in each school. McGuire (quoted in Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 204-205) provides the example of a healing group member who combined "rebirthing, crystal healing, colonics, meditation journals, shiatsu and dance therapy" to epitomize the way people weave "complex, eclectic, and continually changing strands" together to create "personal beliefs and practices" within this discourse.

In true North American fashion individualism is prized in this discourse. Although people may join groups, and participate in traditional or novel religious activities, the individual is the ultimate authority on his or her own spiritual practice and relationship to the divine. Each individual is viewed as containing a "God-spark, or central infusion of divinity" that can be developed (York, 2001, p. 364). Great emphasis is placed on intuition and subjective emotional experience in this process, with "our passions, enthusiasms, and feelings" viewed as clues to the practices and activities that will enhance our "innate" connection with spirit (Sutcliffe, 2003, p. 218). While teachers, healers, ministers, and guides may be sought for support, each person is regarded as the ultimate authority on determining the unique combination of spiritual practices that will be most helpful and fulfilling to him or her.

Psychology is also fundamental to the new discourse on spirituality. Reid (quoted in Hunt, 2003, p. 136) notes the “conflation of psychological and religious language” and concepts that intertwine new spiritual solutions with traditional psychological knowledge in this discourse. For example, the Church of Scientology is based on offering a system for clearing painful past experiences stored in our unconscious that keep us from developing our full potential; clearly a Freudian take on spiritual progress (Hunt, 2003). Psychological practices including dream work, Gestalt therapy, re-birthing, and dance therapy are considered spiritual practices within this framework (Sutcliffe, 2003). One mediates or prays not simply as an act of devotion but rather to transform one’s consciousness. Self-realization and self-development are the engines which drive the new spirituality (Heelas, 1996; Hunt, 2003). Hunt (2003) notes that “while religious healing systems in the past were principally involved with physical healing, the primary concern now is with emotional and psychological restoration or improvement” (p. 184).

The new discourse on spirituality is having a broad-based impact on Western society. Its presence can be seen in everything from Telus ads espousing the pan-religious theme “we’re all connected” to the proliferation of yoga and meditation classes and the advent of mainstream television shows about witches, angels, and personal healing. Within a religious context, the impact of this discourse can be seen in the rise of Pentecostal, charismatic, and fundamentalist churches. These churches emphasize: a) a personal emotional experience of god; b) democratic access to divine as reflected in the common display of mystical experiences such as speaking in tongues, or in minimal institutional structure and a reliance on lay leadership; and, c) the use of spirituality for healing and self-development with a rise in faith healing services being one example of

this trend (Hunt, 2003). While the congregations of traditional mainline churches have been declining in the West, these denominations have been growing by leaps and bounds and are particularly popular among the young and affluent (Hunt, 2003).

The new discourse on spirituality is also reflected in a plethora of new religious movements such as the Unification church or the Rajneesh movement, and in the assorted array of individual writers, practitioners or practices reflecting these common themes which are generally collected under the label of the “New Age” movement (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003). Inspirational or “New Age” literature is one of the fastest growing segments of the publishing market (“The New New Age”, 2002). The influence of Eastern religious traditions is felt in the popularity of Buddhist and Hindu practices and Eastern culture. Spiritual leaders who represent themes of unity and social justice such as Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama have become world-wide celebrities on the order of pop stars. Bainbridge (1997) calls the New Age the “most formidable thorough-going religious culture that currently exists in modern society” (p. 371). Hunt (2003) notes the impact of New Age themes in “medicine, sport, leisure, education, dying and grieving, self-help, animal welfare” and “management training” (p. 145). Further, he argues that:

holistic consciousness has already made incisive roads into public thinking about such issues as ecology, peace, gender, and health. ... Success can also be measured by the growth of green politics and green products—taking the movement from the alienated fringes of public life to its centre. (p. 145)

### **The New Discourse on Spirituality and the Discipline of Psychology**

The new discourse on spirituality both supports and challenges the discipline of psychology. On the one hand, psychological practices have been transformed into spiritual practices within this dialogue. This discourse supports a new openness towards

psychological therapy as an acceptable part of a healing journey. In addition, the large scale utilization of psychological concepts and strategies promotes self-awareness, self-care, and effective coping in popular culture.

On the other hand, this discourse poses spirituality as a new solution to psychological problems. Psychological tools and techniques are being adapted and repackaged to contribute to new forms of "spiritual" healing (Heelas & Kohn, 1986). A whole new class of healers, shamans, and spiritual counsellors are emerging who offer largely untested therapies in place of or mixed with traditional psychological treatment. As Needleman (as quoted in Heelas & Kohn, 1986, p. 296) observes: "The shrinks are beginning to sound like gurus, and the gurus are beginning to sound like shrinks." "Spiritual change has become a major mental health growth industry" (Lambert, Garfield & Bergin, 2004, p. 817), appealing to the same group of white, educated, middle-class men, and particularly women, who have traditionally been prominent consumers of private psychological services and who are similarly drawn to charismatic churches (Hunt, 2003).

Heelas (1996) suggests that the new spirituality has arisen to fill the gaps left by the bureaucratization of modern institutions including the discipline of psychology. It offers a focus on emotional expression and creative or holistic therapies in contrast to the emphasis on cognitive-behavioural treatment and the increasing integration of psychoactive medication. It offers direct and informal interpersonal relationships between spiritual teachers or healers and their clients in contrast to the formal, rule-bound relationships implied in obtaining professional psychological services. It offers an array of practices set within a psychological framework that the seeker can mix and match to

suit him or herself and access at any time as opposed to relying on the help of an expert who may provide fewer options and is only accessible at certain times. The new spirituality challenges the rationalism, scientism, and objectivity of mainstream psychological practice.

The new discourse on spirituality represents a fundamental shift in spiritual or religious practice that has implications for the discipline of psychology. Within this context psychology and spirituality have melded together. Psychological techniques have become spiritual healing tools and spirituality itself is being used for physical and psychological healing purposes. The discourse both supports and challenges the discipline of psychology. Despite its widespread implications for psychological practice, there are almost no studies enquiring into this new popular conceptualization of spirituality from a psychological perspective (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001).

### **The New Discourse Impacts the Discipline of Psychology**

The new discourse on spirituality has also had a significant impact on developments in the discipline of psychology itself over the last 10 years. The growing interest in spirituality in psychological circles, and the postmodern turn in social sciences in general, is reflected in psychological discourse. For example, there has been a rise in interest in emotionally-focused treatments, expressive therapies, integrative body-mind interventions, narrative therapies focused on storytelling and the re-construction of the self, and solution-focused approaches emphasizing minimal functional interventions and clients' own healing resources.

There has also been an explosion of interest in Eastern religions and in integrating Eastern religious concepts and techniques such as mindfulness, Zen, and meditation into counselling interventions. This has given rise to new forms of treatment including

Linehan's (1993) Dialectical Behaviour Therapy which incorporates Zen concepts (Worthington & Sandage, 2002), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Teasdale et al., 2000) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zin et al., 1998), which incorporates mindfulness concepts and meditation. All of these treatments show promising outcomes in research with particular populations (Proulx, 2003; Teasdale et al., 2000; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). As yet untested models of Buddhist therapy have emerged as a new theoretical framework (e.g., Brazier, 2003; Epstein, 1995), and the development of energy psychology also comes from the influence of Eastern healing traditions including yoga and acupuncture (Hover-Kramer, 2002).

Significant steps have been made to integrate spirituality into the fabric of psychology. Although largely in response to cultural and diversity concerns, the A.P.A. (1993, as cited in Schulte et al., 2002) published a guideline on responding to clients religious and spiritual needs to prevent discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation. There are widespread calls for training on spiritual and religious issues in counselling and clinical programs (e.g., Brawer et al., 2002; Schulte et al., 2002; West, 2000). There are a growing number of theoretical offerings on integrating spirituality and religion into clinical practice (e.g., Hinterkopf, 1998; Kelly, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 2000; 2005; Shafranske, 1996; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). There is new funding to support research on spirituality and religion (Clay, 2003; Lambert et al., 2004). Psychology as a discipline is experiencing a resurgence of interest in spirituality and is once again returning to considering questions of the spirit and the soul as well as the mind and behaviour.

### **Roots of Spirituality in Psychological Research and Practice**

If we look back into the history of psychology with the lens of spirit, it becomes clear that despite its early rejection, spirituality and religion have remained intricately

woven into the fabric of the discipline. Even as the mainstream turned away from spiritual issues, work on spirituality and religion continued at the fringes of the discipline. Psychologists who remained inspired either to prove or disprove the value of religious experience set out to apply the positivist method to studying the psychological impact and effects of religious practices. Called the “sleeping beauty” of the discipline (Roelofsma, Corveleyn, & van Saane, 2003, p. 7), the psychology of religion has quietly continued accumulating data on the physical and psychological effects of religious faith, church attendance, and membership in religious organizations as the years have passed.

Spirituality and religion have been particularly influential in applied psychology and counselling practice. Before the rise of the psychology and psychiatry as separate disciplines, severe mental and emotional problems-ranging from psychosis to depression-were defined and “treated” as spiritual and religious issues. Medicine men, shamans, and witches addressed the spiritual ills of local villagers (Argyle, 2000; West, 2000). Even with the advent of the church, “magical-religious remedies” were the norm where medical solutions failed in the medieval period (Peeters, 1996, p. 205). The church provided respite care, religious guidance and treatment, and a variety of saints to which one could pray to obtain a cure (Peeters, 1996). Exorcisms of the evil spirits believed to cause mental illness were still being performed to affect a cure well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Peeters, 1996).

As psychology was being founded in the modern period, pastoral settings provided an early home for the development of counselling and psychotherapy in the United States. The Emmanuel movement of Reverend Worcester combined religious and psychological ideas in treating alcoholism, depression, and anxiety. Worcester’s



bestseller: *Religion and medicine: the moral control of nervous disorders*, and the psychotherapy training courses he initiated, sparked a “veritable psychotherapy movement” that endured until the end of World War I (Abma, 2004, p. 102). The development of counselling and psychotherapy in a pastoral setting remained the other sub-stream of psychology where religion and spirituality flourished over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This sub-discipline is rapidly being rediscovered as interest in religious forms of therapy grows and as clinicians look for inspiration regarding how to develop and implement spiritual interventions in counselling practice. Despite their extended marginalization within psychology, religion and spirituality have played a central historical role in the treatment of mental illness and in the development of counselling and psychotherapy in North America.

### **Theoretical Roots of Spirituality in Counselling**

Spirituality has also played an important role in counselling theory and practice. Spirituality has been a particularly strong and consistent theme within humanist and existential streams of counselling theory. For example, Abraham Maslow (1970), a leading figure in the humanist and transpersonal movement, was profoundly critical of what he saw as psychology’s “exclusion of the sacred and transcendent from the jurisdiction of science” (p. 16). He argued that “religious questions ... are valid questions, that these questions are almost the same as the deep, profound, and serious ultimate concerns of the sort ... by which I would define humanistic psychology” (p. 47). Maslow argued that the core-religious experience was one of spiritual transcendence. He saw these experiences as essentially therapeutic, leading people to self-actualize and develop a consciousness of unity and a concern with ultimate values that he believed to be definitive of the “fully human person” (p. 95). For Maslow, ultimate values “are and

should be the far goals of psychotherapy” (p. 57), and facilitating the transcendent experiences that aid in their realization is central to the business of psychology.

Carl Rogers, who is widely considered the father of contemporary non-directive counselling and psychotherapy (Abma, 2004), came to see counselling itself as a spiritual process towards the end of his life. In 1986 he described how his own experience of spirituality during the counselling relationship--a characteristic he called *presence*--was facilitative of healing. He said:

I find that when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing.  
(Rogers, 1986/1989, p. 137)

At this point of contacting the “transcendental core” of himself, Rogers (1986/1989, p.137) dropped all sense of technique sometimes behaving in strange ways that he could not explain logically but which appeared nevertheless to be appropriate and to contribute to psychotherapeutic healing. “At those moments” he says:

it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger.  
Profound growth and healing and energy are present. (p. 137)

Rogers in his exquisite mastery of the core conditions, which focus on creating something akin to a meditative awareness of the essence of the other person, discovered a spiritual centre to the process of counselling.

Similarly, Victor Frankl differentiates his form of psychotherapy from others by its integration of the spiritual dimension of existence. He introduced *logotherapy* in his

1972 book the *Doctor and the Soul* by saying: "A psychotherapy which not only recognizes man's spirit, but actually starts from it may be termed logotherapy" (p. xi). By this definition, he acknowledges the spiritual realm as fundamental to human existence and to any therapy that seeks to address human problems. He also recognizes "spiritual distress" as a legitimate means of conceptualizing some of the issues that clients bring. Frankl's aim is not to completely overhaul psychotherapy theory but rather to realize it more fully. He explains: "It is not the aim of logotherapy to take the place of existing psychotherapy but to complement it, thus forming a picture of man in his wholeness—which includes the spiritual dimension" (p.xi).

While Rogers recognizes the importance of spirituality in the process of counselling, and Frankl recognizes the spiritual dimension as central to conceptualizing clients' issues and experiences, Ken Wilber turns the whole enterprise on its head. Rather than integrating spirituality into counselling or psychological theory, Wilber integrates psychology into the wider world of spirituality or "integral studies" as he terms it. In sharp contrast to Watson's focus on behaviour, Wilber's definition of the discipline returns to an earlier focus on consciousness that encompasses both spirit and behaviour. Psychology, he says, "is the study of human consciousness and its manifestations in behaviour" (2000, p. i). His integral psychology expressly includes the study of "body, mind, soul, and spirit" as part of the structures of consciousness. For Wilber, psychology is useful in so far as it is fundamentally concerned with helping people develop their consciousness to greater and more profound levels of awareness. The task of the integral therapist is no less than facilitating the unfolding of spirit itself.

Wilber argues that the common thread between various forms of therapy is the quest to develop the client's awareness. For Wilber, "awareness in and of itself is curative" (2000, p. 99). Psychopathology consists of blocks in development where aspects of consciousness have not been integrated and transcended so that new levels of awareness and development can be fully attained. Wilber believes that Western psychotherapies are useful at basic levels of human development but have a limited capacity to contribute to developing awareness at higher levels of evolution. He integrates Western psychotherapies with Eastern spiritual techniques such as meditation, yoga, and tantra to make up the difference, providing the integral therapist a broad range of tools to address the blocks that can arise throughout the developmental process. Wilber encapsulates the considerable challenge of integral therapy in saying:

A full-spectrum therapist works with the body, the shadow, the persona, the ego, the existential self, the soul and the spirit, attempting to bring awareness to all of them, so that they may all join consciousness in the extraordinary return voyage to the Self and the Spirit that grounds and moves the entire display. (p.109)

By Wilber's definition, integral therapy is essentially a process of facilitating spiritual development that is reflected in concrete gains in all areas of functioning including physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual health.

### **Spirituality, Health and Healing**

As interest in spirituality resurfaced in the discipline of psychology, researchers and practitioners ventured back into the psychological literature looking for information only to discover and awaken the "sleeping beauty" of the psychology of religion.

Although historically sidelined, this sub-discipline has steadily accumulated a wealth of information on religion, and spirituality as it was expressed in a religious context over the

years. Owing to the positivist focus of mainstream research and the quest to legitimate its choice of subject, this sub-discipline has virtually dedicated itself to doing quantitative research that proves the positive impact of religion on mental and emotional health (Wulff, 2003). Although diverse forms of spirituality including non-religious spirituality are beginning to be added into its focus, the vast majority of information in the area reflects a Judeo-Christian expression of spirituality and religious behaviour (Wulff, 2003).

The psychology of religion offers a considerable body of empirical evidence that suggests that religion is positively related to good physical and mental health. In terms of physical health, research reviews and meta-analyses of correlational and experimental studies have concluded that religious activity and/or involvement is variously associated with: lower blood pressure (Townsend, Kladder, Ayele, & Mulligan, 2002), increased longevity (Larson & Larson, 2003; McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000; Townsend et al., 2002), increased immune function (Townsend et al., 2002), increased functional ability among the elderly (Kilpatrick & McCullough, 1999), quicker and less complicated surgical recovery (Larson & Larson, 2003; Townsend et al., 2002), decreased pain in cancer patients (Krebs, 2003), increased post-surgery survival (Krebs, 2003; Larson & Larson, 2003), lower rates of cardiovascular disease and associated mortality (Mueller et al., 2001), and positive health practices including more frequent exercise, healthier eating, and less use of alcohol and tobacco among adults and teens (Larson & Larson, 2003).

This body of research as a whole has been criticized for its preponderance of correlational data, which can't provide causal information. With correlational studies it is

hard to know on the face of things whether, for example, those who attend religious services frequently function better or those who function better attend religious services more frequently. Social support and positive health behaviours have been identified as variables which mediate the relationship between religion and health outcomes in a number of regression studies (Argyle, 2000; McCullough et al., 2000). While these factors are important and more variables may await discovery, they don't fully explain the effects of religion on health. A distinct religious factor, which some argue reflects the positive attitudes and emotions associated with religious involvement itself, is an irreducible part of the positive relationship between religious involvement and physical health (Argyle, 2000; Larson & Larson, 2003).

Despite the fact that there are a very limited number of experimental studies in the area, longitudinal studies provide support for numerous consistent cross-sectional findings, adding up to strong and striking results in some domains. For example, McCullough et al. (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of 42 correlational studies on religion and all cause mortality using statistical controls for 15 critical variables. They found that those who scored high in religious involvement were 29% more likely to be alive at follow-up than those who scored low. Although their results revealed only a small effect size of .10, it was a robust effect, holding true regardless of the length of the follow-up period. Larson & Larson (2003) reviewed longitudinal studies that followed large population samples over long periods using numerous controls for differences in factors impacting longevity and found a similar effect. They highlight one such study in particular that tracked a sample of 21,000 U.S. adults for nine years and found that attending religious services more than once per week increased longevity by seven years

for Caucasians and 14 years for African Americans. Although the causal links have yet to be defined, Larson & Larson conclude that when variables as possibly complex and multi-determined as church attendance produce significant associations with health in large representative samples across many studies, a significant and stable relationship has been uncovered.

### **Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health**

Numerous research reviews and meta-analyses have similarly identified a strong positive relationship between religion and mental health. Studies from twenty-six countries reveal a strong association between religious involvement and a lowered risk for suicide in older Judeo-Christian adults (Townsend et al., 2002). A recent U.S. study found that those who didn't participate in religious services committed suicide at four times the rate of those who participated frequently in religious services (Larson & Larson, 2003). Religious involvement also seems to have a prophylactic effect against anxiety and addiction. Religious involvement has been linked to lower incidences of anxiety and fear in a recent analysis of data from almost 70 cross-sectional and prospective reports (Mueller et al., 2001). Studies consistently find that religious involvement predicts lower rates of alcohol and drug use and abuse among both teens and adults (Larson & Larson, 2003; Mueller).

Allport made a seminal contribution to the psychology of religion in distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic expressions of religiosity (Argyle, 2000). According to Argyle, "Intrinsics are real believers and take their religion seriously. Extrinsics see it more as a means to other ends" (p. 31). Intrinsic religiosity is marked by such variables as valuing time spent in private prayer and basing one's approach to life on one's religious philosophy (Argyle). In this way, intrinsic religiosity reflects a

religious expression of spirituality (Smith & Orlinsky, 2004). It measures an outlook where religious activities are being undertaken to experience or express a sense of spiritual connection which may or may not be the case for religious involvement as measured by church attendance alone.

In addition to church attendance on its own, the research highlights the role of intrinsic religiosity in particular in mental health. For example, studies from around the world demonstrate that people who highly value their faith and who participate in religious services and groups have a lower incidence of depression (Larson & Larson, 2003; Mueller et al., 2001; Townsend et al., 2002). Religious faith also appears to play a role in depression recovery, with subjects who ranked their religious faith as very important recovering faster than those who did not (Larson & Larson). For example, in one study of depression among the seriously ill elderly, every 10 point increase on an intrinsic religiosity scale was related to a 70% increase in the speed of recovery (Larson & Larson, 2003). Belief in god and self-identified religiosity has also been associated with a reduced risk for suicide (Mueller). Findings extend across the age spectrum with teens who attend religious services and have high levels of spiritual support being least at risk for depression (Larson & Larson). The positive relationship between religious attendance, personal religiosity and a reduced risk of depression and suicide is a significant, generalized, and well-established finding.

Bergin (1991) and colleagues have conducted a number of studies comparing college students with intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations at Brigham Young University. Those who were intrinsically religious had fewer mental health problems and more positive traits. Those who were extrinsically religious had more problems and less



positive traits. The intrinsically religious also had depression scores that were substantially lower than means from other collages and well within the normal range. These findings are supported by a meta-analysis of 115 U.S. studies that found that intrinsic religiosity is positively correlated and extrinsic is negatively correlated with a variety of measures of mental health (Argyle, 2000).

These findings strongly suggest that the religious factor that is associated with positive mental and physical health may be spirituality. Although we've seen that religious attendance alone has a substantial relationship to physical health, we know that this relationship is moderated by social support and positive health behaviours. When it comes to the more sensitive variable of mental health, findings have further demonstrated that intrinsic religiosity-- which amounts to spirituality expressed and experienced in a religious context --is an important factor. Bergin and colleagues suggest that intrinsic religiosity is associated with mental health while extrinsic is associated with problems. One potential interpretation that makes sense of these discrepant findings may be that it is spirituality expressed in part in church attendance that is the religious factor related to both positive physical and mental health that research in the psychology of religion captures. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that non-religious measures of spirituality correlate as strongly or even more strongly than religious measures with indicators of positive mental health in several recent studies (MacDonald & Holland, 2003; Laubmeier et al., 2004; Piedmont, 2004; Simoni, Martone & Kerwin, 2002; Somlai & Heckman, 2000; Young et al., 2000).

Research on the psychology of religion has recently begun to expand to include non-Judeo-Christian and non-religious conceptualizations of spirituality. The most

common approach to dealing with the broader conceptualization of spirituality represented by the new discourse on spirituality has been to integrate non-religious conceptualizations with religious conceptualizations. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison, 1983; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982) provides one example of a measure that represents this trend. Although the scale has been critiqued for a Judeo-Christian bias in its use of the word god in the religious scale (Wulff, 2003), it has nevertheless been widely used in recent research (Genia, 2001).

The Spiritual Well-being Scale is composed of two central subscales; one labeled religious well-being which measures religious forms of spiritual expression, and one labeled existential well-being which measures non-religious forms of spiritual expression. These two major scales have been found to be independent factors measuring different constructions of spirituality (Genia, 2001). High scores on the Spiritual Well-Being Scale have been negatively correlated with measures of mental illness (MacDonald & Holland, 2003). The existential scale in particular has been related to mental health perhaps because it captures a broader interpretation of spirituality that both religious and non-religious, or theistic and non-theistic people may endorse (MacDonald & Holland, 2003; Laubmeier et al., 2004). Various other measures of non-religious spirituality have similarly been related to mental and even physical health in recent studies (see for example, Laubmeier et al., 2004; Piedmont, 2004; Simoni et al., 2002; Somlai & Heckman, 2000; Young et al., 2000).

In summary, research on the psychology of religion has provided us with a considerable amount of data suggesting that spirituality in both a religious and non-religious form may have a significant role to play in maintaining wellness and preventing

physical and mental health problems. Despite the need for more experimental studies and the importance of beginning to tease apart the mechanisms underlying how spirituality is related to health (McCullough et al., 2000; Mueller et al., 2001; Harris et al., 1999), there is clear evidence that this relationship is strong, positive, and robust. It is clear that spirituality is related to the prevention of depression, anxiety, suicide, and addiction; to the adoption and maintenance of positive health behaviours; and to indicators of positive mental health and social functioning. It is also clear that spirituality is related to increased longevity, decreased incidence of illnesses such as high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease and speedier and less complicated recovery from physical and mental diseases. Overall, this body of research indicates that spirituality has great potential for maintaining wellness, promoting health, and contributing to the healing of various physical and mental diseases.

### **Spirituality as a Psychological Resource**

Research on the psychology of religion also provides evidence to suggest that spirituality may be particularly useful in counselling practice. People to whom a counselling psychologist might regularly be expected to provide services: people with mental and physical health problems, and people facing serious life crises report using spirituality to cope with their difficulties. Many studies suggest that spiritual and religious strategies have been effective in helping people respond to a variety of challenging situations.

For example, 86% of patients who are in hospital or in long-term care facilities report using religion to cope (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2004). The elderly, in particular, have been found to turn to religion for help, comfort, and healing. Five separate studies reported that between 73.4-95 % of their population of older adults

used religious coping strategies (Emery & Pargament, 2004). Another recent study reported that 80% of the 400 psychiatric patients surveyed used religious coping strategies (Larson & Larson, 2003). Commonly used coping strategies in order of importance include: prayer, attending religious services, worshipping god, meditation, reading scriptures, and meeting with a spiritual leader (Larson & Larson, 2003).

A number of recent reviews and meta-analyses have found that spiritual and religious coping is related to better physical and mental health and improved psychosocial outcomes across a variety of conditions. For example, using religious or spiritual coping strategies has been linked to better social support and less depression among the acutely ill (Larson & Larson, 2003); less depression, anxiety and better social and family functioning among cancer patients (Laubmeier et al., 2004; Schnoll, Harlow & Brower, 2000); more hope and better psycho-social adjustment for those with MS (McNulty, Livneh, & Wilson, 2004); reduced anxiety among those diagnosed with HIV; less depression and more functional mobility for elderly women recovering from surgery for hip fractures (Larson & Larson, 2003); and better immune function (more T and helper cells) for women with breast cancer (Sephton, Koopman, Schaal, Thoresen, & Spiegel, 2001).

Spiritual and religious coping has also been linked to better outcomes for those coping with stressful life events such as the death of a child (Argyle, 2000), the death of a spouse, or divorce (Mueller et al., 2001). For example, people who attended religious services and used their faith to find meaning and work through the loss of a child reported lower levels of distress than those who didn't use these coping strategies 18 months after the loss (Argyle, 2000). In psychiatric populations, religious coping has been related to

shorter hospital stays, less alcohol use, less depression, increased life satisfaction and less overall symptoms of disorder (Larson & Larson, 2003).

One of the major contributions of coping research has been that it has drawn a distinction between effective and ineffective or harmful religious and spiritual coping strategies. Pargament's work (Emery & Pargament, 2004; Pargament et al., 2004), in particular, has focused on understanding the effects of spiritual coping strategies that draw on the Judeo-Christian tradition. Strategies which emphasize a supportive and collaborative relationship with the divine such as benevolent religious reappraisals of problems, partnership with god, and drawing on spiritual or religious groups for support are related to better quality of life and lower levels of depression, anxiety, and anger (Makros & McCabe, 2003). Strategies which emphasize a distant or punitive relationship with the divine such as appraising problems as punishment, focusing on anger with god, doubting the help or support available through spiritual and religious avenues, and feeling that one is being left to cope alone, are strategies related to higher levels of depression and anxiety, and lower mood and self-esteem scores (Makros & McCabe, 2003).

Both positive and negative spiritual coping strategies have significant but opposite effects on behaviour and functioning. For example, a recent study found that while positive coping strategies combined with religious attendance to predict a reduced risk of mortality among elderly patients who were seriously ill, those with negative coping strategies had a significantly increased risk of mortality, and negative coping predicted declines in independence in those that survived (Larson & Larson, 2003). Negative coping strategies may reflect spiritual distress that contributes to a client's presenting

issues or that can undermine the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions, signaling a need for the clinical assessment of spiritual and religious issues.

Altogether the literature provides clear evidence that many people who may receive or could benefit from counselling services use spiritual and religious strategies to cope with mental, emotional, physical and social problems. Although this research reflects some of the same limitations as the rest of the research on spirituality and health in terms of an over-reliance on correlational data, it provides evidence to suggest that spiritual interventions help people respond effectively to illness and life crises. By beginning to tease apart the types of spiritual strategies which are and which are not helpful, this research also highlights the critical importance of exploring religious and spiritual issues in clinical assessment. Negative spiritual coping may reflect spiritual distress that needs to be addressed for counselling and medical interventions to be optimally effective, while positive spiritual coping may provide the client with a powerful resource for healing.

### **Spirituality as a Counselling Intervention**

As interest in spirituality has grown within psychology, researchers and clinicians alike have begun to consider the use of spiritual interventions within the consulting room itself. However, research in this area is only in its infancy. For example, in reviewing the evidence on spirituality in psychotherapy outcome research, Lambert et al. (2004, p.817) express both surprise and dismay that "psychotherapy research has hardly touched this potential source of therapeutic effects." Nevertheless, several specific interventions and approaches to spiritually-infused therapy have shown promise in experimental conditions.

Integration therapies that blend standard cognitive-behavioural approaches to dealing with depression with religious concepts have been shown to be as effective as

secular treatments for depression for religious clients (Lambert et al., 2004; Harris et al., 1999). One study which randomly assigned religious clients to an integration of cognitive behavioural therapy with religious content, standard cognitive behavioural therapy, or a wait list control group found that clients in the integration group achieved the lowest post-treatment depression scores (Propst, Ostrom, Watkins, & Dean, 1992). A particularly interesting aspect of this research was that clients receiving the religious therapy from non-religious counsellors had the best outcomes, suggesting that secular clinicians may be just as effective in using spiritual and even religious interventions as pastoral counsellors (Larson & Larson, 2003). Other studies have found similarly positive results for cognitive behavioural therapy that integrates Koranic concepts for Islamic clients with anxiety and depression (Mueller et al., 2001; Townsend et al., 2002). In addition, Linehan's Dialectical Behaviour Therapy which integrates cognitive behavioural therapy and Zen concepts may be the first significantly successful treatment for borderline personality disorder (Worthington & Sandage, 2002).

Meditation is one of the most commonly researched interventions in the area. As an intervention in its own right, meditation has been found to reduce anxiety, high blood pressure, pain and physical symptoms associated with a variety of health conditions, and increase confidence, self-esteem, self-control, and empathy (Murphy & Donovan, 1998). Meditation has been successfully used as an adjunct to addiction treatment reducing withdrawal symptoms, increasing well-being and self-esteem (Harris et al., 1999) and reducing alcohol and drug use in a range of settings (Murphy & Donovan, 1998).

Meditation has also recently been integrated into a variety of therapy protocols based on cognitive-behavioural approaches and aimed at facilitating psycho-social coping

for people with various health problems and treating depression and anxiety associated with health problems. Studies initially show that Kabat-Zin's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is effective in reducing anxiety and psychological distress and increasing a sense of control and empathy (Baer, 2003; Proulx, 2003). In one study, cancer patients achieved a 65% reduction in mood disturbance and a 30.7% reduction in stress by attending this group treatment (Proulx, 2003). Similarly, Teasdale's (et al., 2000) Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy is showing success in preventing relapse in depressed clients, and Ornish's integrative intervention for heart disease which includes meditation has been shown to improve health and reduce heart disease in coronary patients (Harris et al., 1999).

Alcoholics Anonymous is another spiritually-infused intervention that reflects an integration of spiritual and psychological concepts with social support. Although some formal treatment programs are based on the Minnesota Model which integrates a 12-step framework or are based on other religiously-infused therapy protocols, the 12-step program is most often used as an adjunct to treatment. Several correlational studies suggest that those attending a religious or spiritually based program are more successful at maintaining abstinence (Krebs, 2003; Larson & Larson, 2003; Mueller et al., 2001). While the 12-step program has not been experimentally tested against other approaches to alcohol and drug treatment, research has demonstrated that 60-68% of alcoholics who become actively involved in 12-step programs drink less for up to a year, and 40-50% achieve sobriety for many years (Harris et al., 1999).

Prayer and forgiveness are other commonly used interventions. Harris et al. (1999) suggest that forgiveness is the most popular spiritual therapy used in a secular



context. They found several recent studies that demonstrate that it is effective in reducing hurt, anger, and perceived offense, and improving mood and emotional state, and that there is no difference in the effectiveness of religious and secularly oriented forgiveness interventions (Harris et al., 1999). Despite the fact that prayer is the most common coping strategy cited across populations, there are almost no current studies investigating its effect as a counselling intervention or as an adjunct to counselling (Harris et al., 1999). There have, however, been at least two powerful experimental studies on intercessory prayer and health.

Byrd (1988) randomly assigned cardiac patients to a prayer or no-prayer group. The prayer group had three to seven people praying for their recovery. The experiment was a double-blind design: patients didn't know they were being prayed for and researchers didn't know which patients were receiving prayers. Prayers had only the first name, diagnosis, and periodic information about the condition of the prayer recipient. Patients in the prayer group did substantially better than the non-prayer group. They used significantly less medication, had less complications, and when they had complications they were less serious than those in the non-prayer group. A double-blind experimental study with Aids patients found a similarly positive and significant effect for intercessory prayer on health status and outcome (Harris et al., 1999).

Although the experimental testing of spiritually-infused interventions is in its infancy, current results dovetail with the results of studies linking spirituality to health, mental health and coping. Altogether these findings provide powerful evidence to suggest that spirituality is intrinsically linked to good physical and mental health and to positive psychosocial coping. Spiritual strategies are widely used to address a range of mental and

physical problems and to cope effectively with major life challenges. The advent and early testing of spiritually-infused interventions have produced some promising new treatments in the areas of borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety, addiction, and physical health. The area of spiritually-infused interventions thus holds great promise for counselling psychology and health care alike.

### **Gaps in the Quantitative Literature**

Despite the positive potential of spiritually-infused interventions, there are numerous gaps in the literature in this recently rediscovered area. The most important one from a quantitative perspective is the need for an increase in the use of experimental designs to identify causal relationships between spirituality and physical and mental health (Harris et al., 1999). We also need more information on the variables that mediate the effects of spirituality and that moderate its impact as an intervention (Harris et al., 1999; McCullough et al., 2000). Identifying the active or salient ingredients in successful spiritually-infused interventions is also important, particularly given that many interventions blend traditional therapies with spiritual concepts and techniques (Harris et al., 1999). Aside from an increase in the absolute number of well-designed studies testing new interventions, it's also important to further investigate exactly what constitutes Judeo-Christian religious therapy (Worthington & Sandage, 2002). Further areas that have been highlighted for investigation include: non Judeo-Christian forms of religious therapy, the use of shamans and healers, and other non-religious forms of spiritually-infused therapy (Harris et al., 1999; Worthington & Sandage, 2002).

In addition, research on the psychology of religion has been dominated by positivist, quantitative approaches. As a result, the focus of the literature has been on measuring objective and often multi-determined variables such as religious attendance or

quantifiable behaviours such as prayer. The belief and experience scales that have been used to measure spirituality have traditionally reflected a religious and usually a Judeo-Christian perspective, seriously limiting the scope of the findings (Wulff, 2003). This is particularly important for populations such as Canada and British Columbia, in particular, where there may be broad disparities between one's personal spirituality and one's religious affiliation, attendance or expression (Bibby, 2003; Todd, 2004).

Although theories have begun to emerge regarding the possible relationships between positive health outcomes and spirituality, quantitative research reflects an understanding of spirituality as it appears through researcher determined variables. Many of the emerging theories and interventions build on existing empirically-validated models in other areas by adding spirituality into the framework for understanding people's coping behaviour. One of the more popular approaches is reflected in Pargament's work which extends stress and coping theory to demonstrate that people use spirituality as part of a general orienting system which can facilitate positive reappraisals and coping in the face of trauma, illness and loss (Pargament & Brant, 1998). Researchers from different disciplines use different frameworks and have different approaches to explaining similar findings (Koenig, 1998). In addition, researchers often propose unique models to explain their particular data without contributing to developing a broader theoretical framework in the area (i.e. Schnoll, Harlow & Brower, 2000). While this research provides valuable information, it is limited in capturing only a particular slice of people's experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing and most often reflects a traditional perspective on spirituality.

## Qualitative Research

An emerging body of qualitative research is beginning to broaden our perspective and offer new information on people's experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing as they describe and conceptualize them. This research demonstrates that people struggling with a variety of physical and mental health challenges use spirituality as a vehicle for transforming their experience and enhancing their quality of life in response to illness, trauma and mental health problems. For example, Faull et al. (2004) found that his participants believed that facing disability due to musculoskeletal injury actually helped them develop more resilient identities, a more profound connection with themselves, and a deeper awareness of their spirituality. The enhanced connection with their spirituality in turn helped them further accept themselves, appreciate their lives, build meaningful relationships and give back to the community.

Similarly, Albaugh (2003) and Gall and Cornblat (2002), found that people confronted by life threatening illnesses such as breast cancer and heart disease reprioritized their lives to be more congruent with their values, spent more time on activities they found pleasurable, addressed long-standing personal and relational problems, and reaffirmed their commitment to living life at its fullest. Participants came to express gratitude for their illness and view it as a doorway to increased happiness. They described themselves as becoming better people: more empathic, more compassionate, more peaceful, more connected to others, and more spiritual in response to drawing on their spirituality to cope with the challenges they faced (Gall & Cornblat, 2002, p. 533).

Studies of participants who were coping with various forms of trauma (Parappully, Rosenbaum, Van Den Daele, & Nzewi, 2002), abuse (Hall, 2003), and

mental illness (Chiu, Ganesan, Clark & Morrow, 2005) reflect many similar themes. Participants across diverse studies identified their relationship with “god” or a divine force as they understood, expressed and experienced it as the primary resource that helped them cope and transform their lives in the face of the challenges they experienced. Study participants reported that they developed their personal relationships with spirit through a variety of practices including: prayer, scriptural reading, meditation, and for some, service attendance. Spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences helped them find emotional comfort in the face of overwhelming grief, anxiety and depression; accept the challenges they faced; heal past wounds; create positive meanings and act on opportunities for transformation, increasing their quality of life and the quality of their relationships with the divine, themselves, their intimates and with people in the community at large (Hall, 2003; Chiu et al., 2005; Parappully, et al., 2002; Richards & Folkman, 1997).

In addition, many participants across studies reported that they “actualized” in response to these challenges (Albaugh, 2003, p. 596). They associated spirituality with helping them thrive and develop in the midst of trauma and with becoming generative in reaching out to others and creating mechanisms to address important social issues in their communities (Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Hall, 2003; Parappully et al., 2002). In this sense, participants found that facing trauma and illness was a “blessing” or a “gift” in that it spurred them to a new level of self-realization, openness, connection and appreciation for life (Gall & Cornblat, 2002, p. 529).

Qualitative studies reflect and further extend quantitative findings. For example, they add to our understanding of the existence and effects of different types of prayer

from active prayers that involve pleading, adoration, thanksgiving and confession to receptive prayers that involve listening to or communing with the divine (Baesler, Delerga, Winstead, & Barbee, 2003). Qualitative studies further reveal that spiritual experiences such as feeling the presence of deceased relatives, experiencing visitations, and continuing and transforming one's relationship to a deceased or spiritually perceived other is normative and serves as a positive means of spiritual coping and adaptation in the face of grief and trauma (Parappully et al., 2002; Richards & Folkman, 2003; Watts, 2003).

Although most studies have focused on Caucasian and Judeo-Christian populations, there are an increasing number of qualitative studies that affirm similar experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing across African American, South and North Asian populations and for Muslim Americans (Chiu et al., 2005; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Hall, 2004). In addition, qualitative research has demonstrated that spirituality is particularly helpful in resisting oppression and facilitating positive coping and identity development for marginalized groups. For example, Watts (2003) and Mattis (2002) found that spirituality acted as resource to help African American women learn to trust themselves, strive towards goals, define strong identities, accept and cope with problems and defend themselves from oppression. Emerging studies are beginning to lay the groundwork for understanding the unique positive and negative effects of spiritual beliefs and practices across diverse spiritual traditions and communities (Chiu et al., 2005; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003).

### **Gaps in the Qualitative Literature**

Although there have been increasing calls for qualitative research on spirituality either to verify quantitative findings (Harris et al., 1999), or to further develop existing

frameworks to make sense of people's experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing (Mattis, 2002), the qualitative research in the field is limited both in quantity and scope. Some existing qualitative reports evolved out of larger quantitative projects that limited their exploration to specific areas or concepts adding largely to a description of people's general experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing (i.e. Gall & Cornblat, 2002). In addition, the quantitative focus of the field has resulted in an emphasis on positivist or post-positivist methodologies such as content analysis, grounded theory and phenomenology. Although these studies document important themes in people's experiences of spirituality and healing, they do not necessarily investigate the conceptualization of and relationships among those themes from participant perspectives. Finally, many studies employ a theoretical framework that limits the study to capturing or adding onto traditional religious understandings of spirituality.

One of the central reasons for the lack of unifying theories regarding spirituality and healing may be an over-reliance on traditional conceptual and scientific frameworks. Psychological research has lagged behind the development of spirituality in popular culture, and behind people's experience of drawing upon spirituality for healing. The existing conceptual confusion and proliferation of domain specific models points to the need to return to the field to re-vision our understanding of spirituality and healing from the ground up. By exploring how participants themselves conceptualize and bring together various aspects of spirituality to create healing, we may begin to create a framework that is broad enough to unify disparate findings and build theoretical models that describe the role of spirituality in healing.

Despite the calls for integrating spirituality into counselling practice, the literature offers little empirically-based information regarding how participants use spirituality to create healing. Spiritually or religiously infused interventions are often poorly described (Worthington and Sandage, 2002), or represent a distinct treatment approach for a specific population (i.e. dialectical behaviour therapy for borderline personality disorder). Aside from studies that document clients' interest in addressing spiritual issues as part of counselling and health care practices (Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Rose et al., 2001), or counsellors' acknowledgement that their spiritual orientation does play a role in the treatment room (Smith & Orlinsky, 2004; West, 2000), little is known about how counsellors may integrate spirituality into their existing counselling practice in ways that enhance clients' treatment experiences.

### **The Current Study**

The current study responds to these gaps in the literature in a number of ways. As one of the first psychological studies to use the new discourse on spirituality as a theoretical framework, the study employs a wide-angle lens that is open to capturing people's experiences of spirituality as they describe them within and outside of traditional religious contexts. A narrative methodology fits with the postmodern framework of the new discourse and is uniquely suited to investigating how people conceptualize and draw upon spirituality to create healing and wellness in their lives. In this way, the study adds to both the theoretical and empirical literature by offering the opportunity to build theory based on people's own understandings of their process of drawing on spirituality for healing.

In addition, by capturing the experiences of people with a broad range of challenges from physical to mental health problems, the study encompasses the spectrum



of concerns and clients that a counsellor or counselling psychologist may be expected to see in community practice. As one of the first studies to examine the experiences of people who are former or current counselling clients, the study at hand offers concrete new information on the role that counselling can and does play in relationship to spirituality in the healing process. As a result, the findings can provide practitioners with new information on how clients use spirituality for healing in their lives and on how they relate their spiritual beliefs and practices to their counselling experiences. Therefore the study not only adds to the development of the empirical literature and the construction of theory in the area of spirituality, health and healing, it also provides practitioners with empirically-based information on how clients experience spirituality in relationship to counselling interventions.

## Chapter Three-Research Methodology

### Research Questions

This study investigates three critical research questions. The major focus of the study is centred on answering the question: **What are the stories of people who draw on spirituality for healing and wellness?** The stories we tell ourselves and others are central to our interpretation, experience and creation of reality (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). They also provide the conceptual basis and rationale for changes in larger cultural narratives which create the container in which individual experiences are formed. Innovations in individual and collective stories lead to major shifts in culture including the development of new technologies, new approaches to healing and new ways of being. This study is one of the first to investigate the stories of people from disparate traditions and with no specific tradition who self-identify as drawing on spirituality to heal a broad variety of conditions and create wellness in their lives.

Exploring people's stories of drawing on spirituality for healing contributes to the literature by broadening the conceptual framework for this area of research. The study extends traditional psychological concepts such as coping to investigate the more complex concept of healing, as well as extending the traditional focus on recovering from disease within health care literature to creating wellness. By allowing participants to define their own relationship to spirituality, this study is also one of the few to encompass the experiences of participants who find their spirituality outside of as well as within a major religious tradition. As one of a handful of studies using qualitative methods in general, and foregrounding participants' narratives as a primary source of knowledge in

particular, this study provides new information on participants' experiences of spiritual healing as they conceptualize them. By expanding the conceptual framework within which the relationship between spirituality and healing is investigated, this study offers new information which can enlarge our theoretical understanding of the relationship between spirituality, healing and wellness.

The second research question focuses more specifically on the process of creating healing and wellness through spirituality. It asks: **How do people draw on spirituality to create experiences of healing and wellness in their lives?** This question adds to both the theoretical and applied literature by targeting the specific thoughts, feelings and actions that people engaged in to create experiences of healing and wellness. Themes identified in relationship to this question can contribute to building a theoretical model of spiritual healing. They also provide counsellors with practical information on the diversity of approaches and the common themes which emerged from participants' stories regarding the process of translating spiritual knowledge and conviction into personal healing and development.

The final research question focuses specifically on the relationship between counselling and spirituality. It asks: **What is the role of counselling in the narratives of people who draw on spirituality for healing and wellness?** The current study is also unique in being the first to inquire about current and former clients' experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing. This question reverses the standard dynamic of counselling process and outcome studies where counselling is evaluated for its efficacy in healing and other variables are assessed for their impact in that process. In contrast,

participants in the study identified primarily as drawing upon spirituality for healing, and explored the impact of their counselling experiences within that context.

Themes identified in response to this question contribute to both the theoretical and applied literature. On a theoretical level, responses to this question offer new information on how clients view and experience the relationship between counselling and spirituality. Client perspectives can contribute to understanding the nature, efficacy and limits of spiritually-infused approaches to counselling practice. On a practical level, themes identified in response to this question can provide counsellors in the field with new information on the pivotal areas to consider when integrating spirituality in their practice, enhancing their ability to create spiritually-infused practices which are respectful, effective and relevant for the clients in the field.

### **Research Design**

Narrative research is an emerging qualitative tradition in health psychology (Campo, 2005). Narrative approaches are being used to investigate personal experiences of illness and coping and to probe the social, political, and relational dynamics of healthcare (Campo, 2005; Overcash, 2004). Giving patients the opportunity to narrate illness experiences has itself been viewed as part of the healing process (Overcash, 2004). This study builds upon and extends this emerging tradition by choosing a narrative methodology to investigate participants' experiences of healing and wellness.

In addition, spiritual knowledge and wisdom has traditionally been communicated through both oral and written narratives. All of the major world religions and many indigenous spiritual traditions use story telling as a means of communicating central beliefs, codes of conduct and spiritual lessons. The narrative approach has also been particularly recommended for investigating the relationship between "social processes

and individual experiences in spiritually based communities....particularly where dominant cultural narratives fail to adequately represent the lived experience of individuals" (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000, p. 479). The use of narrative methodology to investigate spiritual experience is in keeping with our ages old inclination to tell stories to communicate our spiritual experiences and may be a particularly appropriate means of trying to capture new or emerging experiences.

Narrative research is based on a postmodern understanding of the world that suggests that reality is socially constructed and language is a fundamental avenue for the construction of the experiences we have (Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988). From this perspective, reality emerges from the dynamic interaction between subjects, institutions, and the narratives that shape both (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). The linguistic framework into which we are born reflects popular social narratives regarding every aspect of identity including our understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl, what it means to have or lose a self, and what defines a self at all, if the concept exists within our culture (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Individual experience is shaped within the crucible of the narratives we grow into and the way we resist or accept, perform or reshape those narratives through our everyday language and behaviour (Riessman, 2002). The postmodern, social constructivist framework that underwrites the narrative method recognizes reality as dialogical: it emerges uniquely each moment through the linguistic and behavioural choices we make in our interactions with ourselves and each other (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Because of its social constructivist framework, narrative methodology not only allows for the investigation of the content of a particular story, but it is also necessarily

concerned with its fashioning. Narrative methodology focuses not only on what the story teller is saying about his or her experience, but also considers the choice of words that are used, the characterization of actors in the story, and the narrative framework within which decisions are made and actions are taken to be an intrinsic part of understanding the story and its meaning as a whole (Reissman, 2002). The analysis of the content of a narrative may suggest one interpretation of an experience while the analysis of its structure provides new and sometimes contradictory information (Lieblich et al., 1998). These two dimensions of narrative analysis work together to reveal the meaning and contribution of the story and the reasons for telling it the way it has been told.

### **Rationale for Narrative Methodology**

There are several reasons that a postmodern qualitative approach in general and the narrative method in particular are most appropriate for answering the questions I have chosen. Research on the psychology of religion has been dominated by a positivist approach to science most commonly reflected in a focus on quantitative studies (Harris et al., 1999; Wulff, 2003). Although quantitative studies have demonstrated significant positive relationships between spirituality, health, healing and wellness, and have begun to isolate the factors that may mediate or moderate these relationships, they offer only a very limited understanding of how these relationships work. Because of the emphasis on quantitative methods in the area, all of the existing information reflects researchers' conceptualizations of relevant variables in the process. There is a dearth of existing theory which can comprehensively unify or explain disparate results in the area. The few theories that do exist to unify or ground existing studies focus on extending established models of health, treatment or coping to include spiritual factors.

The emphasis on a positivist orientation to research is further reflected in the qualitative literature, limiting many existing studies to offering only a broad brush description of the major themes involved in either the experience, or the outcomes of drawing on spirituality to cope with a variety of diseases or life challenges. The current research therefore offers very little information on the process people go through to draw upon spirituality for healing, and on the contribution of their conceptualizations of their experiences to creating those experiences. There is also very little specific information regarding clients' experiences of spirituality in relation to counselling, or regarding people's conceptualizations of the role of counselling in the process of spiritual healing. The current literature is further limited by the frequent use of theoretical frameworks which limit spirituality to a traditional Christian religious context. The general failure of existing research to use an inclusive theoretical framework for spirituality, and to inquire into people's own understanding of their process of drawing upon spirituality for healing is particularly ironic given that the existing research itself suggests that people's spiritual beliefs are intrinsically related to their spiritual experiences, coping behaviours, and health outcomes.

The new discourse on spirituality represents a distinctly postmodern take on spiritual practices. Because I am studying a phenomenon that evolved in response to the changes that shaped postmodern culture, it is important, as Howe & Eisenhart (1990) and Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest, to choose a methodology that is consistent with and can therefore capture the range of experiences that reflect that framework. With its emphasis on meaning as constructed through the interaction of individual and social forces, a postmodern epistemology is uniquely suited to the investigation of spiritual experience

precisely because spiritual beliefs and experiences are shaped by the individual, historical and collective meanings people assign to spirituality in relation to events in their lives (Mattis, 2003).

Within the context of a postmodern epistemology, the narrative method is particularly suited to examining how people create experiences through the stories they tell (Reissman, 2002). By offering participants a broad theoretical framework in which to story their own experiences, I learned about participants' conceptualizations of their experiences (Reissman, 2002). Narrative methodology is built on the premise that the conceptualization and telling of experience is part of its construction (Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988). One of its strengths among qualitative methods is providing a viewpoint from which to study the role of language and conceptualization as well as its out-picturing in action and behaviour in shaping the experience that is being studied (Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988). In this way, narrative methodology allows for a more complex conceptual view of the topic while still foregrounding concrete individual experiences against the backdrop of the social context in which they are formed and upon which they draw.

A narrative methodology then is uniquely suited to capturing people's experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing as they conceptualize them. The narrative method is not only in keeping with the postmodern theoretical framework of the research but its ability to include an examination of the role of conceptual processes in creating experiences within a larger social context makes it uniquely suited to responding to both the conceptual and empirical gaps that the study aims to fill.



## **Role of the Researcher**

From a social constructivist perspective, reality is not created idiosyncratically through linguistic and conceptual choices alone, but is also dialectical and dialogical. Thus linguistic and conceptual choices shape and are in turn shaped by the immediate interaction of people and contexts and by their historical experiences and location within larger social discourses that shape culture and society (Traynor, 2004; White, 2004). Consequently, meaning is a moving target; continuously shifting according to the way words and behaviours are deployed within particular contexts to construct particular experiences at particular times (Traynor, 2004; White, 2004). Change any of the elements and the outcome changes because the process that creates it has changed. Built on this social constructivist epistemology, the narrative approach to research acknowledges that the research process itself is fundamentally interpretive, highlighting certain interests and questions and shadowing others from the initial formulation of the question through to the analysis generated at the end of the project (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Because the narrative method is one of the few to acknowledge that the researcher ultimately has a significant impact in shaping the research process and therefore its outcome, it is important that I locate myself as a researcher and account for my influence on the process and outcome of this research study. This study has emerged from my own experience as a participant in both the new discourse on spirituality and the discourse of professional psychology, as well as from my review of the literature and my clinical experiences over the years. Certainly my interest in the questions I am asking and my choices as a researcher have been influenced by the diverse experiences I have had as an insider/outsider in both discourses, and as a white, middle-class, female clinician trained in philosophy, social work and psychology. My unique location in both discourses helped

me connect with participants at a level of understanding that facilitated the rich descriptions of drawing on spirituality for healing that emerged from the study. At the same time, my own location, which is reflected in the orientation of my questions and the research process, makes it less likely that I'll gather in-depth information on the problems associated with drawing on spirituality for healing. Because I, as the researcher, have a critical role in co-creating the meaning that emerges from each interview, reflexivity is an important part of accounting for the meaning constructed in the research process (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

I took several steps to promote and ensure reflexivity in identifying my contribution to the knowledge created throughout the process of research and analysis. I kept a research journal that included my reflections and ideas about the research questions and the research process. I took notes on my initial contacts with participants and field notes which I recorded promptly after each interview to reflect on major themes, learnings and new questions as they emerged. I engaged participants in reflecting on the research process and questions, and solicited feedback regarding the impact of the process and the way questions were framed on the stories they told. I did multiple readings of the video text and looked at my own impact on the interview process, and on the stories and themes that emerged through the analytic process.

Most importantly, I solicited participants' feedback on my interpretation of their stories. Although I initially planned to enlist a sub-set of participants to review the videotape with me (see consent form, Appendix C), I opted instead to ask all participants to review the written summaries of their stories and all participants consented. Reviewing their story summaries allowed participants to have input into the representation as well as

the interpretation of the stories they shared. Thus, I provided each participant with a written summary of their story as I understood it, the major themes I drew from their story, and a list of the quotations I used, asking each person for feedback on the accuracy of my representation of the experience that he or she had shared. Although this strategy was important in constructing an understanding of their experiences that resonated with the participants, my representation of their experiences and the conclusions I drew from them reflect a unique and personal reading of the interview text that we created together.

### **Sample Selection**

I collected a purposive sample of 12 people who were attending or who had been exposed to counselling in the past. Participants self-identified as using spiritual practices to deal with concerns that a counselling psychologist might commonly address such as anxiety, depression, trauma, coping with illness, divorce, grief and loss etc. I chose twelve as a final number because it allowed the best compromise between breadth and depth in my analysis. Twelve represents a fairly large number for a narrative sample owing to the depth of the analysis of each story.

Given that I was targeting a relatively hidden population who shared a specific type of experience, a purposive sample was necessary as a means of identifying potential participants. Since I aimed at finding volunteers who drew on a broad array of religious and spiritual traditions, and who had a broad variety of the concerns typically represented in counselling, I avoided contacting volunteers through particular health or healing centres or via specific spiritual or religious organizations. Instead, I posted my call for participants at non-denominational spiritual bookstores and centres, distributed the flyer through educational networks, and talked about my work wherever I went. In order to qualify for the study volunteers had to respond affirmatively to the general questions on

the call for participants (see Appendix B to review the call for participants). These questions were: Do you use spirituality to maintain wellness? Do you draw on your spirituality to face life challenges or promote healing when you are upset or unwell? Have you ever received counselling from a doctor, counsellor, psychologist or other helping professional? These questions were aimed at collecting a sample of people who self-identified as drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness and who had received counselling services.

Participants found the study through a broad variety of avenues. Some participants responded to ads posted on the University of British Columbia campus and to emails distributed through list-serves in Department of Education. Gatekeepers were important in helping me connect with other participants. As I talked about the study, people with whom I had casual social contact provided referrals or emailed my ad to people who in turn helped me connect with a potential participant. Most participants found the study as a result of receiving an email version of the call for participants that someone else forwarded to them. Snowball sampling also played an important role in the study. A number of participants passed my flyer along to their network of contacts which drew more interest in the study.

### **Participant Profile**

Each participant completed a basic demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) detailing vital statistics and asking general questions about his or her spiritual practices. This section summarizes the results of this demographic questionnaire providing the reader with an overview of the participants you will meet in the following chapters as a group. Participants represented a mature adult demographic and were almost equally split between those who were aged 40-55 (6) and those who were over 55 (5). Only 1

participant reported her age as between 30-39. The majority of participants were female (10) with only 2 males. The overwhelming majority of participants identified as Caucasian (11), while 1 participant identified as South Asian. Participants represented a broad distribution of family income categories: 3 participants reported a family income in excess of \$80,000, 3 reported a family income between \$25,000-\$80,000, and 4 reported an income under \$25,000. Two participants declined to provide information on their income.

Participants tended to have achieved a higher than average level of education. Six participants attended university, 2 held graduate degrees, 3 attended college or a vocational school and 1 completed high school. Participants self-identified as working in a range of economic sectors with a concentration in the helping professions. Reported occupational sectors included: Social or Psychological Services (4), Medical or Health Services (3), Education (1), Service Industry/Tourism (1), Retail (1), Performing Arts (1), and Retired (1). Participants also had a range of relationship experiences: 4 were divorced, 4 were single, 2 were married, 1 lived common law, and 1 was separated.

In terms of spirituality, the vast majority of participants (11) described themselves as spiritual as opposed to religious, and the remaining participant (1) indicated that he considered himself to be both spiritual and religious. The majority of participants were not members of a formal religious organization (8), however one third of participants did hold religious membership (4). Religious affiliations included: Zen Buddhism, the United Church, Religious Science and Unity. Participants indicated that they used 13 spiritual practices on average to maintain their health and well-being. The most popular practices included: spiritual reading (11), meditation (10), journaling (10), playing or listening to

music (10), discussing spiritual issues (10), expressing gratitude (9), being in nature (9), visualization (9), affirmations (8), setting intentions (8), prayer (7), singing (7), doing art (7), and donating money (7).

Participants also reported that they had consulted with a broad variety of professionals to enhance their wellness or facilitate healing over the previous 2 years. Participants consulted an average of six professionals with a range of 1 to 11 during this time period. Professionals most commonly consulted included: Energy worker (9), Massage therapist (9), Counsellor (8), Medical doctor (7), and Spiritual Counsellor (6). Eleven of 12 participants indicated that it would be important for them to seek help from professionals who incorporated spirituality into their practice.

Many participants stated that they currently experienced few psychological challenges if any. Some responded to the question on psychological challenges experienced over the last 2 years by noting the challenges they had previously experienced over a longer period, some indicated challenges that they experienced over the past 2 years. Given the diversity of responses, I relied on participants' stories to describe the challenges they faced that led them to turn towards spirituality for healing.

### **Data Collection**

I chose to collect data via individual interviews because they provided ample time and created the private and relaxed setting that was conducive to inviting participants to share stories and engage in a reflective conversation about a very personal topic (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Because the richest data emerges in the context of a warm interpersonal relationship where some basic mutual respect, interest, and safety has been established, I decided to meet with participants in person where possible to go over study procedures, establish informed consent, and create some degree of interpersonal rapport before the

research interview itself. Three of the twelve participants declined this initial meeting due to distance, time concerns, or because they felt it was unnecessary, and I spent more time establishing rapport and going through an explanation of study procedures over the telephone with these participants. Interestingly, I noticed no appreciable difference in the depth or complexity of the stories that resulted from these interviews in comparison to the others. However two out of the three of these participants emailed me with further details they wanted to share that emerged from their reflection on the interview, while none of the other participants felt the need to follow up in this way.

The major terms and concepts embedded in the research question, particularly spirituality, became a topic of discussion, exploration and negotiation right from my initial contact with participants. When participants called to enquire about the study, their first question usually was: What do you mean by spirituality? From the initial inquiry call forward, I emphasized that I was interested in their experience and conceptualization of spirituality and the other concepts that I was exploring. Often I started the conversation by reiterating that I was looking for people who self-identified as drawing on spirituality for healing whatever that might means to them, and asked the potential participant what drew them to respond to the flyer as a means of beginning our discussion.

During the initial phone contact with participants, I explained the study in general terms and made sure participants met the selection criteria. I followed up on the initial phone contact by emailing interested candidates a copy of the call for participants, the consent form, and the interview guide which provided an outline of the general topics I was interested in exploring, and offered suggestions to help participants start thinking about the story they wanted to share (see Appendix B-E) to review the documents

participants received). If participants met the study criteria and were still interested in proceeding after receiving and reviewing all of the information, I either arranged a coffee meeting to go over consent and research procedures in detail or arranged a phone date for participants who didn't feel the need to meet.

During our in person or telephone meeting, I went over the consent form with participants, solicited and answered questions regarding the study, and worked to establish an interpersonal rapport that would help participants feel comfortable sharing their stories and ensure a positive and respectful interview experience. Often, when I initially met with prospective participants or gatekeepers who offered to provide access to potential participants, they expressed a desire to know more about my personal experience of spirituality. They sometimes asked questions about why I was doing the study and what my objective was, or they wanted to gain a better understanding of what I was looking for in their stories. I freely shared details regarding my own spiritual practices when I was asked. I talked about my interest in learning more about the potential and appropriateness of re-integrating spirituality into counselling practice and about my hope that the study would provide counsellors struggling with similar issues with more information on the topic. I emphasized that I was interested in capturing a broad range of experiences and that information on how spirituality didn't fit into a counselling frame or didn't work in their healing was as important as information on how it did.

During this initial meeting, I solicited personal questions as well as questions or concerns regarding the research process and objectives, inviting participants into the research process on as collaborative and egalitarian a basis as possible to facilitate



informed consent, ensure ethical practice, and to foreground their contribution to the research process. We reviewed procedures for confidentiality, the time commitment involved, how I would use, analyze and represent their stories, the fact that the interview would be videotaped and my intention to invite them to reflect upon and clarify the stories that emerged from the interview. Gathering consent is an ongoing process that needs to be renegotiated or confirmed each time the research situation changes or I ask something new of participants (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001). I committed to staying in touch with participants regarding the development and representation of the stories they shared and let them know that they could withdraw from the study and refuse to offer new information or participate further at any point in the process.

Thinking about their experience of drawing on spirituality for healing as a story was often a new perspective for participants and they sometimes had questions about the kind of information I was seeking. Going over my general topic guide and offering suggestions regarding constructing a time line of major events or making note of significant points they wanted to discuss was helpful in stimulating participants' reflection on their experiences and in helping them consider how they could best convey those experiences. Often times, I got participants talking about their story during our initial meeting and was able to simply affirm that their experience was indeed what I was interested in, which helped them relax into sharing their stories. Several participants later said that reviewing the topic guide or beginning to think about their story in our initial meeting had been helpful in stimulating reflection on and new realizations about their process of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness.

The interview itself was informal and semi-structured in design. My goal in choosing a location was to find a setting that afforded privacy and was comfortable for the participant. Most participants chose to be interviewed in their homes. I interviewed two at their offices and one in the office of a therapist. The interviews lasted from one hour to one hour and thirty minutes and were divided into two segments. During the first portion of the interview, I invited the participant to tell their story of drawing on spirituality for healing in their own words without interruption. Once the participant finished, I used open-ended questions to engage them in reflecting on their story with me. The two segments varied in length, some participants spent the majority of the interview telling their story with only fifteen minutes or so for reflection at the end, other participants preferred more of a question and answer format and solicited my engagement, or spent about half the time on their stories and another half of the time reflecting on what they had shared with me.

I encouraged participants to name their own experience by contextualizing my questions and asking about the terms I was using. For example, I talked about my own struggle to language the topic of study in a way that described the phenomenon I was aiming at yet left room to encompass many different experiences. I asked participants about every aspect of the question from their understanding of spirituality to my conceptualization of drawing upon spirituality. Participants often engaged in discussion about the terms chosen and either offered terms that were a better fit for their experiences or critiqued my terms and discussed the struggle to find words that fit. More often than not, the challenge of languaging spiritual experience emerged as a shared struggle throughout the interview process. I also worked to open the conceptual space by asking

participants to label the experiences they were describing. For example, when a participant described an experience that I would categorize under my definition of healing, I would ask them what they would call that experience.

Although I also asked participants about how they might conceptualize their story as a story, it seemed challenging for them to switch from their engagement with the experience they were sharing to stand outside their story and think about it in a detached manner in the interview. Generally participants responded to these questions by summarizing a major theme they had previously described and adding more about its impact or significance in representing their overall experience. Participants were so engaged in recounting their experiences that they were often profoundly moved and cried or laughed or were awed all over again in sharing moments of great discovery or profound turmoil. They were often surprised by the intensity of the emotion they felt in sharing their experiences. Many participants thanked me for the interview and talked about the realizations that were sparked by the process of telling their stories, sometimes several months after the interview.

Taking time to explore their stories together also allowed me to begin to reflect on and confirm some of the major points I heard and interpreted in their stories. Sometimes this influenced the conceptualization of the results. For example, at one point during the process I reflected back to a participant that it sounded as though counselling had formed a bridge that helped her move from never having explored her experience to exploring her experience through spiritual practices. She replied that she hadn't thought of it this way, but that that was exactly the role that counselling had played. In this way, the

concept of counselling as a bridging experience reflects my contribution to understanding her experience which proved to be paradigmatic for about a third of the participants.

On the other hand, another participant challenged my conceptualization of “drawing upon” spirituality, pointing to the essential nature of spirituality as part of her self-identity, which led me to recognize this as a new theme in participants’ conceptualizations of spirituality. Thus, the interview text resulted from all of the elements: the private and comfortable setting, the interpersonal relationship I established with each participant, the research process and questions, my own framing of the process and my responses to participants, and participants sharing of their experiences and reaction to my set up and questions.

As a further means of understanding and tracking our relative contributions to the findings, I also asked participants about whether they felt that the way I structured the process or outlined the topics led them down a particular path omitting other elements of their story. Sometimes, I audited my contribution simply by asking participants what elements of their story or discussion might have been left out of our discussion or by playing the devil’s advocate and asking about their experiences from a traditional psychological perspective. For example, I suggested that the process one participant described could be viewed as a description of positive psychological coping and asked her what made it spiritual or what spirituality added as a means of understanding her experience, if anything. Thus, I endeavored to frame questions and create a research process that was collaborative, reflexive, and that focused on participants’ conceptualizations of their own experiences as a means of co-creating a rich and informative research text.

I videotaped each interview. Some participants were initially nervous or uncomfortable with the taping but were willing to consent to the process once they knew that segments of the tape would not be used without their permission or review. I offered participants their own copies of the interview. Because the interviews touched on highly personal topics such as problems that participants had experienced, I also had a list of potential referrals on hand should the interview raise issues that participants wanted to pursue further in a therapeutic setting (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001). Although the interviews were emotional, participants generally talked about enjoying the experience and expressed an appreciation for having engaged in the study. No one asked for a referral or expressed a need for follow-up of any kind and the interviews generally ended on a positive and upbeat note. I also collected basic demographic information describing the participants and providing an overview of their spiritual practices through a brief quantitative survey. I found that providing this survey to participants while I was setting up the video equipment sometimes helped spark their thinking about the array of practices they engaged in with regard to spirituality and healing.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

The mini-dv tapes I used for recording are stored in a locked file cabinet to which only I have access, and computer files are password protected. Following Ratcliffe (2003), I decided to analyze voice and image information as a whole focusing on the overall meaning of participants' stories and our discussion. I used Atlas-TI software to code the mini-dv tapes without prior transcription.

My method of analysis combines two distinct approaches to narrative research. I integrated Arvay's (2002) ideas on reflexivity and doing multiple readings of a text with Lieblich et al.'s (1998) detailed description of holistic content and formal analyses. The

focus of the study and the majority of the analysis is devoted to a holistic content analysis of the major common themes emerging within and across participants' narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998). Secondary formal and literary analyses of participants' use of language and narrative choices of plot, character, and metaphors were used to verify and add further depth to the content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998).

My method of analysis involved a six step process. Following Lieblich et al. (1998), I framed general research questions outlining the area of inquiry rather than specific hypotheses and identified themes inductively from viewing video transcripts of the data. 1) The first step of analysis involved viewing and creating summaries of the whole content of each narrative, identifying significant content themes drawn from each narrative. Once initial summaries were completed, I compared accounts and selected themes which represented common categories of experience.

2) The second step of the content analysis involved coding the videos according to the major themes that emerged from the initial readings and comparisons of the video texts with a specific view to responding to each of the research questions. As Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest each step in the analysis involved an iterative process of moving between segments of a narrative and the narrative as a whole, and between individual narratives and the common themes that emerged across narratives to ensure that the themes selected preserved individual differences in experience as well as reflecting common threads among the stories. 3) The third step was to combine major common content themes into a meta-narrative that described participants' experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness and responded specifically to the three major research questions.

Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that the structural or formal features of a narrative are harder for the narrator to manipulate. A holistic formal analysis can therefore complement a holistic content analysis by revealing “deeper layers” of the narrative and of the narrator’s identity serving as a check on the information the narrator shares in the content of the story (p. 13). Thus, I followed my initial readings, coding, and creation of a meta-narrative regarding the overall content of participants’ video texts with two readings which considered, and coded for themes in the overall form of participants’ video texts.

4) The fourth step in my process of analysis was to examine how participants’ choice and use of language contributed to the construction of their narratives and to create codes reflecting these themes in the video texts. 5) The fifth step in my process of analysis was to examine and create codes representing how participants’ plot choices, use of metaphors and characterization of the hero helped to shape the meaning of their stories.

I compared the results of each subsequent analysis to the identified content themes, and integrated the major formal and literary themes that emerged from cross-analysis into the meta-narrative of participants’ experiences. Because the stories we tell reflect and respond to larger common cultural narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998), I juxtaposed common themes reflecting participants’ narrative choices in plot, metaphor and characterization with a seminal work in the Western literary and spiritual tradition in order to highlight how participants’ stories both reflect and innovate upon common literary and spiritual traditions.

Once a draft meta-narrative reflecting all three analyses was constructed, I reviewed and reflected upon the research process. I also provided each participant with a written copy of their individual story, the content themes I drew from it and the

quotations I used to describe common themes in the meta-narrative, and I asked for their feedback on and corrections to their story and the themes I drew from their narratives (Arvay, 2002). 6) The sixth step in the process of analysis involved writing a chapter reflecting on the research process and integrating participants' feedback and corrections into their individual stories and into the meta-narrative reflecting the analysis of common themes.

This six step analytic process combines Arvay's (2002) emphasis on multiple readings and reflexivity with Lieblich et al.'s (1998) description of an inductive process of holistic content and formal analysis. I referred to the field notes I took after both the initial meeting to explore participants' interest in the study, and the research interview itself in forming my analyses. The notes I kept in my field notebook regarding my own reflections on the process of designing and implementing the study served as a good reference for my reflections on the research process.

Atlas-TI provides the ability to attach memos to coded video segments. During the process of data collection and analysis, I found that I used my field notebook and Atlas' memo function to draw relationships between individual stories and themes and to note questions regarding the particular meaning of a word or a segment, or questions regarding the research process such as my own impact on creating participants' stories. I noted these questions and points of clarification on participants' story summaries during the first phase of analysis. Using video as a means of recording the interviews proved to provide a significant advantage in the process of analysis. Because video captures the gestures and expressions that go along with participants' statements, I found that most of the initial questions I noted in my story summaries were clarified through multiple



reviews of relevant segments of the video during subsequent phases of analysis. I either included the remaining questions with the story summaries, themes and quotations participants received or clarified particular questions by email or phone.

In addition to drawing themes from the initial story summaries, I found that my analysis continued to develop with each viewing of the videos. Because I also considered participants' formal or structural choices to be an important dimension of analysis, I stayed close to the language they used to describe their experiences in my choice of codes. Initially, I often had a series of distinct codes representing slightly different views of a similar concept for each participant. After enough instances of seeing the same idea described in different ways, I was able to create a code which captured the most significant common elements of an experience while still retaining the individual labels or sub-codes that facilitated moving between individual narratives to check the accuracy of an emerging theme.

### **Reflexivity Revisited**

The final stage of the research process (step six) involved inviting participants themselves to reflect on the story that emerged from our interview and the process of telling their stories itself. Integrating participants' reflections on emerging themes and on the research process provides a critical means of ensuring accuracy and accountability, as well as developing the richness of meaning possible in narrative research (Arvay, 2002). All twelve participants responded to my request for comments, corrections, clarifications or reflections on their stories and the research process. Some participants simply expressed their support and approval as well as clarifying remaining questions, others requested specific changes, and a few went on to re-write or revise their story and the themes drawn from it.

Participants confirmed and often expressed surprise at the degree to which their stories reflected or resonated with their experience. Several participants expressed a sense of gratitude for being involved in the research, saying that the process of reflection that the study stimulated helped them gain further clarity on their journey, their process of healing and all the changes they had made along the way. Other participants said that reading their stories helped them gain a greater degree of acceptance and understanding for their process and experience as a whole. Some participants found reading their story in the third person to be “weird” or surprisingly emotional, occasionally bringing them back to the pain they experienced as well as to their sense of discovery, and providing a feeling of accomplishment as they reviewed milestones on the journey. Participants’ feedback, clarifications and changes are reflected in their own individual stories and in the meta-narrative of their common experiences of the process of drawing on spirituality for healing.

### **Representing the Findings**

The findings of the study are represented in two forms. I begin the results chapter by presenting abbreviated summaries of participants’ individual narratives allowing the reader to get a sense of the uniqueness of each participant’s experience. Each participant and every character in their story is represented by a pseudonym. The locations and events in some stories have been changed for the purposes of ensuring confidentiality. The meta-narrative that I constructed from participants’ stories comprises sections two to six of the results chapter. This meta-narrative provides a counter-point to participants’ individual narratives detailing the major common themes that emerged from the analysis with regard to participants’ process of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness and the role that counselling played in that process. I differentiated between areas where

participants are in agreement in their description of a particular concept or experience, and areas where a subset of participants introduce contradictory ideas or offer a different perspective.

I made the decision to privilege the voices of participants by placing the research findings directly after the methodology and following them with chapter five which provides a concluding overview of the research process. Readers who are particularly interested in the research process may therefore wish to read chapter five before they continue with chapter four which contains a detailed review of the study's results.

### **Criteria for Assessing the Credibility and Contribution of the Study**

A range of criteria have been suggested for evaluating qualitative research in general and narrative research in particular. One important area for consideration is the appropriateness of the research process itself. Is the chosen method consistent with the purpose of the research, the structure of the questions and the underlying epistemology of the study? (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). Does the study provide clearly articulated, step by step procedures that are theoretically and internally consistent, and that reflect a comprehensive consideration of the relevant ethical, conceptual and procedural issues in investigating the topic at hand using a narrative methodology? (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; White, 2004). I would argue that this study demonstrates a consistent fit between its theoretical and epistemological framework, the topic under inquiry, and the method of inquiry. It also demonstrates clearly articulated procedures that account for all of the relevant ethical, conceptual and procedural issues from obtaining informed consent to following a clear, consistent and comprehensive method of analyzing the data and representing the study's findings.

Reflexivity is a central concern in narrative research and an important criterion for evaluating the credibility of narrative study (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). I took care to weave a reflexive stance into every step of the research process, from choosing questions that provided a broad conceptual field within which participants could frame their own experiences, to contextualizing the terms I used and inviting participants to engage with, adapt and remake major concepts. Incorporating a reflective period in the research interviews allowed me to check my understanding and interpretation of each story as it was forming and engage with participants about the research and analytic process. I used a research journal which included field and process notes to record my observations, ideas and hypotheses as they emerged. I analyzed the data with a view to examining and accounting for my own impact on the process of its co-creation.

Finally, I invited participants to provide feedback on my understanding and representation of their experiences and the themes that emerged from the stories they shared. All twelve participants chose to respond to this request confirming that the summaries and themes that emerged from the research process resonated strongly with their experience of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness. My process of inquiry thus reflects a conscientious effort to identify and account for my own contributions to the co-creative process of narrative research and ensure that the findings that you are about to review meaningfully represent participants' experiences. Because narrative methodology accepts and acknowledges the co-creative nature of the research process, my reflexivity in making my impact in shaping participants' contributions to the research visible in so far as possible provides confidence that the findings actually reflect

important dimensions of participants' experiences of the topic at hand (Altheide & Johnson, 1998).

Perhaps the last relevant criterion for evaluating the quality of a study lies in assessing its contribution to the field. The study that I conducted provides new information on how people draw upon spirituality to address, respond to and heal a broad range of psychological and physical health problems. In this way, it contributes significantly to our understanding of the process of drawing on spirituality for healing and lays the ground work for developing a model that may serve to unify the results of existing studies and provide a new basis for future research.

In addition, the study offers new information on how people who are or have been counselling clients and who draw upon spirituality for healing view and experience counselling in relationship to their overall process of healing. In this way, the study contributes to the further development of models for integrating spirituality into counselling practice and contributes to enhancing the potential effectiveness of counselling for clients who draw upon or are open to spirituality as a resource for healing. Thus, I believe that the current study has the potential to make a significant theoretical and practical contribution to research and practice in the fields of health care and counselling psychology.

## **Chapter Four-Results**

This chapter presents the major research findings that emerged from participant interviews. It is divided into five separate sections. Section one responds to the study's first and overarching research question, namely: What are the stories of people who draw on spirituality for healing and wellness? In this section, you will encounter each participant as an individual and get a sense of his or her distinctive voice and experience by reading an annotated version of the story he or she shared with me. Sections two to five represent the meta-narrative that emerged from drawing the major content themes from participants' individual stories. Section two also responds to the study's major research question and details, in particular, participants' conceptualizations of spirituality and participants' collective journey to drawing on spirituality to create healing and wellness.

Section three responds to the second research question, namely: How do people draw on spirituality to create experiences of healing and wellness in their lives? This section narrows the focus from common themes in participants' overall journey of drawing on spirituality for healing to outline the specific steps they took to create healing and wellness in their lives on a day to day basis. Participants identified a seven step process that they used to transform illness or disease into wholeness and wellness, which will be detailed in this section. Section four sheds light on participants' understanding and experience of healing and wellness, discussing the transformations they experienced as a result of drawing on spirituality and elaborating on the essential aspects of healing and wellness in their experience.

Section five responds to the third and final research question, namely: What is the role of counselling in the narratives of people who draw on spirituality for healing and wellness? In this section, participants reflect on the diverse roles that counselling played in their process of healing and development. A significant minority of participants identify why they left counselling to seek healing through spiritual modalities alone, while the majority of participants explain how counselling played a central role in their larger process of spiritual healing and development.

Finally, the results of a secondary formal and literary analysis of participants' stories are contained in Appendix A at the end of the dissertation proper. This section serves to confirm and add richness to themes identified in the content analysis. The formal analysis of participants' use of language to convey their experiences reveals their conscious deployment of language itself as a vehicle for the creation of healing in keeping with the themes identified in the content analysis. The literary analysis of participants' narratives sets their stories in the context of the Western literary tradition, further confirming the novelty of their conceptualization of spirituality and highlighting their stories as stories of spiritual healing and discovery.

This chapter is organized according to section divisions which represent the major categories of themes that emerged from the content analysis of participants' stories. The text is laid out so that each major category of themes is reflected in the title of each section. Category markers and section dividers appear centred on the page, bolded in upper and lower case script. The individual themes that provide the building blocks of the experiences that participants described in each category will appear flush left and bolded in upper and lower case script. Sub-themes appear indented in bolded lower case script

beginning with a capital and ending in a period. Themes in the formal and literary analyses that comprise Appendix A will similarly appear flush left and bolded in upper and lower case script.

As a whole the analysis moves from the individual's unique story to an overview of common themes to an in-depth look at the language, metaphors and narrative choices participants made to create the meaning and message that has emerged from their stories. In moving from unique voices to common themes, and from surface content to formal structure, I believe the reader receives a view of participants' experiences that encompasses both the breadth and depth available in narrative analysis.

### **Section One: Participants' Stories**

This section of the findings provides an annotated version of the stories of participants' experiences with spirituality, healing and counselling that they shared over their hour to hour and a half interviews. Each participant has reviewed, corrected and provided feedback on the full length version of his or her story that I wrote to reflect the videotape interviews. The stories are presented as 3<sup>rd</sup> person accounts in order to remain faithful to the interview context in which the information emerged and to render visible the role of the researcher /writer in the genesis of the stories. Participants' responses to editing their stories varied from general approval and requests for minor changes to major re-writing. The final two stories depart from the general format I've chosen for the presentation of the stories because they reflect annotated versions of participants' own recasting of their stories. My hope is that each story gives you a sense of the unique flavour of the person and his or her journey of drawing on spirituality to create healing and wellness.



## **Bruce's Story**

Bruce describes himself as being "intense" or "sensitive." He says that he always felt "different" from other people; not quite "normal," or "mainstream," although he can't quite put his finger on why. Bruce was successful at everything he turned his energy to, from athletics to business, but continued to experience a nagging sense of self-doubt, a "lack of confidence," that left him looking outside of himself for answers. He became obsessed with "doing the right thing" to secure love, success and to control the outside world so that he could feel good on the inside.

When Bruce used cocaine he experienced some reprieve from being so intensely affected by other people's opinions and reactions and he was able to let go of trying so hard to control how his life was going. Although initially cocaine provided a sense of release, his use spiraled out of control over time. Eventually, Bruce arrived at a place where nothing he did was working anymore: he lost the financial success he had achieved, he felt angry and out of control, his relationships weren't working and he could no longer make decisions for himself. Bruce says that once he was "on his knees," he knew without a doubt that he could not continue to live his life in the same way and get over the addiction he had developed.

Letting go of control is a critical aspect of spiritual healing for Bruce. As Bruce became willing to let go of the control he had tried to exert over his life, "the spiritual well opened." He began to accept help and was led to a drug and alcohol treatment centre where he started to experience the spirituality that he had long been reading about. As he started to look within, he became aware of a greater presence through the uncanny synchronicities he witnessed in his life and in the lives of those around him. Gradually he made the shift from what he calls the "human perspective" of being at the centre of life,

driven by his ego to try to control the outcome of events to the “spiritual perspective” of seeing himself as a conduit for a greater energy, playing a role in a benevolent universe, but not being in charge of what was occurring.

Since his original surrender, Bruce’s healing and growth process has unfolded “in a natural way.” He has moved from thinking and controlling to experiencing life as it unfolds and is open to the purpose and the lesson he now believes reside in each life experience. Bruce says that the counselling he received at the treatment centre helped him start to identify the life patterns he needed to address, and that he has come to understand and begin to change those patterns through his spiritual journey. Bruce now uses journaling, visualization and spiritual reading to help him identify the roots of any discomfort he is experiencing, dissipate the energy of a pattern, and choose a new response.

Bruce believes that physical well-being provides a foundation for spiritual well-being. He takes care of his health by exercising and eating well and he finds a spiritual connection by spending time in nature, through meditation and by continuing to let go and be open to the spiritual messages available in day to day events. Bruce now knows that peace resides in his spirit beneath all the turmoil of the ego. Losing touch with this sense of peace has become Bruce’s signal to look for the lesson he needs to learn from the challenge that confronts him. Bruce has learned to trust his feelings to guide him along the way. If it feels right, he does it. If it feels peaceful or moves him towards peace, he knows he is on the right track. His feelings rather than his thoughts have become an internal compass leading him back to spirit when he gets caught up in fear and self-doubt.

Bruce says that he has experienced a total transformation; “a complete restructuring of self” through this process of re-patterning his life from a spiritual perspective. He says that his addiction made it impossible to maintain the “façade” he was presenting. By “making me face myself,” the addiction acted as a doorway for Bruce to connect with his spirit and begin to love and appreciate himself exactly as he is. Bruce says that now he is a lot less concerned with what other people think of him and much more focused on how he feels about himself. Previously concerned with financial success, Bruce now finds a sense of purpose in helping others. He says that his focus has shifted from looking at what he can get to how he can contribute to those he meets.

Ironically, Bruce has also found that financial success has come along with contributing to the lives of others. However, Bruce now sees his success in the world as the reflection and not the source of the contentment he feels within. Bruce says that he actively sets intentions for what he wants and uses affirmations to continue to develop the positive beliefs that help him open to the action of spirit. Then he trusts that he’ll receive the guidance, support, and resources he needs to take him wherever he wants to go. Bruce has learned that in sharing his spirit through giving to others he receives. His life has become an ongoing adventure of discovery that nurtures both body and soul.

### **Anne’s Story**

Anne was hit by a bicycle while walking on a forest trail in 1992, an accident that left her with a serious head injury. She experienced partial paralysis on one side of her face, found it hard to remember things, and was confused in her thinking. Anne was unable to continue to do her job as a real estate agent and faced the very real possibility of “being an invalid” for the rest of her life. Early on, Anne made the choice to embark

on the “long and traumatic” journey of healing, initially starting to regain strength and mobility in her physical body through exercise.

The process of recovering from the accident began a cascade of awakening in Anne’s life. Up until that point, Anne says that she “thought she was happy.” She enjoyed her job. She says that she knew that there were problems in her marriage, but she didn’t realize how deeply rooted they were. The accident helped her to see her life anew and become aware of how unhappy she actually was. Shortly after the accident, she also left her marriage and sought counselling. Anne describes therapy as “a beautiful gift,” helping her begin the process of looking within and serving as a bridge to opening to her spirituality. Over time Anne was introduced to energy healing through a spiritual teacher.

Anne credits her spiritual exploration with helping her move out of a “victim place,” trapped in fear and worry about how she’d survive with her injury. She gradually began to see herself as a “spiritual being having a human experience,” and started to understand her life and everything that was happening to her; her accident, her marriage, as serving a purpose; helping her grow and learn about herself. As she got in touch with herself, Anne became aware of all the pain she was carrying. She realized that she wasn’t just trying to heal from the accident, but rather that the accident gave her an opportunity to begin to address all of the pain she had been carrying since childhood.

Anne explains that positive experiences just flow through our bodies, but negative experiences stick. Anne talks about how we all want to please our parents as children and when we can’t, when we feel that we don’t measure up, or we feel hurt in ways that we can’t understand and process, we experience a block in our energy. Anne realized that she coped with the hurts she had experienced by burying the pain and putting on a happy

face. As she looked within, she started to get in touch with the shadow side of herself, the pain she carried, the negative beliefs she had accepted and the havoc they created in her life.

Anne believes that when we bury wounds, we begin to build walls around ourselves to protect us from feeling the pain, which often unknowingly attracts more experiences that fit the negative beliefs and feelings that represent the wound. The experiences we attract allow the wound to surface and call us to healing. Over time, Anne came to understand that her head injury called her to realize her greater need for healing. Anne believes that for healing to truly take place, the wounds she acquired had to be acknowledged and addressed on every level: the mental, emotional, physical and the spiritual.

Anne formed a support group with other women in the spiritual classes she attended and they started to meet once a week to practice the meditation and energy healing techniques they were learning. At the beginning, Anne wanted desperately to feel energy. She'd take hold of a rock or a stone and try to feel its energy. At first she couldn't feel anything at all. She'd go to bed at night asking for guidance and she continued practicing. After a time, she began to feel energy. As she continued to practice meditation and practice feeling energy around her and within her, Anne's awareness of her needs and issues and her ability to sense energy grew. Now, Anne says that she can feel any problems or imbalances as soon as they arise.

Anne says that she usually starts the healing process by feeling into any emotional pain or discomfort she is experiencing. As she feels into the predominant feeling, for example, anger, accepting and loving it, she begins to be aware of and move through the

various layers of emotion-fear, loss, pain; whatever is present underneath the surface. Moving through each layer, she gains an understanding of the experiences related to the feelings she is having. Once the emotional layer is cleared, Anne looks at the mental layers surrounding an issue. What beliefs are connected to the feelings? Why is she holding onto a particular experience or set of experiences? Often, Anne finds beliefs about herself, her life and her experiences that need to be cleared so that she can fully accept and love herself.

Anne first clears the beliefs that she acquired around an issue and then moves into the physical level. Anne says that often by the time she gets to the physical, any pain she was experiencing in her body is gone, dissolved through the process of clearing the other layers. If pain remains, she goes through the same process of feeling through its layers, coming to understand how it was created and what it means for her, sending it love until it dissolves and all that remains is her increased awareness.

Anne has done a variety of things to facilitate her process of healing over time. Her weekly meditation group has become a touch stone in her life. She says that they spent a whole year meditating, journaling, and talking about their experience of divorce alone. Anne has also drawn on a variety of practices using such tools as aromatherapy, crystals, stones, colours, and sound to raise her body's energy to facilitate healing around specific areas or topics. Anne explains that oils, stones, crystals, and other natural substances all carry a unique energy vibration that we can draw on to shift and balance our own energy, helping us to process and move through whatever issue is arising. At this point, Anne considers everything she does to be a spiritual experience. Whether she is walking by the ocean, washing dishes in the kitchen, or reading; by connecting with the

spirit inside of her, Anne experiences each of these activities as a spiritual practice that contributes to her ongoing healing and wellness.

Anne has experienced a total transformation through her spiritual journey. She describes herself as “90 %” healed with regard to the effects of the accident. Anne is walking, talking and dancing with ease. There is no more paralysis, she is easy to understand and follow in conversation. Anne says that she is a “not the same person” she was when she had the accident. Through opening to her spirituality she has fallen in love with herself. She has become open to all of who she is, acknowledging, loving and accepting her “shadow side” as well as the “good parts.” Along the way, Anne has cleared many of the fears, wounds, and blocks she was carrying. Although the journey is always ongoing, a deep sense of peace, connection, and love for herself, others and for life around her has become the mainstay of her daily experience.

### **Eva's Story**

Eva talks about what it's like to live in fear. Eighty percent of the time, she says, she had a gnawing sense of anxious foreboding, a feeling that something was coming around the corner and that it “was going to be bad.” Although when you meet Eva you'd never guess that this positive, fun and optimistic woman felt “disconnected from herself and everything,” Eva says that for most of her life, she felt as though people could not see her. That she was at the mercy of the chaos surrounding her.

Eva talks about the early part of her life as being oriented towards “getting.” Trying to get something on the outside to quell her fear and make her feel better on the inside. She recognizes that she chose to marry her husband in part to try to respond to her own sense of fear and emptiness. When that dream ended with the end of her relationship, Eva was catapulted into a depression. She remembers being in constant

physical pain, although she had no injuries and getting allergies for the first time that year. Eva started to see that her mind and body were connected, and she realized that she was getting a message; something needed to shift.

Counselling proved to be a pivotal experience during this period. Eva was stunned to find that someone really did see her. In talking about her counsellor, she says: "he saw some stuff that he could only see if you saw me, and so I thought I'm connected to someone." Eva still finds it hard to put the experience into words. She says that it was as if in seeing the larger essence of who she was through all the turmoil she was experiencing, he "validated my soul." As a result, Eva began to get in touch with and focus on the larger part of her that was connected to the world and to others.

As she reconnected with herself, Eva started to explore spirituality to understand what was going on in her life? She wondered what had led her to this point of divorce and depression. She started attending the Unity church. She says that it's not your typical church; it focuses on helping you change your life by changing the way you perceive and respond to events. As she started to focus within and became curious about what was going on for her psychologically and spiritually, Eva started to consider her life from the perspective of soul. She explains her shift in perspective by saying: "...like it's not about what is good for my ego, in the sense of having a man or a house to make me feel good, but about what is good for the inside of me and how do I let that lead?"

Eva says that things started to change slowly over time through shifting her focus from the outside to the inside. She started to practice surrendering to the greater spiritual reality that was taking place. She encountered *A Course in Miracles* and started to link the fear she was experiencing to being directed by her ego's desire to get things. She says



“it’s very different when you turn it around to a spiritual perspective and ask what am I here to give?” Now Eva takes thoughts about what she can get as a signal that she has slipped back into her fear and forgotten the greater part of her. Her ability to tune into her thoughts and feelings helps her shift back towards knowing and experiencing herself from the level of soul.

For Eva, the spiritual and the psychological go hand in hand. The spiritual path led her to a deeper consideration of her psychological self. As she pondered the purpose of events, she started to identify and examine patterns of belief, feeling and behaviour that fed her fear. As she traced these patterns to experiences in her early life and relationships, forgiveness became an important part of her spiritual healing process. Overtime, Eva has come to realize that true forgiveness comes from experiencing the pain of past events and identifying and accepting their impact, which then allows for a new understanding of oneself and others. As Eva explores the psychological roots of her experiences, she finds that she is led more deeply within, further discovering and honouring the knowledge and wisdom that resides in her soul.

Eva believes that wellness encompasses the “physical, emotional and spiritual” working together. Although she has always relied on physical activity to cope with stress, and it worked well to a degree, she says what she was missing was the “deeper level of spirituality.” By learning to really surrender to god, “so that I’m really not trying to control anything anymore,” Eva has found a sense of freedom from her fear. For Eva, surrendering to spirit, goes hand in hand with doing the “psychological part,” taking responsibility for “cleaning up my childhood stuff and family relationships” and changing her reactions to events by unraveling the patterns of thinking, feeling, and

behaving that she acquired through her past experiences. Eva emphasizes the need to bring every level together to create healing. Her shift to relating to herself as a soul was an important start, but it wasn't enough on its own. She knows that she needs to do the work to see and clear the patterns that keep her tied to old beliefs and the fears they generate.

Eva's spiritual journey has created a radical change in her experience of life. Her fear has faded and now she says that she is "peaceful and content" most of time. Her constant worry has lessened ten fold. She says "Life is so much easier this way." Her allergies and physical symptoms have fallen away and her relationships have changed "360 degrees." She has been able to heal old wounds and create a positive parenting relationship with her ex-husband, she enjoys a relationship built on authenticity and love with her partner, and she is increasingly at home and able to share herself with her family. Eva has created work which allows her to continue to deepen her spiritual life on a daily basis and she feels increasingly at home with and connected to life itself.

For Eva spirituality means "believing that I can be more than what I see...I can be more than my past...it's remembering who I am." She uses daily meditations to focus on remembering, she practices surrendering when she gets stuck, she takes responsibility for giving her gifts and for choosing to listen to and live from her soul. Eva no longer fears what is coming around the corner, but trusts instead that she is in the right place at the right time and that she'll be guided to all that she needs to learn and to do for her soul to continue to grow in love on the journey.

## **Lila's Story**

Lila doesn't know when she started to use energy, she remembers being able to see fuzzy shapes, auras, around people and animals as a child. It was natural. At that time she thought that everyone could see energy and that everyone communicated with plants and animals. She says that she has always experienced and been aware of the greater life force that she connects with within herself and in the natural world all around her.

Although Lila appreciates Christ as a spiritual teacher, she turned away from the beliefs and practices of Catholicism as a youth, finding her own sense of spirituality through metaphysical readings and workshops. Lila describes herself as a seeker and feels that she has always been intuitively guided to the spiritual beliefs and practices that work for her.

Lila has been married twice and talks about having experienced a number of challenges in her past relationships. She had severe sciatica in her mid 30's and a herniated disk that the doctors said required an operation. Her pain was so severe that she couldn't walk and was confined to bed rest. She recalls clearly realizing that she could choose to be ill, as her mother had to get the attention of her husband, or she could choose to heal. She did some energy work, starting by visualizing bringing healing light and love down her spine with an intention to heal, and in much less than a month she was up and walking around. Lila says that when you work with a healing intention you start receiving exactly the experiences you need to facilitate your healing. She was using crystals, which she says magnify thoughts to assist with her healing. Her crystal healing teacher referred her to a chiropractor who was also a spiritual healer in turn and within 3 months her back was completely healed and has remained problem free.

Lila says that she has come to view pain as a gift. She believes that pain signals the blocking of energy that happens when there is something we don't want to feel or don't want to look at. As she became willing to look at her relationship and examine her choices and beliefs that underlay her behaviour, her energy started to flow again. For Lila the belief systems we acquire through our childhood experiences are critical to making us who we are. When she experiences physical or emotional pain, Lila trusts her inner knowing to reveal the old beliefs and experiences that are blocking her. As she uncovers and clears the experiences, feelings and beliefs that contribute to a particular problem, Lila accepts more of her own power. Lila has found that a gift resides under each problem or fear. As she clears old beliefs, she discovers new skills and abilities and a new level of love for herself. Over time, Lila has come to know and accept the absolute perfection that resides in all of us as spirit. Through her experiences, Lila understands that healing comes from restoring our connection to the perfection within.

Lila is constantly drawing on spirituality for healing and growth. She has channeled her early awareness of energy into a mature ability to understand and work with energy within and all around her. Lila draws on a large variety of spiritual practices. She meditates and chants to connect with the perfection within herself on a daily basis. She connects with nature drawing on the energy of trees or of the ocean to increase her own energy. She uses light, colour and sound to raise her energy vibration to one of joy which she believes is our natural state. At very high vibrations such as joy, anything that is unlike her belief in her absolute perfection is cleared away and she is able to see and release any judgements or limiting beliefs about herself on an ongoing basis. Lila

believes that disease and illness are the result of judgements we make about ourselves and the limiting belief systems we acquire.

Lila says that as she clears the judgements or hidden beliefs that she uncovers through looking for the lessons in her life experiences, more and more joy arises spontaneously within her being. She has discovered that the more she accepts her joy, her power and her gifts, the more joy she is given. Lila currently shares energy work with a group of friends who help each other grow, heal and expand. Lila says that as she sets the intention to open and act as a vessel for spirit, she finds that she is more profoundly connected to the vastness, power, and joy of the creative force of life itself moving through her.

Healing has been a "slow evolution" for Lila. Through that evolution, she has come to feeling very joyful on a daily basis: "it's phenomenal" she says. Lila now experiences a lot of inner peace, knowing that she can move through whatever presents itself. She says that spiritual growth doesn't mean that you don't have the same emotional challenges that everyone else does. You do continue to have challenges. It just means that every time you step through a challenge, you gain a deeper understanding of the power a limiting belief has over you, a deeper acceptance of your power to overcome, and a more profound awareness of the fact that your own gifts need only to be awakened.

### **Janet's Story**

Janet recalls the Greek Orthodox Church that her mother took her and her brother to as strange and forbidding. There were many rules she didn't understand, the icons loomed menacingly, and the service was in a different language. Despite the fear inspired by this early experience, Janet prayed frequently as a child making spirituality an important part of her daily life. She experiences god as a "presence;" a sense of all of us

“coming together” in spirit, a “connection.” Pivotal moments in the development of her faith occurred when she found herself speaking in tongues at an evangelical camp she attended as a child. To this day, she has no idea how this happened, she can’t explain it. But she recognizes that this experience ushered in her acceptance of the mystical and unexplainable dimension of spirituality that has remained a comfort and a source of wonder throughout her life.

Another pivotal experience was the support, safety and guidance she found in a Protestant girls’ group when she was a teen. During this difficult time in her life she struggled with her family’s poverty and with the burden of juggling her school work with caring for her single-parent family during her mother’s illness. The girls group was the first place Janet remembers feeling as though she belonged. She remembers the group leaders encouraging her to trust her own sense of what she needed as she struggled to decide whether or not to join the church. With their support, Janet learned to trust her own judgement and that she could shape her own spirituality. The group provided Janet with a safe haven to develop her skills and be appreciated for her talents. Janet recognizes her group leaders as one of a series of angels whose arrival has touched her profoundly, changing the course of her life in a positive way. From this experience, she learned that you just need a safe place where people see you and believe in you to tap into your own healing resources.

In her adult life, Janet turned to her spirituality most significantly when her son Michael was dying. She can still remember getting the call to tell her that her perfectly fit and healthy young adult son was in hospital with a heart attack. It didn’t make any sense, and of course she remembers thinking that he’d be fine. As the family gathered and

gradually realized that he was not going to emerge from the coma that had taken him, Janet relied on her faith to find strength and comfort at each step of the journey. She drew on her church community for prayer that first night and used rituals such as lighting a candle to honour his life and the love they held for him to find comfort and hope as she prepared to go to him. Janet drew on scriptural stories of Mary's experience of watching her own son die to comfort her in the process of choosing to let him go and in saying goodbye. Janet knows that it was her faith that sustained her through the incredible pain and devastation of losing Michael.

Janet describes her spirituality as the "comforting presence," the foundation that reminds her that it's going to be okay no matter how horrible things seem. Her son Michael's death followed closely on the heels of a series of significant losses in her life, and Janet remembers feeling as though the "whole world was gone;" almost nothing that she relied on as part of her former life remained. She took some time off to take care of herself through exercise, prayer, scriptural and spiritual reading and by seeking counselling. Janet describes counselling as "the joining of one spirit with another as companions on a journey." Like the Protestant girls' group those many years ago, counselling provided her with a safe space where she could be witnessed in her grief and make sense of all of the spiritual experiences and personal questions that she had around Michael's death.

Janet believes that the many spiritual "signs" she experienced during her process of grieving contributed to her healing. She found another angel in the comfort and companionship of the mother of a friend of Michael's who had similarly lost her son a few years earlier. She found comfort, reassurance and meaning in such "signs" and

synchronicities as a robin who visited outside her window during that spring, and the daffodils that reminded her of a poem she searched for just prior to Michael's birth, the same poem she went through precisely the same process of finding as they prepared to go to his bedside while he lay dying. Janet and her family were further healed and comforted when they were able to share the depth of their empathy with a friend of their daughter who tragically lost her brother while they were visiting. This provided an opportunity to witness and understand what their daughter must have been going through that night as she prepared to join them at Michael's bedside. In this way, each "sign," each synchronicity provided them with a further piece in the puzzle of understanding, meaning, healing and completion.

Janet says that Michael has always been her greatest teacher. She used to think that healing meant resolving or getting over an issue so that it "doesn't hurt so much anymore." Now she knows that healing involves accepting and learning from the pain that remains, allowing it to transform you in positive ways. Janet says that she is "incredibly different" than the person she was before Michael's death. Moving through the experience in the way she has; making meaning of it through her spirituality has liberated her in a way. She says that she takes more risks now and does more things that she enjoys. She finds it easier to "get to the heart of things." She has fewer doubts about herself and is more creative. She has dropped a lot of self-imposed limitations and allows herself to experience more joy in living. Her spirituality continues to deepen and enrich her daily life and her ongoing process of growth and healing.

### **Katherine's Story**

Katherine's spiritual journey started in earnest in 1983 when she was diagnosed with uterine cancer. She says that the diagnosis opened her up to a new level of spiritual



exploration. Now, Katherine can't imagine having been able to heal without that willingness to open further to her spirituality. Spiritually-infused counselling has been an integral part of Katherine's healing journey. The psychologist she was seeing at the time of her diagnosis helped Katherine learn how to fast and guided her into an altered state as a means of connecting more deeply with spirit in preparation for her cancer surgery.

Katherine describes the near death experience that emerged from that session as a turning point in both her healing and her life journey as a whole. She remembers moving towards the most incredible love and light she has ever experienced. She was met by Christ who stopped her and told her it wasn't time for her to come home. She begins to cry at the memory, still feeling how sad she was not to be able to return to that incredible love. She received information about the gifts she had to share and was shown a vision of her son walking with his guides before finding herself back in her body.

Katherine says that this vision freed her from an ongoing sense of feeling torn between the world of the living and her attachment to those who have passed on before her. She returned with new hope, clarity and a sense of purpose in being in this world. She credits this session with enabling her to "remain on the planet" by opening the door to her spiritual healing. Quoting Bernie Segal, Katherine believes that healing happens when "the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional" are aligned. After this session, Katherine started on an insatiable quest to investigate every healing strategy that she felt drawn to. Over the last number of years she has worked with a broad range of counsellors and health practitioners such as naturopaths, energy healers and psychics, attended self help groups, studied for the ministry and integrated a broad variety of approaches to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. One of the most significant realizations

that Katherine experienced on her journey was the awareness that healing is really all about “clearing.” Katherine believes that it is the patterns that we acquire, repeat and live, usually without our conscious awareness, which create disease in our bodies. She links her development of uterine cancer to her repression of memories of sexual abuse she experienced as a child, a failed marriage, and to the stress that she was experiencing in her daily life. She can see how the cancer she experienced and also a subsequent hepatitis infection helped to make her aware of the need to start living in a different and less stressful way. It also helped her to attend to the memories of abuse that were waiting to surface.

Her initial diagnosis of cancer and the healing journey it sparked led Katherine to learn to listen to and honour her feelings, intuition and inner knowing. Katherine says that she lived most of her life “from the neck up,” coming from a family that didn’t acknowledge or deal directly with the many emotional struggles and undercurrents that Katherine experienced in her family home. As Katherine listened to the signals she received from her illnesses along the way and was increasingly willing to slow down and spend time mediating in nature, she started to see, feel and identify the patterns of thought and feeling that were creating her experiences. Being willing to feel through her feelings has been a crucial part of her healing.

Now Katherine allows her intuition to guide her to the best method of working through a feeling, to identify the pattern, and see the lesson beneath the experience. She uses a range and combination of spiritual practices from meditation, prayer and journaling to art, music, and energy work. She now trusts that the right vehicle for getting in touch will present itself in the moment. For example, when focusing on a feeling,

Katherine will often receive an image that she feels guided to express. As she begins to paint the image, an understanding of the feeling and its message will start to unfold.

Channeling paintings has become not only a means of personal healing but is also one of the unique gifts that she now shares with others.

Katherine's journey has led her to a relationship of profound connection with and trust of spirit. Over time she has come to rely on the "unmistakable" spiritual "knowing" that she receives in meditation and when asking for guidance. Her ability to trust in and act upon this knowing has led her to take many risks; from quitting a job she loved which was contributing to her ill health, to starting a new business the like of which she had never in her wildest dreams imagined or even desired. Katherine finds that as she continues to hold a healing intention, her inner guidance effortlessly creates everything she needs, putting her in the right place at the right time to enjoy amazing healing and a continued deepening of her joy of life.

Katherine describes her spiritual journey as an "amazing awakening." She talks about being grateful for her cancer and all of the other physical and emotional health challenges she has faced from early trauma to recurring health problems to divorce. She says that drawing on her spirituality has helped her get in touch with her soul journey rather than being driven by what she thinks she should do or what her childhood conditioning would have her do. Through her healing she has transformed from a "concrete thinker," someone who always had to be in control, to someone who is comfortable "living in the void." She has been successful at breaking the legacy of abuse and its impact on her family through her own healing, and she enjoys a great deal of peace in her life. As she looks towards her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, Katherine can't imagine retiring

in the traditional sense. She is passionate and excited not only about her own continually unfolding journey but also about playing her part in making the world around her a more welcoming place. Katherine is active in her community, using art, creativity and intuition to help others connect with that abiding presence within.

### **Robert's Story**

Robert describes his early life rather matter-of-factly: at 18 months of age he was abandoned by an alcoholic mother, spending his youth shunted from one foster home to another, and experiencing physical and sexual abuse along the way. Fear, anger, and loneliness have always been a part of Robert's experience. His early experiences made it hard to trust others and form attachments, making relationships an ongoing challenge. As a youth, Robert says he was headed down the wrong road. He was in a special class at school because of his behavioural problems; he sniffed glue, used IV drugs, and gravitated towards a "very disturbed" crowd, many of whom are currently in jail or in trouble with the law. Looking back Robert can see that even during that desperate time he had a core of compassion within that he has since developed through his spirituality.

Robert was exposed to Christianity as a youngster and found solace in prayer during times of trauma. Reading Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* was his first exposure to Buddhism and he remembers being quite moved by the book. Siddhartha's pivotal moment of looking in the pool, seeing his own reflection, and realizing that the world was all within him was a realization that stuck with Robert. His success in weightlifting in his teens raised his self-esteem and gave him his first sense of meaning and purpose. He encountered a book by a sports psychologist that combined Western psychology and Zen, and he started using the visualization and progressive relaxation strategies to improve his weightlifting performance. Looking back Robert realizes that these ideas

started him on a process of self-reflection, noticing himself and his thoughts in a way that would be a key to his later development.

Over time, Robert was led to a twelve step group through a relationship. He felt welcomed and found the idea of a higher power that one could surrender to helpful in coping with the ongoing fear and panic attacks that were the legacy of the abuse he experienced. During this same period, Robert attended a lecture on Zen at a local temple as part of a course on religion he was taking in college. He couldn't believe how the 15 minute meditation was able to drain away the stress and anxiety he was experiencing. Zen practice seemed to fit naturally with the techniques he had explored through his weight lifting training and the principles of the twelve steps, helping him surrender in a way that allowed a "creative force of healing" to arise. Robert's visit to the temple was 9 years ago, and he has been meditating everyday since.

Robert talks about struggling through his life. He struggled to understand and control the effects of trauma; he struggled with his memories, his fear, his anger, and his reactions. He struggled to control events in order to change what he was experiencing. He struggled to try to be a good person. Robert associates his struggles with suffering. He sees Buddhism as path to finding liberation from suffering, not just for himself but for the interconnected self that we all share.

Meditation has been the core practice that has helped Robert stop the struggle. As he meditates, watching his fear, his anger, his thoughts, Robert realizes again and again that they aren't real, they come and they pass away. He has learned that the more he struggles with them, the more he suffers. By accepting his experience and saying yes to the fear, he has discovered that it's not actually a problem. It changes on its own. Robert

marvels at the awareness he has come to, saying: "It's very simple, it's a very simple thing to do." Yet at the same time it has taken 9 years of dedicated practice to arrive at this point of being able to become aware of and surrender his struggle. Through surrender he is liberated.

Robert talks about Zen as being more about reality than spirituality. It allows him to see clearly what is real and drop the rest in his practice. Robert says that meditation works from the inside out, helping him see, accept, and shift his thoughts, feelings and reactions. Practicing the teachings of Buddhism helps him by working from the outside in, guiding him in taking a non-reactive approach to the situations he encounters in daily life. Robert carries his meditation practice out into his life by doing one thing at a time, practicing a mindful presence. Meditation helps dissolve the automatic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving he has learned through experience; patterns which create suffering. When he is out in the world, the teachings act as a touch stone to prevent him from reacting in ways that reinforce the patterns he has learned while they are in the process of dissolving. As he continues to practice, Robert is finding that the teachings he incorporated in his attitude and behaviour, such as the four wisdoms of empathy, charity, gentleness and benevolence, are beginning to occur naturally of their own accord.

Robert describes the transformation that has occurred as a result of his practice as "amazing." A lot of the emotional problems he has experienced have been "lifted." Even his memories of past trauma have shifted and he isn't overwhelmed by his feelings about them anymore. He now experiences a pervasive sense of peace in his life. He has a sense of love for himself and a sense of joy, of affection for life, and increasingly of affection

for others. Through each step on his path, Robert has developed that seed of compassion that he always had within, becoming a kind and loving person.

Robert's practice has also helped him to accept his difficulties as an opportunity to learn about himself. He is not afraid of challenge and he believes that the suffering he experienced has inspired his dedication to meditation practice. He says that coping with the legacy of abuse in his daily life was so difficult that he had to practice. As a result, he experiences a relative sense of joy, liberation, and warmth that he continues to cultivate. He talks about how wonderful it is to accept life as it is. When he encounters a challenge in his day, he can tap into the deeper awareness that he experiences in meditation until the understanding of what he needs to do comes to him. He can't imagine ever stopping his practice. Originally motivated by healing, now motivated by the ongoing unfolding of liberation and joyfulness, he is profoundly grateful and committed to enjoying what each moment has to bring.

### **Michaela's Story**

Michaela was always drawn to exploring the unseen world, intrigued by magic and stories of fairies and vampires for as long as she can remember. Naturally curious, Michaela was interested in probing the reality beneath the appearance of things. Michaela talks about having always believed in and felt god; she felt god in church as a little girl, and even more profoundly in nature. As a teenager, she stopped attending church, feeling that she didn't need organized religion to continue to explore her connection with god. Michaela continued to deepen her spiritual understanding through her own exploration throughout her youth and adult life. She describes herself as having been open to life, to new understandings, and as having been continuously engaged in her own growth.

Then 9 years ago, Michaela's eldest son, Justin, a high school senior, died in a cliff diving accident. Michaela describes the event as having "blown" her family apart. Justin's death "shattered the structure" of her life. In recalling the day Justin died, she remembers being steeped in a sense of the surreal that was punctuated by moments of incredible pain and horror at her growing awareness. The enormity of her loss and her love for him was so profound that she still experiences moments where it is difficult to believe that he is really gone. Justin's death catapulted Michaela to a new level of spiritual exploration and growth. She explains that it was as though the fabric of space and time opened in a new way with Justin's death. She now lives as much in the realm of spirit where she can still connect with his presence as in the human realm of day to day affairs.

Michaela describes the initial period of coming to terms with Justin's death as being dominated by her search for connection with Justin. She says that she always experienced a connection with her son's unique energy and personality, even before his birth. She says that she knew he was coming, even as a teen, and felt connected to who he would be. Certainly, her connection with him grew throughout her pregnancy and her life with him, and it felt natural for her to continue to look for him after his death.

One of the profound synchronicities that occurred for Michaela in her grieving process was a message she received through a medium. A friend of a friend gave Michaela the tape of a session where she was amazed to hear a medium describing her and responding to the despair she had been feeling on a recent trip by saying that spirit had heard her prayers and that her son was well. This chain of events led her to visit the medium and begin attending classes. Michaela talks about the sense of understanding and



relief she experienced through this exploration of mediumship. Although the sessions didn't provide answers to all of her questions, she was relieved to hear Justin, sense his unique personality, and experience his presence once again.

In her search for a spiritual understanding of his death, Michaela dove broadly into any tradition or teaching that drew her. In reading about diverse spiritual or religious paths, she found that "they all have answers." In drawing on these answers throughout her grieving process, Michaela used prayer, journaling, reading, spending time alone and in nature, and meditation to help her. She came to a belief that "god was energy," an inestimably huge force of love, "like a loving parent," who was always available and supportive in helping her negotiate the challenges and learn the daily lessons of life. Her understanding of god helped Michaela have the courage to "walk fully into," feel and express the anger, grief and pain that she was experiencing. By drawing on all of these tools and giving herself fully to the experience of her grief, Michaela was able to come to an acceptance of Justin's death.

Michaela describes reaching a pivotal point in her process where she needed to decide for herself whether she would give into her despair or rejoin life. Her choice was to live. For Michaela this choice meant using the pain of Justin's death as an opportunity for growth, as an opportunity to become all that she can be. In this way, her pain, becomes a "badge of honour" marking her ability-and the human ability- to continue to embrace life and grow even through the devastation of losing someone so dear. Michaela describes her healing as making the decision to continue to live fully and grow fully even in the face of the pain and grief of her son's death.

Counselling played a critical role in Michaela's healing. By embracing her with a spiritual "love" and by providing the guiding structure that she felt had been torn from her life, her counsellor helped Michaela negotiate those painful first days of waking up to a world without Justin in it. Michaela describes her counsellor as "spiritual", "open" and "genuine." Her understanding and companioning of Michaela's spiritual search for Justin provided comfort as well as guidance and support as the healing process began.

Michaela feels that there is no end to healing, because we are always growing and evolving. Spirituality is an integral part of Michaela's life, woven through the fabric of each part, from how she understands herself and what happens in her life to her openness to hearing messages and learning from everything in the world around her. She feels that her daily use of prayer and meditation keep her grounded and healthy and she believes that she needs to maintain those practices to continue to progress in a optimum way. Michaela says that although she continues to get "curve balls" thrown at her, she now has the confidence that comes with growing through adversity. No matter what she is thrown, she now knows that she can re-create the balance she needs and continue to fulfill her purpose of becoming all that she can be.

### **Sigrid's Story**

Sigrid describes herself as a seeker, "always searching" for something to address the sense of unhappiness and disconnection she experienced in the strictures of WW-II Germany and the insular culture of her family. She left home as soon as she could, marrying after a short time and coming to Canada. She says that her "real searching started" after she left her husband of 5 years and moved into the work world. Sigrid initially took a job as a salesperson to overcome her fear of people. Over many years, she climbed the corporate ladder becoming a retail executive. Although success and

achievement were “the thing to do” at the time, she says “my heart wasn’t in it” and she gradually turned more and more of her attention to her search for understanding.

Sigrid had developed an interest in psychology in her teens and initially began to read in earnest in this area. She started seeing a psychiatrist who helped her gain more understanding of parts of her personality; more insight into herself. However, over time, she found that psychology “didn’t get to the bottom of it all” and she discovered a book on spirituality. Since she considered the “occult” a bit flaky, she was surprised to find herself interested in and responding to spiritual material, finding that it had value.

Discovering the *The Nature of Personal Reality* in the 1970’s was a major turning point. It introduced her to new ideas about creating her own reality, including choosing this incarnation and the people in it. This book and the ideas it stimulated became “the basis” for her ongoing search and her beliefs, actions, and values for some time. During this time, she says: “God became an interesting entity again.” She had long rejected the image of god as an old, white male authority figure, just a bigger version of her father really, that she was exposed to as a child. *The Nature of Personal Reality* helped her reconnect with an interest in the invisible world by opening up new visions of god as everywhere, including within. She also discovered *A Course in Miracles* in the late 1970s which helped her get in touch with a reading of Christianity that she found profoundly moving and meaningful.

Sigrid’s spirituality developed or perhaps rather she deepened her discovery of it as she read and experimented with new beliefs over time. The majority of her spiritual development came from reading, accepting and implementing new beliefs which then changed her experience and gave her a broader perspective, opening the path for more

learning and change as each new understanding built upon the last. As she looks back she now understands that she always set intentions and brought positive experiences into being. What other people would call luck, she recognizes as intention that helped to draw the jobs she wanted and experiences she needed.

Ten years ago, Sigrid experienced another significant shift when she connected with a spiritual study group and started learning about energy work. She describes this period as the beginning of "real contact with my inner self, higher self, or with the spiritual aspect of me." Investigating energy, she came to see and experience everything as energy. Sigrid says that she had always pushed her feelings away. She can remember when simply feeling was a painful experience. Through learning about energy, she reconnected with her deeper self and her feelings, coming to understand that she experienced health and wellness as she allowed feelings to flow freely through her body. She learned that if she judged her feelings, or her experiences, she created energy blocks which resulted in unwanted effects in her life. She came to understand that illness results from these energy blocks.

She now understands energy as everything that is, as an essential part of us, and believes that understanding how energy works and our relationship to it is essential for healing to take place. She practices accepting everything as it is in her life, letting the unwanted flow through her consciousness without giving it extra energy. Letting go has become an important principle for Sigrid because she understands that giving her attention or energy to something creates more of it in her life.

Sigrid describes her life as being perfect in its unfolding. She believes that every single part of it has a purpose and exists because she has chosen it at some level of her

being, although she may not immediately understand the message it is bringing to her. Learning about energy has opened the door to discovering self-love. As she opened to understanding energy and to her feelings, she connected more deeply with herself and came to love herself for the first time. She believes that our beliefs create our reality and are the basis for everything in our lives, although we are often mainly unconscious of them. She says that there is no formula, no discrete  $A + B = C$  to spirituality, but that it is all an integrated experience. She doesn't know how it works. She just knows that it does. Her journey has been a process where one step has prepared her for the next.

Sigrid sees healing as a process, and an ongoing one. Counselling has played a very minor role in Sigrid's healing. She started the process of healing by looking towards psychology to help her understand and heal her personality. Over time she moved from psychology to the vast, unknown territory of spirituality "where all these wonderful things were happening." In spirituality she encountered a set of beliefs and understandings that made sense, which she began to practice, and then gradually to experience in her life. For Sigrid, the healing of her personality has occurred as her spiritual search has continued to unfold. Sigrid describes herself as being "at peace". She is a robustly healthy and active 80-year-old who is excited at the learning, growth and continued expansion to come, experiencing each day as taking her more deeply into a journey of discovery.

### **Silke's Story**

Silke shares a story attributed to a Zen master. She says: spirituality comes knocking and at first it's just a tap, then the tap gets harder, then it becomes a knock, then it gets a little uncomfortable. If you continue to ignore the knock, it grows even more uncomfortable and perhaps even life threatening, until you answer the door. Silke now

realizes that the challenges she encountered were spirit's knock on the door, inviting her to further awakening.

Silke credits her love of her children with starting her on a journey of self-exploration. She recalls one pivotal moment, where she could see herself yelling at her children at the top of her lungs, while they cowered in a corner, over a glass of spilled milk. At that moment, she flashed back to how she used to shrink from her own father's rages. Shaken by seeing how she was repeating the pattern, she decided to do everything she could to address her anger and ensure that she wouldn't leave her children with the same legacy of fear that she experienced. This decision started Silke on a journey of self-discovery and change.

Although Silke successfully pursued this initial seed of self-development, it wasn't until her 30's that she found herself contemplating the possibility of god for the first time since her Anglican upbringing. Initially Silke decided to accept the idea of god intellectually, gradually leading to a continuously unfolding relationship with god, which Silke now recognizes as an "all pervasive, loving presence." During this period, Silke pursued an interest in meditating and began to have spiritual experiences initially of a loving presence, and over time of guidance or information flowing effortlessly to her. Most recently, Silke receives music; spiritual songs of inspiration and of guidance that she experiences as god talking to her. Spiritual experiences have been an important part of Silke's journey, helping her to develop her faith through experiencing the reality of a loving presence in her life.

In her late 30's Silke started experiencing panic attacks so severe and ongoing that she wasn't able to sleep for more than two hours a night. She remembers being in a

perpetual state of agitation where she was afraid to leave the house because an attack might occur. As the panic took control of more and more of her life, Silke searched desperately for answers. Medical interventions helped only for short periods or actually added to her symptoms. Having grown increasingly desperate to understand what was happening to her, Silke accepted her doctor's referral to counselling.

Silke describes counselling as the first time that she felt truly listened to in her life. It gave her an avenue to sort through her confusion and distress and identify patterns in her life experiences. After finishing counselling, a friend introduced her to re-birthing which she credits with taking her to a new level of depth in experiencing her emotions and identifying the source of major life patterns. This experience started her on an 8 year journey of "opening" through reading and attending workshops based on spiritual principles from Buddhism, *A Course in Miracles*, Shamanism and Eastern Mystics such as Osho. She describes the essential gift of her spiritual explorations as "coming back to myself and opening up and trusting my own heart, that part of god in me."

Silke describes the marriage she was in when she started having panic attacks as rocky and volatile. Up until this point, she experienced life as a continual struggle: whatever she tried to get off the ground, it just never seemed to work, no matter how hard she worked. She remembers reaching a turning point when she took care of her father who was ill, and experienced a very peaceful and healing week with him. As the week drew to a close, she found herself unable to return home. She grew more and more agitated at the thought of going home. This turning point ushered in a year of turmoil and reflection while she lived with a friend and tried to sort out a new direction.

By this point in her growth, Silke says that she knew that god was at the centre of her life. Through her spiritual studies she learned about and resonated with the idea that there is a spiritual purpose that we are each here to fulfill. Silke says that once she committed to the decision to fulfill that purpose and listened to her intuition and the feelings that were telling her to leave her husband, her sense of struggle transformed and everything came together to support her in moving forward in the most amazing ways.

Silke talks about this experience as being in the flow. In short order she had a safe place to stay, the money she needed to survive and she was starting to move towards fulfilling her dreams through returning to school. Today, when she is confused or disturbed, Silke meditates to connect to the loving presence within, listens to guidance she receives, sets a clear intention for what she wants to experience and trusts that she will receive the support she needs to move in that direction. Silke knows from experience that when she is on track with her purpose, and in the flow, things just come together for her.

Meditation has become a crucial spiritual practice for Silke. She says that her daily meditation practice connects her with the unconditional loving presence within. In her experience of this most essential part of herself, anxiety, daily worries, imagined grudges and the self-criticism that floats around in the mind simply disappear. Silke describes her spirituality as healing, by "taking me home to myself." Her meditation practice keeps her clear and connected on a daily basis while the other strategies she uses such as acceptance, singing, setting intentions, spiritual reading, and her own technique of vocalizing and feeling through her feelings help her get back on track when she gets



stuck. For Silke, being centred in her spirituality is synonymous with being centred in her heart; feeling connected to god, and being open to all that life has to offer on her journey.

In thinking about who she was before she embarked on her spiritual journey and who she is now, Silke says she is a totally different person. She remembers feeling “on the edge” and “crazy” a lot of the time back then. She hated herself, hated the world around her, and hated what was happening in her life. Now, she routinely experiences a lot of peace, hopefulness, feelings of really loving herself, robust health and she enjoys her life on a daily basis. The panic attacks have gone; she sleeps regularly and often feels joyfully in the flow of fulfilling her purpose. Now when symptoms of panic or anxiety pop up, she sees them as sign posts pointing her back towards reconnecting within.

### **Mia’s Story (Re-written by the Participant)**

Origins: Mia remembers always having been interested in the “invisible world” and the unexplained. As a child, she started reading about parapsychology, mythology and magic in the library to satisfy a yearning to learn about the deeper realities of life, “the hero’s journey.” As a teen her focus changed to experiencing life and she concentrated on exploring her creativity in university; studying film, screen writing, and media studies. Shortly after settling in Vancouver, she developed a health problem, bleeding cysts on her forehead, which proved a pivotal turning point, drawing her back into an exploration of spirituality in an effort to heal.

The journey: Initially, Mia tried the standard Western medical approach to healing, going through a variety of pharmaceutical drug treatments. When nothing worked and she felt that her health was starting to be compromised, she started exploring alternative healing and focused on nutrition and various natural health modalities for a few years. During this time she also tried some traditional counselling as a means of

understanding her psychology better. One day she tried an energy healing session, with a practitioner who shared an office with her physiotherapist. The first session was a turning point in her journey. The healer put her hand over Mia's heart chakra and she could feel palpable movement of magnetic-like energy. Fascinated, she decided to investigate this phenomenon. This marked a transition from focusing on physical healing to focusing on energetic healing which she also considers spiritual healing. Although still working full-time, she plunged full force into studying energy principles; reading intensely, going to workshops and having sessions with a variety of healers.

About depression: Mia describes her first few years of studying as being a dark time, experiencing many challenges. An energy pattern she labeled as depression, for a lack of any other way to identify it, had been with her, recurring regularly since childhood and all through her teens and early 20's. She would periodically feel hopeless, lose all sense of meaning, not want to do anything, be tired or drained. She describes it as entering a state where she stopped feeling anything. She had always felt that the depression just took over, that she didn't have any power over it. At recurring intervals, she had often contemplated suicide.

As she studied her past patterns from an energy perspective, she came to the realization that she could choose how she felt. She could choose not to entertain depression and the thinking associated with it and made a commitment to herself not to ever entertain it again. Mia talks about the power of having made a commitment, a vow to herself and following through with it. She thinks of depression and other feelings as guests that visit your "mansion," which comprises all your bodies: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Through this analogy, she was able to see depression coming to

her doorstep and so she learned not to invite it inside.

About healing: One of the first maxims she was exposed to was that “you had to stop seeking the cure in order to heal.” Her drive to heal her health issues had inspired her search and now she needed to let go of healing as a goal. It felt like a most terrible paradox. However, over time, she became so fascinated with the process of learning and experimenting with energy principles, that she did release “healing” as a goal. As she let go, and as her awareness grew, her condition spontaneously healed in a matter of two weeks, despite being intractable for at least 2 years at that point. This healing was clearly a result of her energetic practices, and as she continued the work after the cysts disappeared, *every* area of her life was transformed.

New perception: Through her studies, Mia came to understand that everything is energy. Energy is always flowing around us, through us and we create our realities. What we experience on the outside is determined by the way we manage our energy (by the thoughts and feelings we entertain). She talks about taking a scientific approach to her study of energy. She had been skeptical through the early stages of the journey. Even cynical and doubtful, wondering if it was all just “new age bullshit” whenever she got discouraged.

Nevertheless, as she continued on the path, she saw the spiritual concepts get played out in her life and in the lives of those around her. As she consistently began applying the principles, she started to see tangible effects. She talks about faith being an important part of the process, having faith that as we change the inside, it must show up on the outside. Her passion and commitment to the process kept her going.

Mia's process has been to notice a pattern and investigate it, observe it as a non-judgmental third person. Observation would lead to understanding and epiphanies. She realizes that the patterns were simply reflecting her beliefs, and were showing her how she was using her energy. Then she made commitments to stop doing actions, small and large that were perpetuating the pattern. With each small change came a cascade of epiphanies and soon the pattern had been transcended. Change had been achieved with new perception, followed by committed and consistent action. With new awareness, come new choices. With new choices, come new thoughts, feelings and manifestations. Mia has come to understand that thoughts and feelings are the blueprint for what is manifested on the physical plane.

About feelings: Mia talks about having learned to let feelings flow through her instead of blocking them. For example, when facing anger, if we are afraid or judgmental about it, we try to stop feeling it. If we allow it, it just flows through and passes very quickly. As a result of allowing feelings to pass through her physical, emotional, mental and spiritual bodies, she no longer spends a long time in negative feelings. When patterns or feelings she doesn't like come up, she puts her detective hat on, gently observes what is happening, and allows herself to experience her feelings fully. Although she observes herself, Mia is clear that it is not purely a mental process. Although the mind is always analyzing, we need to move out of the mind into the body.

Examples of change: Mia was raised in a world of struggle, where everything was "achieved" through hard work. It was also the paradigm of struggle, where one had to overcome many obstacles and work intensely to receive. Now she does "energy work," so instead of focusing on "doing," she focuses on "being." Outer action is still useful but

the process is led by inner focus. By aligning her energies (her thoughts, intentions and emotions), she co-creates with cosmic forces.

The next stage: Mia's life has changed tremendously as a result of her nearly decade-long spiritual journey. Previously, she would rarely have used the word joy to describe what she experienced, while joy and bliss are now common experiences. At this point, she doesn't feel the need for outside guidance; she receives guidance inside from her own intuition. Her relationships have changed; she has great people in her life. She experiences abundance and freedom. She is doing what she loves and is excited to get out of bed everyday.

### **Miriam's Story (Re-written by the Participant)**

Miriam identifies her husband's illness as the initial inspiration for her conscious spiritual search. She started searching metaphysical bookstores for something to help him, but quickly realized that she needed to address her own wellness in dealing with the impact of his illness on her family. Initially she found and delved into *A Course in Miracles* which brought her to a greater awareness of her feelings. Coming from a Ukrainian Polish home, where no one talked about feelings, this was the first time Miriam had really delved into experiencing and looking at all the various hues of feeling which really resolve into two main feelings: fear and love. Through *A Course in Miracles* she came to understand that her greatest fear was that of opening to love and to truly accepting herself as part of god.

As her studies continued, Miriam became curious about and investigated a range of healing modalities. A woman in a spiritual discussion group she attended told her about an energy worker. Her first session was profound. Not only did Miriam experience a sense that she already knew this woman upon meeting her, she could also feel the

energy moving through her body and could actually hear guidance; both powerful new experiences. Never before had she felt her body in this way, and although she had used intuition before, she had never heard guidance on the inside in this way. Miriam remembers the intense period of growth sparked by beginning to take classes with this teacher. As she started to shift to a spiritual way of looking at life, she lost her sense of what was real and what wasn't as her perception of reality shifted. Although she wouldn't change her experience in looking back on it, the sense of having lost her bearing on reality was very frightening until she was able to start to really trust herself, her gifts, and the guidance that was coming to her.

During this time, Miriam started to realize that she could access "universal knowing" on the inside; "answers you could never find in a text book." She started a process of looking inside and asking whether something that came to her was a universal truth or a "man made" theory. She says: "To trust that, to absolutely trust that, and to ask questions in myself: Is that a universal truth or a man made law? became a study for me."

As Miriam's internal openness grew she discovered some artistic gifts she didn't know she had and got the idea of sculpting an angel for her energy instructor as a means of saying thank you. She recalls sculpting the angel in her kitchen and having her daughter comment that it needed to be balder and fatter and thinking; angels aren't bald or fat. When she took it into the class, the facilitator recognized it as her soul angel, saying that it needed only to be balder and fatter to be exact. Miriam says she was "blown away" by this incident. She was surprised by her ability to tap into and create a reflection of the spiritual realm. People in the class began asking her to sculpt their soul angels and this started her on a 5 year journey of sculpting angels. People would come, all by word

of mouth, and she would connect with the soul of the person and with the insights of their journey. This process in turn also connected her more deeply with her own remembering.

The energy class also led Miriam to begin doing energy work with others. Again this wasn't in any text book, but was part of the process of remembering her own knowing. She describes it as "a natural ability that arrived." Miriam found that the clients she attracted mirrored beliefs and concerns of her own. Gradually, she started to understand that we choose our own experiences, and that the people we interact with serve a purpose in our growth. As Miriam struggled to understand and accept the great variety of human choices that involve suffering, she found that the issues that clients came to see her about shifted reflecting her progression in accepting each facet of human experience. By accepting and understanding her clients' choices, Miriam was able to move more deeply into an acceptance of her own life choices.

As her learning progressed, Miriam came to live more and more from trusting and attending to the guidance she received within. For example, she felt guided to begin to teach. As she gradually allowed her inner guidance to lead her she received the name and content of a class on the inner child, a part of the self which Miriam experiences as part of our spiritual nature. No one was more surprised than she, she says. She wasn't at all interested in the concept of the inner child at first. Similarly, when Miriam became pregnant at 40 and wanted a means of income that would allow her to be at home with her child, she turned within only to be led to exactly the information and people that she needed to begin a craft business that allowed her to be successful in working at home. Miriam explains: "you know it was just trust, just knowing that something would be

provided, I was willing to choose something out of the ordinary, I didn't know what, but it occurred."

Healing is present in every aspect of Miriam's life: connecting with her children, healing from her marriage break up, her health, every area. She goes within to learn from and respond to every challenge that occurs. Recently, a specialist said that she had retina damage and wouldn't be able to do anything about it. As she meditated on the issue, she was guided to particular practitioners; an ear acupuncturist, a chiropractor. She began integrating aromatherapy and herbs, started doing Qi Gong and going swimming, attending consciously to her physical self for the first time in her life. Her specialist confirms that her eyes have continued to improve with each appointment, and she keeps working on it. She knows that the condition is related to accepting herself further and accepting that all of her choices; both the beautiful and the traumatic have been just perfect for her. Her eye problems have brought her to further honour and integrate her physical self. For Miriam, healing is defined by acceptance, accepting more and more of her self.

Spirituality has very much become a way of life that Miriam now experiences as an intrinsic aspect of herself. She draws on a range of tools to stay in contact with herself so she can "hear, feel and know the deeper spiritual aspect of herself." These include meditation and toning, as well as energy work, and the creativity that she has used with herself and with others. She starts each day with gratitude and with setting an intention for that day. The tools she uses help her remember that she is the "whole of the whole" and give her the ability to stay in the flow and respond in the best possible way to whatever arises in her day.



In terms of how her life has changed since the beginning of her journey, she says that she is happier, and has become focused on living in the present moment, embracing what is here now. In order to stay well she balances her food, exercise, and entertainment with friends. However, she says you can have the appearance of a balanced life and still not be well inside. For Miriam, wellness is grounded in an "acceptance of everything in my life." She says: "I can have a physical disability and still be mentally well." Miriam believes that wellness comes from her spirituality, tapping more deeply into herself which allows her to "take the very best of everything that I possibly can in any situation."

### **Section Two: Spirituality and the Path to Healing**

This section marks the beginning of the meta-narrative of common themes that emerged from an analysis of participant interviews which will unfold over the next four sections of the results. This section, in particular, describes participants' experiences of spirituality and provides an overview of the road they traveled to begin drawing on their spirituality for healing. Although each participant's story is distinctive, a surprising number of similarities emerged in listening to and engaging with each person and the story they told. The majority of participants moved away from the religious traditions they were exposed to as children, integrating the best elements of those early experiences and charting their own non-traditional spiritual course. As children, participants generally shared an early sense of the magic and wonder of life and an innate awareness of the mystery of life that they came to explore more fully as adults. At some point in their lives, some very early and others later on, each storyteller faced an unsolvable problem, most often accompanied by overwhelming anguish, which motivated them to seek the answers in spirituality that they had been unable to find in any other place. Participants were drawn into the extraordinary spiritual adventures they described both by the desire

to end their pain and by their awareness that some greater experience of life awaited them.

Participants drew on the metaphor of a journey to describe the sense of personal unfolding that their spiritual search engendered. Reading served as the most common doorway into new visions of the world. Almost every participant spoke of encountering a book that sparked their spiritual imagination, calling them to remember a truth about themselves and often introducing ideas or practices that changed their perception and experiences. Participants also explored a broad variety of teachers, practitioners, religions, workshops, courses, and practices, synthesizing the ideas and techniques that best resonated with their own experience. As each participant's journey unfolded through dark times and light, participants invariably found not only healing but transformation. The changes participants experienced through exploring their spirituality were so profound that they began to encounter and eventually enact entirely new ways of living. The excitement and the sense of spiritual unfolding that occurred was so transformative that the journey eventually became a fascination and an end in and of itself. Ultimately, healing became secondary to the greater experience of life that they were living, and participants found that their healing occurred, naturally, spontaneously, and to an extent that was well beyond their wildest imagination.

### **Participants' Definition of Spirituality**

#### **Spirituality is a Unique and Personal Experience**

Spirituality lay at the heart of participants' stories and experiences of healing. Participants conceptualized spirituality as a lived experience of connection with the divine. Each participant had their own particular understanding of this lived experience of connection. Participants derived their conceptualizations of spirituality by drawing on

reading which resonated with their personal experience of spirituality. Because they conceptualized spirituality as an experience of their relationship with the divine, they expected that each person would have their own particular experience of spirituality and that their experience would change over time as they changed. Hence, Bruce comments on the futility of trying to come up with a universal definition of an experience as uniquely personal as spirituality. He says:

There's millions of us all of whom all have a different definition, and therein lies the beauty of spirituality, like love it's almost indefinable, other than to say that we all have a process in spirituality that's different.

Bruce's comments capture participants' appreciation for spirituality as an ineffable experience. Several participants commented that attempting to concretize spirituality into clear definitions was missing the mark. They preferred to focus on learning to open to the experience itself in order to encounter and develop their spirituality.

### **Spirit is All There is and We are Spirit**

Despite the unique and personal nature of spiritual experience, participants' stories did reflect some common elements that describe the nature of their spiritual experiences. A central theme that emerged in participants' stories of spirituality was the sense of the divine as an all encompassing presence however they chose to conceptualize that presence or their relationship with it. Participants used a broad range of terms interchangeably to talk about the divine. The most commonly used terms included: god, spirit, life force, energy, higher self, and soul. This practice of using a variety of terms communicated their belief in multiple ways of understanding and relating to this presence, inviting the listener to choose their own entry point into the conversation.

Drawing on different terms also served to communicate their sense of the vastness and

omnipresence of spirit in each and every aspect of existence itself. Participants were united in understanding the divine as a much larger reality that is present, benevolent, and accessible everywhere at all times. By far the most common conceptualization of spirit was a non-traditional one. Fully six out of twelve participants described spirit as an all pervading energy. Sigrid provides the best example of this view in explaining:

God is an energy, it is spirit in itself, spirit is what everything is made of. The stars, the planets and every single little bug, it's all the same, it's all spirit. That knowledge now is solid in me ... energy is flowing constantly everywhere, and it's flowing also through your body.

Sigrid's quotation demonstrates the recognition of spirit as an omnipotent presence that pervades the individual as well as the world. According to this view, we as human beings and everything around us actually are in essence spirit or the divine itself. Spirit is a benevolent force flowing through and sustaining us. It never harms but only supports because that is its nature and because we are an essential part of it. Participants believed that spiritual development involved becoming aware of and experiencing this benevolent force and deepening their connection with it. This view of spirituality is representative of the beliefs of the majority of participants. In addition, even participants who expressed differing views of spirit were united in identifying it as a larger benevolent presence and power that could be experienced within the self as well as in the outside world.

### **Spiritual Not Religious**

Given that they generally held non-traditional views of spirituality, it's not surprising that the majority of participants, 11 out of 12, characterized themselves as spiritual on the study's demographic survey, rather than as religious, both spiritual and

religious, or neither spiritual nor religious. Most participants were exposed to Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox forms of Christianity in childhood. Almost all of these participants moved away from the religious teachings of their youth. Some participants actively rejected religion explaining that they found the beliefs or practices they grew up with to be limiting, harmful, or non-spiritual. Participants frequently felt that the beliefs that were espoused in church didn't resonate with their experience of life or they were disappointed in the hypocrisy they saw in the behaviour of religious role models. Other participants acknowledged the potential for making a spiritual connection in church or through religious avenues, but simply didn't feel as though that was the most direct or effective route for them personally. Eva exemplifies a participant whose experience of the dissonance between what she saw and heard at church and her own experience led her to turn away from religion. She explains how her earlier experiences led her to dismiss anything that was associated with religion or spirituality for many years. She says:

Part of that is the Catholic thing, growing up Catholic, sitting in church all the time, bored out of my tree and pretending that I was there when I wasn't and yakking on about all of this stuff that was just so fake, you know and going into those confessionals and pretending that you're bad person so that the priest can forgive you, *and you're 10* [italics added], that I'm sure, started that whole, I think it's fake, I think all of you are fake, you know I put the blanket on everybody that's religious or spiritual, I think you're all fake, and that is not true at all, so that was my disdain for that whole fake woo-woo stuff.

On the other hand, many participants, including Eva, either held onto or returned to build upon elements of early religious practice or training that resonated and had

meaning for them, recognizing the value in the spiritual principles if not the organizational manifestations of some religious teachings. Miriam, for example, credits her Catholic upbringing with introducing her to the concept of a guardian angel which continues to be an important part of her faith. Although her current views of spirituality are radically different than and even opposed to many of the church's teachings, she found that she started sculpting individual soul angels for people as part of the process of opening to her own spirituality and the intuitive knowing that she considers fundamental to her spiritual experience.

Similarly, 2 participants who left the religious organizations of their youth connected instead with newer religious denominations whose recognition of the pervasiveness of spirit, acceptance of other faiths, and ideas regarding the process of spiritual development resonated with their own views and experiences. Over time, they found a means of translating, interpreting and adding to the Christian teachings of their youth in ways that were personally meaningful and effective. Although non-religious in their own orientations, the vast majority of participants recognized the wisdom to be found in spiritual texts and practices from around the world, frequently incorporating concepts from various traditions in their own practice in one form or another.

### **Religion Also Provides an Avenue for Spiritual Expression**

Two of the 12 participants found their lived connection with spirit within the context of a religious tradition. One found her spiritual home within a liberal Protestant denomination and the other became a practitioner of Zen Buddhism. Interestingly, both participants described themselves primarily in spiritual as well as in religious terms, suggesting that the distinction remained significant to them despite experiencing their spirituality within a religious tradition. Both participants also talked about having

connections to and integrating practices they learned from other spiritual traditions and secular approaches to healing including psychology.

Janet, who is actively involved in a Protestant church, selected spiritual as the appropriate category to describe her faith. Janet's story exemplifies the most traditional Western religious path among participants in that prayer and drawing on biblical stories for strength, wisdom and modeling were the strategies she used to "connect" in times of great distress. At the same time, Janet's spiritual path has been supported by but not confined within a particular tradition. Her broad exposure and access to native spiritual traditions has also led her to draw on the wisdom of elders and participate in native ceremonies for healing. Janet interprets native ceremonies and traditions in light of her Christian beliefs and acknowledges the significant role that each tradition has played in her healing and spiritual development.

Robert who identified himself as religious and spiritual on the initial survey draws primarily on the teachings, practices and community he finds at a local Zen Buddhist temple. However, in talking about his tradition, it's clear that Robert experiences Buddhism in more functional and pragmatic terms as a path of spiritual development. He says that you could think of Zen as a "spiritual practice" or as a "religion for spiritual adults." He explains the distinction between traditional theistic religions and his understanding of Buddhism in saying:

It's not something where you have a mystical power outside of yourself that is going to come and save you, it's more that you have to do the work, you have to practice, you have to keep the precepts, be kind to people working from the outside in, and do the meditation working from the inside out to come to a place

of non-suffering, where suffering ceases, not just for oneself but for the bigger sense of self, but I haven't really thought of it in those [religious or spiritual] terms, it's more of a practice.

Although 2 participants found their spiritual path within the context of religious organizations, in the main participants' stories generally reflect a non-traditional approach to spirituality whether or not they drew upon religious traditions. Participants each developed a distinctive spiritual practice that integrated a broad variety of ideas, traditions, and experiences that resonated with their own understanding. Participants shared the vital lived experience of a benevolent spiritual presence that they felt within themselves and that they experienced in every aspect of the world around them. A minority found this experience within the context of religious organizations, a majority did not.

### **Participants' Journeys to Drawing on Spirituality for Healing and Wellness**

#### **Spirituality is a Journey**

Participants conceptualized their experience of spirituality as a journey that has evolved over time. They experienced healing as an ongoing part of this journey and as an experience that similarly continued to evolve and deepen as they changed. For many participants the journey was both joyful and fearful, involving dark times of self-doubt, searching and questioning, particularly near the beginning, significant turning points, continued challenges, and an ever increasing experience of joy, peacefulness, love and expansion along the road.

In looking back, participants identified many steps on the path that contributed towards their current beliefs and practices. For example, Robert says that when he encountered Zen, it seemed to be a natural next step because it elaborated on all of the



previous learning and practices he had acquired. As a child, Robert found solace in distress by drawing on the Christian tradition of prayer. Then as an adolescent, he discovered visualization, progressive relaxation and a form of “mental training” that brought him a new level of self-awareness, calm and effectiveness in competition. His experience in a twelve step program took him to the next level of connecting with others and learning to surrender to a higher power.

Robert’s Zen practice builds upon and reflects the further deepening of his previous practices and understanding. He likens meditation to a form of silent prayer through which he has learned to surrender to “what is.” The peacefulness and increased awareness he finds through meditation and the additional insights and sense of community he has received from working with the *sangha*, or group of Buddhist practitioners at his temple, represents a natural deepening of the coping skills and connection he found earlier in his journey. Looking back from his current perspective, Robert can see how each step on his path provided tools and experiences that prepared him for, and that continue to be reflected in, his ongoing practice of Zen.

### **A World of Magic and Wonder: Feeling the Presence of Spirit in Childhood**

As children, many participants were fascinated with the “invisible world,” eager to unravel the mystery of vampires, angels, magic, and fairy tales. Participants talked about experiencing a sense of the wonder and vastness of the infinite, feeling the presence of god or the spiritual realm, sensing energy, and being able to communicate with trees and animals or see auras at an early age. For example, Mia says:

For me it started at a very, very young age, when I was able to read. I guess I was about 6-years-old when I started learning to read. I started to go to the library and I started to borrow books about, at the time, I didn’t use the word spirituality, it

was more like, magic was the word I used, ... but I wasn't interested in magic tricks, it wasn't that, it was about something deeper, I guess it was about the power of the human spirit, is kind of what I was looking at. So, I was also fascinated by legends, myths and fairy tales ... and it was more than just entertainment or the plot of the story, it was something deeper, it was the hero's journey.

Participants recognized that the spiritual interest or awareness they later developed in a conscious way in adulthood had always been present in the innocence and openness of childhood. Through the process of growth and development they were invariably drawn away from this spark within to focus their energy on finding their way in the human realm of affairs. It wasn't until participants rediscovered the spiritual realm as adults that they realized that they were returning to explore a connection that had always been available within.

### **The Healing Crisis: Illness and Trauma as a Doorway to Spiritual Exploration**

Participants re-discovered their spirituality or deepened their connection with spirit through experiences of illness, unhappiness and trauma. Each participant in the study, at some point in their journey, encountered a problem so intractable or an event so catastrophic and painful that they simply could not continue living as they were before. Michaela, who was already consciously pursuing a spiritual journey, talks about the impact of losing her teenage son:

It was like our lives were blown right apart. The whole structure of my belief in my life was *absolutely* shattered [italics added]. I couldn't have been more devastated. It just never occurred to me that something like that could happen, and my love for my children is so strong that to *have that* [italics added], to lose

Justin, I couldn't believe it and even now I still can't believe it. Even now sometimes suddenly something will unlock in my mind to go, and I'll suddenly be on the rocks or remember when I phoned my mom that night from the back of the police car, and all of the things that would unfold, absolute horror, *absolute horror* [italics added].

Losing her son was so shattering that Michaela had to step into a new level of spiritual exploration to respond to the experience. She talks about how her son's loss rocketed her from the "shallow" to the "deep end" of the pool, acting as a "major catalyst" sending her "full boar" into a search for answers in the spiritual realm.

Several participants experienced medical conditions including cancer, panic attacks, a head injury, cluster headaches and skin problems that were either so disabling, so life-threatening, or so persistent that they motivated a search for healing. Most frequently participants with medical issues proceeded through all the standard medical protocols to no avail. They consistently arrived at a point where none of the standard treatments and none of their regular coping strategies were sufficient to address the challenge that confronted them. Participants with medical issues often began to search for healing through alternative medical and spiritual routes because nothing that they knew and nothing that was available within mainstream helping networks worked.

Other participants experienced devastating mental and emotional problems. Two participants unexpectedly lost young adult children, others dealt with the effects of physical and sexual abuse, intense panic and anxiety attacks, depression, addiction, and relationship breakdown. In the face of experiences that they could not master with their existing belief systems, participants confronted the necessity of transformation.

Although Bruce had been interested in and read a lot about spirituality prior to and during his addiction to cocaine, he describes himself as having had a “pseudo-intellectual” knowledge of spirituality. In reality, he spent a lot of time living in fear, feeling hurt and inadequate and trying to control events around him despite all of the successes he had achieved. The devastation he experienced as a result of his addiction led him to a willingness to become open to an entirely new way of living. Bruce explains:

I was on my knees. I had no where else to turn. I couldn't do anything else in my life. ... I was down and out. So something had to change. I realized myself that I couldn't be who I was before and live the life I was living before if I ever hoped to get over substance abuse.

Recovery for Bruce involved nothing less than spiritual transformation. Bruce talks about having previously tried to change all sorts of things from his job to his living situation to get a handle on his addiction. By confronting an obstacle he could not overcome through his existing mental and emotional coping strategies, Bruce was forced to go to the next level of personal development. Bruce credits his addiction with being the key that opened the “spiritual well” that moved him from thinking and talking about spirituality to actually living his life on a spiritual basis.

One of the central experiences participants shared was the experience of discovering a doorway to spiritual exploration and transformation through illness and trauma. Participants talked about reconnecting with their spirituality at a new level or beginning their spiritual journey in a conscious way in response to confronting a personal crisis.

### **A Journey of Many Steps**

Participants' search for healing typically involved a diverse array of practices, practitioners, workshops, personal study and an intensive commitment of energy over many years. Many participants, especially those with medical conditions, started their search by exploring physical wellness and alternative health and healing strategies, gradually shifting into more obviously spiritually focused strategies over time. Every participant eventually developed an array of mental, physical and emotional practices connected to one another through a spiritual belief system which brought the whole together over the course of their journey. Participants reported using an average of 11 of these practices ranging from more physically to more purely spiritually focused approaches including yoga, a special diet, connecting with nature, affirmations, setting intentions, meditation, journaling, prayer, energy work, music, rituals and ceremonies to maintain their wellness or to stimulate healing.

### **Reading: the Door to a New Vision of Spirit**

By far the most common support participants accessed in their journey, particularly in the beginning was reading. Perhaps because they had reached the end of their regular supports and resources when their search started in earnest, participants often described the spiritual journey as a solitary endeavor. Books were usually the first place they encountered new and stimulating ideas or alternative perspectives that reflected or resonated with their own experiences. Like many participants, Sigrid moved from psychology or popular self-help books to find inspiration in the metaphysical or spiritual section of the bookstore. She explains:

I consumed books on finding answers. And it was psychology where I thought I found the answers, which was enlightening and it was nice, but they didn't go to

the bottom of it all. Until, late in the 70's I found a book that is called *The Nature of Personal Reality*, channeled by Jane Roberts, ... that gave me an eye opener that the occult is not some kind of a flaky séance type of a thing, and it was a great education for me. ... The beliefs now that we create our own lives ... all this type of stuff came actually from Seth [same book]. It was the basis for my own search, for my behaviour, my beliefs, my value system by that time. ... God, not at that time, but a little bit later, became an interesting entity again.

Reading provided participants with entry to a new world of spiritual ideas and perspectives that extended beyond popular secular or traditional religious explanations of life. Participants who had moved away from traditional religious avenues or who felt that no one around them would understand or relate to their spiritual interests often found the first reflections of their beliefs and experiences through reading spiritually-oriented books. A number of participants were aware of prejudice towards spiritual exploration in general, and anything that looked non-traditional in particular, in their social milieu. Some participants talked about their concerns, early on in their journey, that friends and family might consider some of their experiences or beliefs to be "flaky," "woo-woo" or "way out there." Reading provided a safe avenue for developing their knowledge and encountering others whose experiences might reflect their own without risking prejudice or misunderstanding.

### **Learning Through Attraction and Experience**

Although participants often began their process with spiritual reading, they moved quickly to noticing how ideas that resonated with their experience were actually playing themselves out in their lives and in the lives of others. They then began to consciously experiment with and learn from their experiences with applying new concepts and

practices. Participants also drew new ideas, techniques and practices from broad variety of teachers, workshops, classes, groups and health and healing practitioners over the course of their journeys. Participants commonly talked about being attracted to a certain book, teacher, or group, acquiring an idea or having an experience that provided an important piece of learning for them, and then moving on to the next book, teacher, workshop or group. Like most participants, Lila explored a broad range of teachings and describes participants' common experience of feeling drawn to a particular practitioner at a particular time in order to learn a particular skill or integrate a piece of information which then led to the next step in her learning and healing. As part of describing a particular phase of her journey, she says:

Prior to that I'd done energy classes and some meditation, I read Louise Hay's books on the power of positive thinking and went to Science of Mind classes, just curious, total curiosity. ... Wherever I heard someone of interest that seemed to have something to offer me with my beliefs, I would continue with that, I would explore it ... see, when you're in this area, all of a sudden, things come to you: 'When the student is ready the teacher appears.' ... So it's been through trial and error, I guess just experimentation.

Most participants spent long periods of time studying or working with one, two or three central teachers or practices intensively, while learning about a broad array of related ideas from classes, workshops, and reading. Their knowledge of spirituality was both broadly based yet focused as a result. Participants learned about different areas of life from different teachers or traditions. They commonly talked about learning physical practices from one practitioner, emotional practices from another and mental practices

through still other exploration. Whether it resulted from surveying a range of religious traditions, or integrating a variety of religious and secular healing practices, participants viewed the holistic array of skills and perspectives they acquired through their exploration as building a strong spiritual foundation.

In addition to attending workshops or classes and studying with teachers many participants also learned new practices or benefited from seeking assistance from a variety of traditional and alternative practitioners. Participants reported visiting an average of six practitioners within the last 2 years, with a range of 2 at the low end of the scale to 11 at the high end of the scale. Participants sought assistance from mainstream professionals including medical doctors and psychologists as well as non-traditional professionals and healers including energy workers, Reiki practitioners, psychics, and spiritual counsellors. An overwhelming majority of participants, 11 out of 12, reported that it was important for them to seek help from practitioners who incorporated spirituality into their practice.

### **Finding a Community of Support**

Nine of the participants were drawn to connect with an ongoing community of like-minded individuals for spiritual support at some point in their process. Four participants found this support through churches or religious organizations while others joined meditation groups, or created their own circle of support with people they met in workshops, classes or retreats. Because participants frequently experienced their journey as necessarily solitary, for example, Bruce described it as a "journey I take with myself," many found great joy and support in finding like-minded others with whom they could connect. Given participants' awareness that their spiritual views and way of life were increasingly "different" or non-mainstream, finding others who could relate to their



experiences helped them feel understood and connected. It also provided an avenue for sharing the exciting experience they were having. What they were discovering was so extraordinary that many participants expressed the need to share what they were learning in some way.

Participants connected with like minded others to share ideas and experiences and also to share skills and support one another in healing and exploration. Lila and Miriam talked about the way their group of energy practitioners developed new meditation techniques together and did energy work on one another to facilitate healing when necessary, or simply to facilitate the transition to a new level of development. Similarly, Anne started a meditation circle, gathering together participants she met at workshops with her spiritual teacher into an ongoing support group. For a whole year the group meditated on their experiences of divorce alone, journaling and sharing their stories and realizations. The support of working through her divorce with others who shared similar spiritual beliefs and practices was incredibly healing for Anne.

Participants were committed to following their own paths and were highly motivated in their individual exploration and growth, transitioning through a great many teachers, teachings, and communities of belief as they continued to evolve. At the same time, many participants found great support in their own journeys through connecting with others and exploring their own spiritual paths through focused and ongoing group activities.

### **Spiritual Experiences Provide Support and Affirmation**

Participants also talked about extraordinary experiences of spiritual communication that provided insight, guidance and comfort on their journey. Their experiences ranged from the pre-cognition of the death of close relatives, waking visions,

receiving guidance from angels or spirits, communicating with relatives that had died, and receiving significant messages through dreams, signs, and inexplicable feelings. Although occasionally frightening or disorienting, at least initially, these experiences served largely to provide comfort and a sense of connection to the divine in times of doubt or distress. Spiritual experiences also provided insights regarding issues participants were struggling with, guidance in creative endeavors, and practical information that helped them prepare for an upcoming reality, such as the death of a loved one.

Silke's experience of beginning to receive songs while sitting in meditation one evening combines and exemplifies several of these ideas. She says:

I sat down and I just opened myself; got kind of quiet, closed my eyes and started listening on the inside, something I didn't do very often. That's what I do basically when I'm listening to my intuition. But, I was just listening, and all of a sudden I heard a melody, and I thought, well that's interesting, and I heard words. It was an actual song and there were lyrics to it, and I was kind of puzzled, but it was so pretty, and I started to write it down, and then I'd find my mind going and thinking; oh, it should rhyme, oh, it should be this word, and I thought; wait a minute, wait a minute; back up, and I'd start all over again. So I'd get real quiet again and then just open up and hear it. ... It took me about two hours between keep [sic] flicking into my mind and coming back out. ... When I looked at it later ... I realized I was so shocked by that because I don't know where it came from ... and then when I started listening to the songs, it was like god was talking to me, like the first one is called 'To be open,' and it goes: 'To be open is the only

way.' The first verse goes [singing]: 'It feels so good to share myself, to love with all my heart. To know no need of boundaries for this love I would impart. And there's no need to tell myself, guard yourself, keep safe. Because now it's only love I find, and to be open is the only way,' ... and I heard this, and then I realized that is exactly what I've been trying to do is to be open.

Like Silke, participants found these experiences of profound connection and communication with the divine deeply meaningful and encouraging. Five out of 12 participants reported a series of such events over the course of their journeys. By their estimation, these events occurred and continued to occur with greater frequency as they become increasingly open to trusting in spirit and as they grow in their willingness to be guided by their own intuitive knowing.

### **The Journey Becomes the Goal**

Although searching for healing was the initial motivating factor in embarking on a spiritual journey, or in moving to the next level of an ongoing journey, participants' focus shifted from healing to exploring spirituality for its intrinsic interest and wonder over time. In the beginning, participants were often so beset by pain or felt so lost in their human experience that coping, healing and understanding what was happening in their lives was a paramount motivation. As participants' spiritual exploration led to them to initiate personal changes and cope more effectively, and they started to feel better and develop new understandings, they became fascinated with the process of spiritual development itself. The changes created by their new perspectives and practices opened up a new and exciting world. Gradually, participants arrived a point where the sense of personal expansion they were experiencing in their journey itself became the dominant focus. Although healing occurred along the way, they found the adventure they were now

experiencing fascinating for its own sake. Katherine talks about the way this turning point opened her to a much larger perspective on life. She says:

Ah, there's part of it. It's like; it's the journey that is important. It's about living out the journey, as opposed to the goal: the goal of getting to achieve a goal, or to live my life in a certain way. It's to know that I'm in a process of my soul evolving and taking me, probably on many different journeys.

Every participant described a similar shift to this much broader sense of intrinsic interest in the unfolding journey of their soul itself. Most participants only experienced this shift after at least a few years of intensive study, and after experiencing some change, some participants worked consistently for many years before making this transition.

### **Participants' Reflection on the Journey**

#### **Spirituality is an Intrinsic Part of Who I Am**

As participants began to focus on their journey of spiritual unfolding for its own sake, their awareness of their spirituality deepened, its influence in their life heightened, and their spirituality gradually became the foundation of a new life and identity.

Although participants drew on specific practices to achieve specific purposes, these practices were part of an interconnected set of beliefs and experiences that participants came to regard as integral to their identity. In this way, their spirituality was very much experienced as a unified whole. Practices as concrete as running on the beach were regarded simultaneously as physical and as spiritual because they had become part of an integrated expression of being. This both/and vision of spirituality was hard to translate into words. In our discussions, the participants talked about the limitations of terms such as "using" or "drawing upon" spirituality because they implied an instrumental view of

spirituality that obscured the larger organic experience they were having. Janet speaks aptly to this conundrum in commenting:

It [spirituality] is the experience. It's not something that I'm drawing on or something that is external to me. It's not; it's there. It's part of the way that I think about things. It's not external to me. It's like saying; well, how do your lungs draw in breath? They're there, and they're part of who I am, you know. I don't sit there, and think; okay now I need to move my rib cage so my lung can draw in [breath], you know, it's just how I believe the world is.

Participants were passionate about identifying spirituality and their expression of it with the most essential part of themselves. The sense of spirituality they found within marked that place where they touched and blended with the universe itself. At the deepest level, their experience of spirituality was an experience of the ineffable. At the same time, participants used concrete practices such as prayer and meditation for a variety of spiritual and practical purposes from connecting with god to calming the mind or treating a panic attack. Participants were consistent in making the point that drawing on spirituality for healing involved this both/and vision. Part of the power in the practices they used emanated from their larger ongoing relationship with and knowledge of spirit as part of their identity. The technological or instrumental use of spiritual practices as "tools" in and of themselves, while potentially beneficial, was a very distant cousin to their experiences of spirituality and healing. Participants talked about their spiritual practices as something which helped them connect with or express a much larger understanding of the spirit within. The spiritual practices they used had meaning and

transformative power by virtue of their integration into and representation of their larger understanding and experience of spirituality within the self.

### **A New Way of Life**

Participants' integration of their spiritual perspectives, experiences, and knowledge over time led them to experience life itself from a spiritual point of view. Although participants' experience of spirituality was far from instrumental, it was also far from esoteric. Their spirituality had become a lived experience accessed through the concrete moments of everyday life. For example, Robert talked about extending his meditation practice to being mindful in everyday life. He described his ongoing practice of bringing his full presence to what he was doing in each moment, so that when he was dialing the telephone he was simply dialing the telephone, totally conscious of and available to that moment.

Many participants similarly found that their years of spiritual practice brought them out of a preoccupation with either the past or the future, making it possible to be fully present in the moment where they were available to connect with themselves, with other people, and with spirit in the midst of it all. As a result of this new found presence, everything they did and experienced became a spiritual experience. The process of living itself was viewed as a spiritual experience, and each activity also became a spiritual activity from this perspective. Anne sums up participant perspectives nicely in explaining:

I think that is where I am now; that's where I've evolved to. Everything I do, I now see it as a spiritual practice. This is; my body isn't separated from my spirituality, it's a part of me. So when I'm walking on the beach, running on the beach, exercising, that's a spiritual practice for me. When I'm doing my dishes,

I'm now connected to my soul, it's not just physical. I'm washing dishes, and it's a, I always try and make it a sacred thing, and so, when I'm talking to you, it's a connection. It's not about what I say or what I don't say. It's, you know, this is a spiritual connection and we're connected together, and we're learning from each other, and, you know, when I'm reading a book, that's the same thing. I try and stay present in whatever I do, and when I'm present, I'm connected. ... It's a much bigger, bigger perspective, and for me now, I wouldn't be able to separate them.

Anne's comment on her inability to separate her spirituality from her experience of living provides an apt example of the dilemma of describing participants' journeys of drawing on spirituality for healing. As participants' spirituality developed, practices which may have begun as tools became integral expressions of their identity as, and connection with, spirit itself. Participants' experience of spirituality like their experience of healing and of life in general moved towards becoming an integrated whole as their journey unfolded.

### **Summary**

Thus, although participants' intent to heal, or find help in dealing with an unsolvable problem or overwhelming experience was a primary catalyst for making a profound commitment to the spiritual journey; participants gradually came to pursue the journey of spirituality for its own sake. As participants changed in response to their spiritual adventures, their experience of themselves and their lives shifted profoundly. Participants came to see their whole lives and all of their experiences from a spiritual perspective. From this perspective, every experience, and what they did, said and felt in

response became a spiritual experience. As their spirituality grew and expanded so too did the healing that accompanied their journey.

### **Section Three: Creating Healing and Wellness through Spirituality**

This section focuses on answering the study's second research question: How do people draw on spirituality to create experiences of healing and wellness? Despite the challenge posed by the whole dilemma of "drawing on" something that is simultaneously the foundation of your identity, and a means by which you are experiencing life; most participants were able to furnish remarkably detailed descriptions of the things they thought, felt and did that contributed to their healing. Because participants experienced healing as the by-product of developing their spirituality, the process I will be describing is a process of spiritual exploration and development that generated healing.

I've already emphasized participants' conviction that developing spirituality is a uniquely personal journey. Each person's process of spiritual development and healing was as unique as their fingerprint, evolving organically out of their own personal exploration, experimentation, learning and study. Because they all started at different places, with different understandings of spirit, and different issues, they each felt called upon to carve their own path through their encounter with spirit within and without.

Although the process of healing and the combination of beliefs and practices upon which participants drew was unique to each person, participants identified many common aspects to creating healing. I have compiled these common elements into a framework which outlines the major components of the process of healing they described. The process includes seven major steps, and imbedded with them are four sub-steps that describe the process they used to clear the major blockages that they encountered as physical, mental, and emotional challenges or disease. The steps of the process as a



whole include: (1) being open; (2) shifting to a spiritual perspective; (3) going within; (4) connecting with spirit; (5) clearing through: (a) watching; (b) feeling; (c) accepting; (d) choosing and committing to drop the patterns they identified; (6) setting intentions; and, (7) following their inner guidance. The following text details the content of each of the steps participants took to create healing and wellness.

### **Step 1: Openness**

As a result of meeting the limitations of their own skills and of mainstream avenues to seeking help in response to their dilemmas, participants became open to transformation. At the beginning of their journey, in particular, but also throughout their process, participants developed the ability to let go of their current understanding of life, or of a problem they faced, and became willing to see it in a completely new way. Although this transition tended to be experienced more dramatically and traumatically at the beginning of their journeys, when participants needed to let go in larger ways; often of an entire worldview, the willingness to see something they understood in one way with completely new eyes proved to be a catalyst to their ongoing spiritual development.

For example, Bruce identifies openness as the key to helping him take the opportunities that were presented to move from addiction to recovery and to begin experimenting with living from his spirituality.

You know, I was ready. If I were to let the spiritual aspect of me look at that situation: I'd already pushed my parents away, they were not going to talk to me anymore, but it was the intervention of someone who cared enough for me to get them involved. But at the same time I was open enough to not deny it anymore, and just say, 'I have a problem, I need help, help me'. All of those things had to happen; all seemingly coincidentally [sic], but, and I'm sure that similar situation

happens to a lot of people but they choose a different direction. ... The process just unfolded almost in a very natural way, but it required an openness and an acceptance of what was going on.

Bruce recognized that he'd had many opportunities to choose a new path in his journey. Healing couldn't take place while he was still hanging on to his old way of being. The fact that nothing he'd done to overcome his addiction had worked helped him become willing to let go of his old way of living and become open to the total transformation that could bring healing. Similarly, Katherine believes that healing occurs only when we are really ready for it. Because there are so many different layers of awareness, we may feel that we are ready and spend a great deal of time striving for healing on a more superficial level, only to realize later that we were not truly willing to open to the changes that healing implies. Like Bruce, she believed that true readiness for transformation, from the soul on out, allows the healing process to unfold naturally.

Participants tended to share the belief that our lives are always inviting us to greater levels of spiritual awareness and healing, but that we need to be open to receiving that invitation. An important part of receiving the invitation for healing was the willingness to let go of one's current framework of seeing in order to welcome the new information which may bring healing. Over time, participants learned that healing and development came from transformation. They expressed an awareness of themselves as being constantly in the process of change and development. Sigrid, for example, commented that while a given set of beliefs formed the basis of her current vision of reality, she might not hold those beliefs a week or a month from now.

In many ways, the participants in my study became experts at shifting paradigms. They developed the unique ability to feel firmly grounded in their current understanding of life and equally able to let go of that understanding to allow for the development of a more expansive approach to living when the time came. Although their initial experience of letting go of a way of living and all it implied about their identity and orientation to reality was very challenging, participants grew more skilled in opening to transformation through practice and experience.

### **Step 2: Shifting to a Spiritual Perspective**

One of the central themes that all participants shared was the critical importance they placed on shifting to a spiritual perspective of life as a foundational step in their healing. As participants became open, their searching accelerated and the seeds planted by previous reading and study began to bear fruit. Participants frequently conceptualized this shift in terms of moving from a human perspective on life to a spiritual perspective. Anne talks about the transformative power of starting to understand herself as a “spiritual being having a human experience.” She says:

When I connected with just feeling that I was just a human being here and going through work, and getting married, and children, and all of that; it was much more painful; when I identified with the body. But yet, when I identity with the soul or the spirit, then it gives me a different way of looking at things. I know that I came here to evolve, and so I know that I create different things in my life to learn from it [sic].

By exploring her spirituality, Anne began to “experience the soul within.” Once she made this connection and came to view her life from the perspective of her soul, her relationship to everything around her changed. Anne’s shift in perspective gave her a new

place to stand in relation to her human experiences which allowed her to see the vista of her life on the human realm rather than to be immersed within it. This new level of awareness allowed for an entirely new approach to her life.

Participants viewed the shift to a spiritual perspective as the most critical shift in their entire process of spiritual development and healing. The shift to a spiritual perspective initiated a cascade of shifts in beliefs, values, and ways of seeing life. As participants started to relate to themselves as a spirit or soul having a human experience, their perspective and relationship to themselves, to others, and to all of their experiences changed. They started to truly experience the world through the lens of the spiritual ideas they had been reading and studying. They became curious about their larger journey as a soul, and they started to see how their beliefs were reflected in the experiences they were having in their lives. Participants started to understand their lives as a series of experiences that reflected their energy or consciousness, providing them with opportunities to learn spiritual lessons and decide what they were going to be and experience in each moment.

By providing the foundation for a new way of perceiving reality, the shift to a spiritual perspective opened the door to a new experience of reality. Participants became acutely aware of their role in creating their life experience. For example, Eva explains her awareness of the impact of her beliefs on her experience in saying: "What you perceive you receive." Similarly, Sigrid explains: Beliefs are the basis for everything in our lives, beliefs create our reality. Thus, as participants' beliefs about themselves and their world shifted with the shift to spiritual perspective, so too did the reality they perceived and experienced.

Although the initial shift to a spiritual perspective was the most significant transition participants experienced on the journey, participants also came to understand that shifting one's perspective was a key to creating healing and transformation on an ongoing basis. Whenever they encountered an issue in their lives, whether small or large, participants continued to work with shifting to a spiritual perspective around the particular issue in question in order to shift their experience. Thus, shifting to a spiritual perspective was both part of a larger transformation in perspective and continued to be an ongoing practice as participants encountered areas or issues that remained challenging on the journey.

#### **Developing a spiritual purpose.**

In shifting to viewing the world through a spiritual lens, participants started to see themselves as having a larger purpose of learning, growing, evolving and giving. Life became less and less about the daily realities of the material world and more and more about the drama of their souls' development. For example, Michaela explains the purpose she discovered in this way:

[It's] not a purpose in that I'm meant to go out and do something with it, but a purpose in unfolding as I am supposed to be, as one of god's beings, and to choose every opportunity that is open to me to be able to give.

Living their purpose in terms of continuing to open to the unfolding of their spiritual nature became a focus for participants. Some participants experienced the need to express this purpose through contributing a specific skill in the world, while others, like Michaela, understood it mainly in the context of taking every opportunity to live fully and be who they were meant to be in each moment regardless of the things they did for work or play in their lives.

Developing a sense of spiritual purpose provided a touchstone to participants as they moved through their daily lives. Participants were able to relax into their experiences with a greater sense of openness, trust and resilience because they were oriented to looking for the spiritual lessons or opportunities in their experiences rather than being caught up in the human drama of survival and achievement. Eva contrasted the distress she experienced when she was engaged in the ego-oriented struggle of trying to get things: a car, a house, a job, a man, to survive or satisfy her needs and longings, with the peace she felt when she tuned into her inner awareness that she was here as a soul to give of herself and grow through her experiences. The shift to connecting with a spiritual purpose that co-occurred with the shift to a spiritual perspective gave participants a new sense of direction and a firm foundation on which to operate in their daily lives.

**The world comes alive.**

In shifting to a spiritual purpose and perspective, participants began to experience a new level of wonder and magic in the world. It was as if they entered into a dialogue with the universe itself. They started to view everything that happened in their lives as a meaningful communication with spirit. Life itself acquired a new sense of dynamic interaction as every moment became a moment available for learning, expanding, and encountering spirit. For example, as Bruce became open to seeing and living in a new way, he started to experience synchronicity and find meaning in his daily experiences. He explains:

When I was talking to other people who were trying to find their way in their life at the treatment centre, and I started to use these runes [ancient Nordic oracle], it just so happened that there was a couple of people that did these runes and there was such significant coincidental links to their life and what the rune was saying

that it was just too uncanny for me, and then it started happening over and over; seeming coincidences started not to be coincidental to me, and that's where it changed. So now I look at life not as coincidences anymore.

As they shifted to a spiritual perspective, participants came to see everything in their lives as serving a purpose and as providing information and guidance in their spiritual journeys.

Very often participants described their life experiences as a mirror, reflecting back to them their beliefs, issues, and feelings in order for them to become more aware of what they were doing and providing an opportunity for growth. Mia, for example, described her life as a living laboratory where she was always getting feedback on her process through her life experiences. Mia saw this as an impartial process where the spiritual or energetic laws of the universe were operating to respond to the energy she was expressing, allowing her to see what she was doing and to make choices about it.

Other participants felt that they also received specific messages in response to requests for help or information. Like Bruce, many participants received these messages in the form of synchronicity, such as meeting the very person they were thinking about and wanted to talk to in their evening walk. Other participants received an answer to something they had been pondering by happening upon an apropos phrase in a book they opened at a random page, or by something they heard or overheard in casual conversation that sparked an epiphany. Every participant described receiving at least one of form of spiritual communication and three quarters of participants talked about commonly receiving messages through all of these avenues and more.

Over time, participants developed a sense of partnership with the divine in their lives and spiritual development. They experienced their world as being alive with meaning, love, help and support. They acquired the confidence through their experiences to know that whenever they intended or asked for help or information, they would receive it in some form. The spiritual communication participants experienced was often intrinsically healing or reassuring as well as serving to transform their lives into a daily adventure of encountering, learning and growing with and from spirit.

### **And the earth moved.**

Making the shift to a spiritual perspective was not without its perils. Some participants talked of the struggles they experienced as they transitioned from one way of living to another. Participants alternated between excitement at their new discoveries and a desire to share the reality they were experiencing, and fear, grief, confusion, and anguish in letting go of old ways of seeing and being. The initial shift to a spiritual perspective was often a time of the great questioning, self-doubt and personal reflection as participants increasingly made the leap to listening to their soul and letting go of the ego perceptions of the world that commonly form our normal social reality. Miriam talked about the fear that accompanies letting go of your previous markers of reality and opening to the immensity of the greater reality within yourself. She says:

It was also frightening for me, because I was opening up into a whole world of what was reality and what wasn't reality. I went into times of losing my sensors of what was reality and what wasn't reality. It was a lot more fun [laughing] where it wasn't reality at times, you know, and when I analyzed that, I knew that my greatest fear in the whole aspect of spirituality was love.



Like many participants, Miriam experienced a significant sense of disorientation as she let go of her previous world view and opened up to her spirituality. At times, Miriam feared she might be going crazy because the disorientation was so great. Other participants also experienced periods of fear and questioned whether their experience was natural and healthy at various points in their journey. Many participants initially refrained from sharing their experiences for fear of being misunderstood or perceived as crazy.

Over time, Miriam came to realize that her disorientation was a natural part of the transition to opening up to a much larger reality than she had previously perceived. For her, in particular, the transition was accompanied by fear of feeling the love that participants commonly identified as part of the experience of connecting with spirit within. Many participants had similar fears of losing control, losing touch with reality, and being overwhelmed by the intensity of their experiences. Although many participants experienced a similar struggle during subsequent transitions to a new level of spiritual understanding, it seemed that by and large these turning points were less frightening and more easily accomplished than the original transition to living fully from a spiritual perspective.

### **Step 3: Going Within**

Another near universal theme that emerged was that the shift to a spiritual perspective led participants to look inside themselves for the connection, answers, and direction they were seeking. Even as the outside world came alive with meaning and messages, participants talked about realizing that the key to interpreting and responding to those messages lay within. The most common strategy participants used to connect to "god," the "soul," or the "spirit" within was meditation. Eleven out of 12 participants talked about the importance of regular meditation in their process of healing and

development. Forms of meditation varied greatly from Buddhist practices of “just sitting” without a goal or focus of any kind, or simply watching their breath, to using sound, colour, light, or movement, and walking mindfully in nature, to stimulate a spiritual connection. Participants who thought in terms of energy saw the process of meditation in energetic terms, describing for example, how meditation using sound mantras raised the vibration of the body’s energy, stimulating a new state of awareness. Participants with this perspective considered meditation and any other practice they engaged in to shift their energy as “energy work.” Other participants, such as Bruce, described similar practices as a process of “quieting the human aspect of the mind to allow the spiritual essence to come through.”

Prayer was another important vehicle for making a connection with the divine within and without. Different participants conceptualized it in different terms. Bruce for example talked simply about “talking to the air,” Michaela and Janet both used the term prayer, Lila and Miriam talked about asking a question and going within for guidance. The essence of prayer involved some internally acknowledged or externally verbalized request for help, direction, guidance, or clarity aimed at either, and most often at both the divine as it exists within and outside of the self. While 11 participants focused on meditation, 7 used prayer, and many viewed the two as complementary. For example, Michaela conceptualized prayer as talking to god, and meditation as becoming quiet and turning within to listen for the answers. Some participants described prayer and meditation as a continuous process, each being simply a different form of the attempt to connect with spirit.

#### **Step 4: Connecting with Spirit**

One distinct purpose of using meditation and prayer to go within was to connect with the divine. Participants described connecting with the divine as co-terminus to connecting with their soul or with the spirit within. Silke provides a deeply felt description of how meditation and the other spiritual practices in which she engages bring her in contact with her own soul:

The spirituality helps bring me back down into who I really am, the centre of myself, and remembering ... [crying] in reality who I really am, how gentle and innocent and soft that person is, ... there is this me that is so gentle and so loving, and that loving part just means so much to me.

Other participants used such terms as: peace, wholeness, joy, and love to describe their own experience of connecting with the spiritual centre that they recognized as dwelling within. The experience they described was that of contacting the deepest, most authentic or essential part of themselves only to realize that it was simultaneously a part of the larger whole of the divine itself. Participants framed their experience in terms of discovery as opposed to creation. Bruce, for example, observed that the spirit he found within had always been there, he just hadn't known it.

By connecting with this spiritual centre participants were able to experience themselves and their life from the perspective and qualities of this part of themselves. By experiencing themselves and their lives from the perspective of love, awareness, peace, freedom etc. participants were freed from the ego perspective of limitation. In the process, many of the problems participants were experiencing from an ego perspective simply dropped away. They realized that they were not in fact problems but simply experiences to be accepted and embraced. Connecting with the spirit within cleared away

the daily debris of the ego mind and helped participants live from this place of spirit.

Silke explains how problems fall away in the light of the love she finds within. She

comments:

Spirituality is healing ... because it takes me home. The more spiritual I am, the closer I am to home, and consequently all the stuff that I take on, in my life, my imaginings, projections, imagined hurts, all those things are shed, and I come back to who I really am. ... When I'm in that spiritual place, where I'm in my heart, they [problems] don't exist, they just don't exist, there is such peace, such a feeling of love, of being loved, of compassion, just peace, there is no problem.

By coming home to the divine within participants reconnected with their own identity as spirit. In making this connection, participants were able to realize that many of the problems which preoccupied them on the human realm were in reality insubstantial.

In shifting to seeing their life from the larger perspective of experiencing the love, peace, and joy that they were as spirit, these problems literally no longer existed. What remained was an awareness of the intentions, desires, and realities that were truly important.

Making this connection with spirit within was therefore intrinsically healing, enabling participants to live their lives from a place of profound ease, appreciation, meaning and flow. Making the connection to the love inside also provided participants with the clarity and strength to make healing choices that increased their enjoyment and well-being in response to challenging life experiences.

### **Step 5: Clearing**

The second reason for participants to go within was to begin to understand and address the difficulties they were experiencing from a spiritual perspective. Sometimes as participants tried to make the connection to spirit within, they found the road blocked by worry, fear, doubt or negative thinking. In fact, Lila noted that the very act of reaching for or preparing to receive the connection with the divine within tended to bring up any issues that were standing in the path of making the connection to spirit. By beginning to reflect on issues or concerns as they arose, participants were able to identify patterns of thought, feeling, behaviour and energy that were causing or contributing to the physical, mental or emotional problems they were experiencing. Thus, the second distinct purpose of going within was to begin to understand and respond to any persistent patterns that were blocking access to that place of love and joyfulness within, or that were showing up as a disease or disturbance of some kind in the inner emotional or outer physical world. Participants most often referred to this multi-layered process as “clearing.”

Although clearing could happen in a matter of minutes, it could also take months and even years for a core issue that had many layers to be cleared over time. Participants described a process that generally involved identifying and observing the pattern, feeling and experiencing it fully, and then having an epiphany about the purpose it was serving and how it was created. Once the lesson was learned, and there was an understanding of the pattern, their relationship with the pattern shifted and a space opened. Sometimes, this was all it took for a pattern to dissolve, returning participants to their connection with spirit within. At other times in opening to spirit, participants opened to a sense of their own power in creating the pattern and they could then choose to drop the pattern and put their energy towards creating something more in line with their spiritual centre.

Most often, patterns were patterns because participants had been engaged in repeating them and living their lives according to the beliefs woven into them over a long period of time. Thus, patterns which were particularly ingrained or fundamental to a participant's way of life also typically required diligent work to dissolve over a period of time. Several participants likened the process of clearing to peeling the skin of an onion. They found that a persistent pattern would arise repeatedly and they would clear another layer of it with each encounter. As each new layer was discovered and uncovered, they arrived at a more profound understanding of the pattern, and it diminished in strength and intensity, until eventually they had experienced and understood it fully and it rarely reoccurred.

Participants described clearing as a multi-layered process that involved a progressive series of steps that were employed as needed. These included: (a) watching the pattern; (b) entering the felt experience of the pattern; (c) accepting or surrendering to the existence of the pattern; and, (d) choosing to stop engaging in the pattern and committing to the process of change. Each step was progressive in that simply acknowledging and attending might dissolve very weak or surface patterns, while others required a long term commitment to a step by step process of letting go of the pattern layer by layer. Participants didn't do all of these steps in the same order and the same participant might take the same steps in a different order to tackle two different issues.

**(a) Watching the pattern.**

The first step in clearing a pattern was becoming aware of and exploring it as a pattern rather than simply responding to it as a real phenomenon in the world. Participants talked for example about becoming aware of "depression", "fear", or "anger" as a pattern, rather than being so involved in the experience that they were simply

experiencing depression and living out the acquired pattern with little awareness. Most often participants became aware of a pattern by experiencing and attending to either physical or emotional discomfort in their bodies. As they started to feel the feelings that were arising, they began to observe interwoven patterns of thought, feeling, memory and behaviour that were underlying and creating their experience of pain or discomfort.

Mia thinks of patterns as “visitors” that she invites into her life by giving them her attention. By becoming aware of and observing her engagement with a particular visitor, she becomes familiar with the pattern, and starts to understand it, which in turn leads to changing the pattern. Participants commonly experienced resistance to observing their patterns as patterns or found that they judged themselves for having the pattern at the beginning of the process of observation. As they persisted in watching a particular pattern, these defenses gradually dropped and they were able to engage fully in observing and experiencing the pattern, which then allowed them to come to a new understanding of the pattern. The new understanding they achieved regarding the meaning or etiology of the pattern in turn created a change in the pattern. Mia gives an example of her process of moving from identification through judgement to observation, understanding and change. She comments:

I became very conscious about how the pattern manifested ... and every time I caught myself, instead of being hard [on myself], ... I started to let go of the guilt and I just observed it from a very objective, almost kind of clinical way, as a third party watching this person going through these thought processes, ... and I started to understand, and so the epiphany came after the commitment to the process, ... by just watching, watching and watching, ... and seeing the pattern and

understanding, ... an epiphany came, ... I knew why I was doing it finally, and not just mentally knew, but I could feel why ... and so it brought about a change of perception.

The change of perception Mia experienced as a result of watching further changed how she felt and behaved in response to her feelings creating an entirely new experience over time. Participants began the process of dissolving the unproductive patterns in the way of experiencing themselves as spirit by diligently watching and attending to uncomfortable patterns as they unfolded.

**(b) Entering the felt experience.**

Participants talked about the necessity of fully entering into the emotional experience of the patterns they were seeing in order to be able to heal a problem or understand an event that was occurring in their lives. Although participants considered cognitive awareness a first step in their process, and occasionally used mental strategies to reassure themselves, they were united in the belief that cognitive awareness alone was insufficient to generate true insight into a persistent pattern. Participants believed that entering fully into the emotional experience of a pattern while understanding that experience as part of the pattern was an essential part of the clearing process. Eva provides a good example of this shared conviction in explaining her process of change. She says:

It's not so much that I'm just thinking it, because you can't just think it. No, I was talking myself into going: 'oh, no. It's okay now. Everything is okay. Everything is meant to be.' Like that kind of chatter was sort of helpful, but it's the first step. I had to turn it around. I think *my soul* [italics added] had to turn it around.



In order for her soul to turn the fear she was experiencing around, Eva had to engage with and feel her fear without getting lost in it. Eva talked about acquiring “a little voice” inside of her, a witnessing presence that was able to observe her experience of being terrified and angry while she was experiencing it. By engaging with the feelings connected with a pattern in this way, participants were able to start to see the experiences and beliefs which underlay and created the pattern.

All of the participants used a variety of spiritual tools and strategies to help them experience and process their feelings while remaining aware. They talked about drawing on meditation, journaling, energy work, prayer, physical movement and exercise, ritual and creativity to experience and move through the feelings associated with a pattern. Regardless of the method they used, participants found that their ability to remain aware actually helped them engage more fully with emotions that they would otherwise have experienced as too overwhelming to feel. Participants’ methods of connecting with and clearing the emotional layers of a pattern changed over time. For example, Katherine talked about being intuitively guided to develop painting as a vehicle for processing her feelings and connecting with the meaning behind them over time. She says:

I will continue to clear and as I do that it’s interesting, because that’s when the spontaneity comes. For instance, I will work through some old fear, like the layers of the onion skin that we often talk about. I’ll feel great fear and I’ll sit down and I’ll start to paint, and the painting that comes through is of a child with eagle wings around; and so it’s like the healing continues in different metaphorical ways. Not just in the ways you would think: I need to work on this and this and

this. It's like, just being with the emotional piece and being willing to feel my feelings ... the insights certainly come through.

Regardless of the particular methods they chose, participants uncovered the beliefs and experiences underlying the patterns that were causing them discomfort by entering fully into the emotional experience of the pattern while maintaining a sense of awareness of the pattern as a pattern.

**Patterns are built around unresolved experiences.**

Each participant in their own way linked the patterns they found within to unresolved emotional experiences. As participants traced back the layers of thought, emotion, and memory associated with a particular pattern they invariably uncovered negative or challenging experiences that they hadn't fully processed, and began to understand how the complex layers of thought, feeling and behaviour that developed out of these experiences led to the challenges they were having. Participants explained that positive life events, events which meshed with or reinforced their talents, skills and abilities were easily digested and released. However, so called "negative" events, interactions in which they experienced pain that they didn't have the resources to understand or process at the time, continued to live on in the form of charged memories, feelings, beliefs about themselves and life that formed part of their worldview and that motivated their behaviour. Anne summarized it succinctly in saying: "Positive things flow through your body. It's like a lightness. But what we call the negative sticks."

All participants believed that it was usually their resistance to feeling the feelings associated with an event that caused an experience to stick and stopped the natural process of learning from an event. All participants talked about having struggled with experiencing and moving through their feelings. They identified several strategies that

served to stop them from fully experiencing and processing an event. Some participants talked about denying the meaning or emotional impact of significant events, others used cognitive strategies to talk themselves out of feeling upset, and others identified their judgement of themselves or other people as a block to fully experiencing their feelings around an event. All participants acknowledged having resorted to these strategies to protect themselves from painful or overwhelming feelings and information at one point in time.

Through their process of clearing, all of the participants realized that when they stopped themselves from entering fully into the felt experience of an event, they walked away from the event with unresolved feelings, interpretations of the experience, and beliefs about themselves and life that were often negative. When they continued to protect themselves from experiencing painful feelings they were unable to understand and integrate the event, and they began to operate from and add layers to the half-processed feelings and beliefs they acquired through that experience. Over time a pattern of beliefs, feelings, behaviour and experience formed over the unprocessed wound. These patterns led participants to develop a range of mental, physical and emotional problems that reflected the unprocessed material.

Sigrid provides a succinct summary of participants' views in explaining the central role that feelings play in creating patterns. She says:

Feelings are flowing freely and they come and they go, but as soon as you judge: this is good and this is bad, then you hang onto them, and if you hang onto them, they block then. It's like a traffic jam, and that makes for all other things, including illness.

All participants therefore viewed feelings as the central communication system of the soul. They viewed the human tendency to block pain as the source of unresolved patterns that create obstacles to full development, and they viewed feeling one's feelings as the key to clearing patterns and accessing the soul within.

### **Family of origin issues.**

Most often, participants traced unresolved issues to events that occurred in their families of origin, and to the beliefs they acquired about themselves as a result of those events. Tracing the problems they were experiencing back to the unresolved events allowed them to release the pain they were carrying, understand and learn from what had occurred, and finish processing the experience. As they completed the experience, the beliefs they had acquired from resisting it naturally dropped away in favour of the beliefs they gained from its completion. Participants found that clearing unresolved experiences helped them reclaim aspects of their essential nature that they had previously been unable to access, literally expanding their experience of themselves and of life.

Lila provides a powerful example of this process of clearing an unresolved childhood pattern. Through an alternative psychological treatment called re-birthing, Lila recovered a memory of sexual abuse she had experienced as a very young child and cleared an associated pattern that allowed her to further claim her power in the world. She explains:

I had a few emotional traumas to overcome and, they created who I thought I was for a long time. I'm not connected to them anymore. They lived in me for a long time. ... It wasn't until I found out; I wasn't aware of it until I was in my 40s, when I had a re-birthing session, that this experience, the whole visceral experience [of sexual abuse resurfaced]. I was in it. I couldn't speak. I had no

voice. I couldn't breathe. I mean *I thought I was dead* [italics added]. I thought I was dead. I could feel the mucous come through my nose. I thought I was going to explode inside. It was a horrible experience to experience, but what it showed me was: why I never felt I had a voice as an adult. Why even when I did, people didn't take my no as a no. They just kind of went on doing, and accepting or experiencing for them that I would do it anyway, even if I said no. And I realized that I didn't really have a no, my no was taken away through that experience, and as an adult, when I found out, I had to do some work on healing that little child within me and give [sic] her a voice.

By reconnecting with this experience, Lila was able to understand that she had always had problems with assertiveness because this unprocessed experience and the belief that she didn't have a right to say no that she had acquired from it lived on within her without her awareness. As she recovered and re-experienced the event with awareness, Lila was able to understand and process what occurred, recovering the truth of herself as an adult with the power to say no and to stand behind her boundaries.

Although most participants related the patterns they were experiencing to previous events in their adult lives, and especially to events in their childhood, some participants believed that events they experienced in this life further mirrored patterns they carried into this life from other incarnations. These participants found that as they became practiced at clearing, events with similar themes from previous lifetimes also surfaced to be cleared. Seeing the past life links to major traumas served to provide another level of understanding, peace and healing for these participants.

**Unresolved issues create disease.**

Through learning to trace thoughts, feelings and sensations back to their origins, participants saw how the mental and physical health problems they experienced were actually patterns rooted in unresolved issues. Over time, participants came to believe that physical and mental distress, or discomfort of any kind, was a signal from their body or their soul that there was something they needed to see and to clear. For example, Silke connects the disabling panic attacks she experienced as an adult to her need to process patterns of fear that she acquired as child experiencing her father's outbursts of rage. She says:

That's what my dad was like: totally out of control in his anger. ... As a result I spent a lot of my life in fear, hence the panic attacks, I found out later ... It sort of dawned on me; a slow process of deduction about my situation anyways. That I lived in fear for most of my life and the panic attacks just came on to point me back to that.

Silke's desire for personal development was originally sparked by realizing that she had acquired her father's pattern of angry outbursts and that she didn't want to inflict the same fear upon her own children. She realized that the panic attacks that subsequently surfaced were a natural result of the unprocessed fear which marked her daily life as a child and as an adult. The panic attacks ultimately helped her see and process the pattern of fear she had acquired through her experiences with her father.

Participants viewed physical ailments and diseases as a natural extension of the unresolved mental and emotional patterns in the physical body. Participants believed that everything they experienced from skin problems and migraine headaches to uterine cancer represented something they needed to see, experience and understand for their

further development. Anne explains how the thoughts or feelings we acquire from unresolved experiences gradually translate into physical health challenges as we continue to deny them over time. Her comments provide a good example of how one participant creates healing by progressively unraveling the emotional, mental, and physical layers of a pattern as needed. She says:

What happens in the physical body in most cases, whatever caused that physical hurt, started out here in the mental and emotional bodies and you didn't look at it. You didn't acknowledge it. Until eventually it starts [to become disease]. ... But I recognize that as I work with myself out here, on the mental and emotional bodies, that by the time I move into the physical, that sometimes the pain is gone. Thus, dissolving a pattern on the emotional and mental level was often enough to clear it and create healing on the physical level as well. While participants also frequently used and often initially started their healing process with a variety of alternative or non-intrusive physical strategies such as exercise and nutrition to address problems, they tended to view these strategies as part of a holistic process of clearing or of creating wellness. The mental, physical and emotional strategies they used were chosen from and united by a spiritual perspective, making them spiritual strategies. You might recall that many participants were driven to discover a spiritual approach to healing because physical strategies alone were not enough to address and clear persistent patterns that manifested on a physical level. As participants continued their journeys of spiritual development, the process of clearing the emotional, mental and physical patterns underlying an issue emerged as their central spiritual strategy for addressing any disease or discomfort.

**(c) Acceptance and surrender.**

Participants identified the important role that acceptance and surrender played throughout the process of clearing. Participants talked about the need to fully accept the reality of an issue and begin watching it with total openness in order to engage with their pattern at the beginning of the process. Participants noted that if there were areas they were not prepared to acknowledge, or truths they didn't want to see, they would be hampered in fully understanding the patterns they were exploring. Some participants talked about the necessity of acceptance in terms of honesty, saying that without a willingness to be absolutely honest about their behaviour and motivations, they wouldn't be able to progress. Clearing ultimately required a willingness to surrender all of their defenses and preconceptions about themselves and become open to discovering a new reality.

Participants also drew on the idea of surrendering control over their process. The more they accepted what was occurring in a given moment and let go of an issue they were struggling with in trust, the more easily the information or awareness they needed came to them. Participants' willingness to accept and surrender to the process of clearing itself often determined the speed at which they were able to move through a given pattern.

Robert exemplifies a participant who found acceptance to be a key to liberation throughout his spiritual journey. For 9 years, he watched himself struggle with his feelings, thoughts, judgements and behaviour in his daily meditation. By continuing to watch and feel through his patterns with awareness, Robert learned how to stop struggling with his experience. He describes the acceptance he achieved in this way:



Now there is a recognition that yes, this is happening; you win, and just that opening to it. It's just the difference. So it's not a problem. Before, it was a struggle to try and control things to make them be a certain way, or fit in, or figure it out and do something. .... Now I can see that, and I can let it be, and when I let it be, it changes, and when I try to change it, I suffer. If I'm just kind of open to it, it changes all by itself. If I let go, you know; you win, no problem. It's fine.

Robert has found that fully accepting the patterns he sees and feels himself to be engaged in alone dissolves the patterns and reconnects him to his Buddha nature or essential goodness. In this place of connection, the problems he struggles with are no longer problems. His meditation practice has enabled him to see the insubstantial nature of personality patterns in comparison to the spiritual reality that lies beneath them. He credits his meditation practice with everything from helping him stop panic attacks in the moment to shifting major personality patterns over time.

Eva is more inclined to use the term surrender. She makes surrendering a practice on many levels. She talks about continually surrendering the bigger picture of her life to "whatever is out there" because it allows her to let go of control and move to a place of being present in the moment to learn from and respond to whatever comes up. Eva also talks about surrendering her need to have answers in the process of unraveling a pattern. She focuses on simply acknowledging and experiencing whatever is happening in the moment, letting go of trying to understand it at a deeper level, and trusting that the information she needs about a certain pattern will be revealed as she needs it. Eva's

ability to surrender keeps her moving through life from a place of trust and responsiveness.

**(d) Making a choice and committing to the process of change.**

Participants often found that some patterns literally dissolved on their own as they felt through their experience and were able to identify and accept the pattern, gaining insight into its reason for being. At other times, participants found that some patterns required making a conscious choice about what they wanted to experience, and following it up with a commitment to let go of behaviours that were associated with a pattern they wanted to clear. In talking about watching her recurring pattern of depression, Mia could see her experience progress from despair, hopelessness, fatigue and apathy to thoughts of suicide, to considering a plan for suicide, to believing that there might actually be a way to carry out her plan without experiencing a lot of pain. As she watched, experienced and saw her pattern escalate, Mia came to understand that she did have a choice in what she was experiencing. She describes her realization in this way:

Because before I felt that I didn't have a choice; that this depression, or this feeling of just hopelessness or despair would just descend upon me. So it felt that it had me, and when it had me there was nothing I could do. Then during that first year of effort [studying energy], I came to this realization that I could *choose* how I felt, and I made a commitment that I would never entertain the concept of depression again [9:9]. ... You can feel the thrust of energy towards a commitment like that where you make a vow and you just don't break it. ... So that really helped my journey along, just having made that first commitment. It was an act of self love.

Choice has remained an important part of the change process for Mia. By watching and experiencing the feelings involved in a pattern, she receives an insight about why she is engaging in the pattern, her perception shifts, and she is able to see the pattern differently. A space opens. Rather than feeling compelled to continue acting in the patterned way, the new understanding she has acquired brings her to a place of choice about continuing to act in line with the pattern. As she chooses to stop feeding the layer of the pattern she sees and follows through on this commitment, while continuing to watch what happens, she continues to receive epiphanies about the meaning, purpose and origin of the pattern, and so the process goes, unraveling the threads of the pattern layer by layer. By going through this step by step process of identification, watching, experiencing, choosing and committing, Mia has developed a process that is effective in clearing the mental, emotional and physical patterns that have blocked her from a sense of well-being.

Other participants similarly recognized the critical importance of making a choice and following through on it as part of the process of change. Both Michaela and Janet, who unexpectedly lost adult children, talked about the importance of making a conscious choice to live fully in the face of the devastating pain they experienced. Each woman saw her decision to accept what had happened and move forward in the midst of pain as pivotal to her spiritual healing and growth. Similarly, other participants talked about becoming aware of arriving at a point where they realized that they could continue to suffer from the negative effects of an illness they were experiencing or they could choose to heal. Ultimately, participants found that they had the power to make a decision about what they wanted to experience.

Participants also acknowledged that making the initial choice, however significant, wasn't the end of the story. Their choice became meaningful when they followed it up with a commitment to acting in concert with that choice in whatever way they could, in a step by step fashion. Although they might not be able to stop engaging in the pattern or a reaction as a whole, by simply taking the next possible step, they continued to move forward. Michaela points to the importance of commitment in actualizing a choice when she explains how she translated her decision to live fully and grow through the pain of her son's death into a reality. She says:

It happened in theory, and then has grown to be an actuality. It happened by a decision. After a lot of meditating of, my intention, of what I wanted, of where I wanted to be. Where did I see my direction? And then as I've tried to live that as best I can, and that whenever I go off course, I pray to always have help to go back on course, and then it has become a reality that is my life.

By continuing to focus on and act in concert with her choice, Michaela and other participants like her healed persistent patterns and grew through incredible challenges allowing them to be transformed in positive ways by their experiences.

### **Step 6: Setting a Healing Intention**

Participants also talked about the importance of intention as part of the healing process. As patterns started to unravel and a space for doing something different opened up, participants were able to clarify what it was they wanted to be experiencing. Like Michaela, many participants took time to form a clear intention as part of the decision making process. Others, like Bruce, simply knew that they didn't want to repeat a particular pattern anymore and went on to identify a positive intention after making the initial decision to drop what it was they were doing. As participants tuned into their

spiritual centre, they often had more of an experience of receiving or becoming aware of an intention as opposed to creating one in an effortful sense. Clarifying and focusing on their intentions provided energy and direction in the process of healing and development and was an important vehicle for taking responsibility for creating the lives they wanted to live.

For example, Janet identifies spirituality itself as a process of conscious creation that then shapes the experiences you have. In talking about dealing with her son's death from a spiritual perspective, she says:

You are much more intentional, you create the opportunities. It's not that this happens and then you respond. It's not like that. It's that you create the environment in which something happens and can be contained and that your responses are based on how you make meaning.

In this quotation, Janet clearly identifies the spiritual power she found in choosing how she wanted to experience and process her son's death. Her ability to set and follow through on her intention was an integral part of creating healing and allowing herself to grow through this event.

Participants used a variety of tools to set clear intentions and shift their focus to these intentions. Many participants used meditation to gain clarity about their intentions. Other participants wrote about their intentions and referred back to them regularly as a reminder of where they were going. Many participants spent time visualizing their intentions, imagining what having the experience that they intended would feel like, and some used affirmations to shift their focus in the moment, when old patterns of thinking

arose. Intentions functioned as a compass for directing their thoughts, feelings and energy around a given topic.

Participants talked about the importance of balancing the time spent on unraveling patterns and realizing positive intentions. Participants aimed at living life in general from the perspective of their positive intentions. As they became more and more free of their major patterns, participants sometimes found that simply shifting their attention from a negative pattern to the corresponding positive intention was enough to dissolve another layer of the pattern. By contrast the same attempt to focus on a positive intention was only inclined to bring a negative pattern to the surface where substantial unresolved issues were in the way of realizing the intention. The feedback participants received from sensations in their body, from their emotional responses to an intention, from the environment around them, and from their inner guidance helped them know the most appropriate step to take at any given time.

Silke provides a great example of using intentions as part of the process of unraveling a pattern. In this case, she set a healing intention that helped her process and move through the tension in her body during her daily meditation. She says:

So I notice oft times that there is tension in my heart. So I visually expand my heart open, while still allowing that tension to be there. So my intent is to be open.

I don't know if this is making sense. To me, that is being with what is there while opening to it and then I find whatever that tension is; it releases.

In this example, Silke combines visualization with her intention to open which helps her engage fully with the tension in her body, allowing it to dissolve in turn. Participants had

numerous creative ways of using intention to assist in the process of clearing and to move towards creating the lives they wanted.

### **Step 7: Following Your Inner Guidance**

Once a positive or healing intention was set, participants found they were led to the information, practices, and practitioners they needed not only through synchronicity and receiving feedback from the outside world as we've discussed, but also through their developing sense of intuition. Participants talked about moving beyond the realm of making decisions from their mind alone and into the realm of allowing themselves to be guided by their intuition. Although most participants associated their intuition with following their feelings, some honed their intuition to such an extent that they were able to "hear" guidance within in distinctive ways.

Miriam identifies this inner guidance with the process of remembering her connection with and identity as a part of the source itself. She talked about tapping into the place within where the individual and universal meet and where all knowledge is available. By making "a study" of consulting the guidance she found within she came to a place of trusting that everything she needed to know would be revealed to her within. Participants all described a similar process of learning to go within and consult their spiritual centre to know what it was they needed to do on any given matter, whether that was taking the next step forward in healing, moving toward realizing an intention, or even something as mundane as choosing which apartment would be the best one for them. If they were willing, their guidance invariably led them to information, awareness, practices and processes that lined up with their intentions.

Similarly, Katherine talks about "coming into her own" when she started to honour her intuition and allow the knowledge she received from her connection to spirit

to guide her healing and development. After receiving a second diagnosis of cancer, Katherine went on a 3 month retreat. She credits the intuitive guidance she received during this time with giving her the courage to follow through on major life changes that she feels ultimately saved her life. She says:

In that 6 weeks that I was there, most of the time that I was there was by myself and I was in that place of being in nature and connecting to spirit, and listening and walking, and I realized that I loved my work, but if I didn't stop doing what I was doing, ... I wasn't going to be on the planet. I mean that came up so clear, and I think being in that space it really pushed me to listen to the message that was coming through that I had to resign, and to have the courage. ... That 3 months was magnificent in terms of pushing me more clearly into my spiritual journey, and so I came back ... and said, I'm resigning and of course met with all kinds of resistance. How could you? You know. How could you? You've got this great job. You're doing great work. You're changing people's lives, you know, all those people who really, really challenged me. But it was such a *spiritual knowing* [italics added] that there was no question but that's what I had to do.

Participants came to trust their intuitive knowing as their premiere source of guidance. Often the guidance they received made no logical sense and was completely contrary to major life patterns. For example, Katherine typically placed a great deal of importance on her work, devoting much time and energy and taking on a great deal of responsibility. Deciding to walk away from her job was a huge leap of faith at that point in her life. Although challenging to follow in the beginning, participants found that the



intuitive guidance they received always steered to them towards healing, and often helped them realize their positive intentions in ways they could never have planned or fathomed.

Participants viewed their feelings as a major creative force. As they cleared old patterns and moved towards new intentions, they understood that it was their feelings about those intentions and the energy that they devoted to them which created new experiences. Setting a clear intention and focusing their attention and excitement on that intention set into motion a chain of creative events. Participants relied on their feelings and intuitions to take them towards the healing and positive experiences that they intended. Sigrid describes the non-linear process of being drawn to realize her most profound desires through her feelings and intuitions. In talking about realizing her intentions she says:

Let's see what the future brings. I know what I want it to bring, and I understand that, eventually, whatever we really want we always get anyway. It is a matter of not doing it with your head, but doing it with your heart. What the heart desires, we get. If the head is involved, it can interfere.

As part of their process of spiritual development, participants learned to listen to and be guided by their feelings and intuition. Whether they were following a feeling to unravel a pattern, or following an intuition to realize a healing intent, participants found that their feelings and intuitions invariably brought them to a place of healing and freedom in the short term, and ultimately brought them home to the spiritual centre of themselves in the long term.

### **Clearing Brings Us Home**

The process of clearing formed the central route to helping participants understand and move through interconnected patterns of thought, feeling, belief,

sensation and energy that were in the way of their connection with spirit and their ability to act from the divine essence of themselves in pursuing their intentions in the world.

Participants progressively moved through the steps of watching, feeling, accepting, choosing and committing to drop old patterns, and moved into realizing new and positive healing intentions through following their feelings and intuition. Ultimately, the process of clearing created healing by enabling participants to drop the patterns that were in the way of fully connecting with and expressing themselves as spirit itself.

Lila summarizes many of the themes I've touched on in describing participants' process of clearing, tying her own experience of clearing the unresolved patterns of childhood to uncovering and being able to live from the joy of the spirit within. She says:

As you get rid of all these, I'm going to call them belief systems, because we created beliefs by how we were treated. ... As I started to clear those beliefs away and started to understand and accept my own power for me, the joy just started to happen more and more. As I started to *trust* in my inner knowing, the joy is there. It's inside of all of us. It's not something I have to do. I don't have to go and do something to be joyful. *It's just there*, [italics added] and um, you know, it's hard to describe. I have no idea why or even where it comes from. But I have an incredible belief that it's at the soul of all of us, and we've just covered it up with all of these other vibrations, and as we clear those: those vibrations are dense, whenever we judge ourselves, they're heavy, and they make us feel heavy and they make us feel bad. When we clear them away, we don't have these bad feelings anymore, more of this joy is uncovered. It's not that we have to put it

there. We don't have to do something to get it. It's a state, and I think it's our natural state of being.

### **The Process of Healing: Putting the Pieces Together**

All participants drew on a broad variety of particular practices and techniques to create their own unique approach to drawing on spirituality to connect with the divine within, and to clear and heal their mental, physical and emotional issues. Different participants used different strategies for different purposes. For example, Katherine might use a ritual to clear her energy and prepare for meditation or prayer, while Mia might use a ritual to set and build energy around a positive intention.

Altogether participants identified a range of more than 25 practices they engaged in to connect with spirit, clear and heal, or create their lives from a place of spirit. The practices participants emphasized the most in their interviews were meditation, acceptance, making conscious choices, setting intentions, intuition, energy work, journaling, art, music and creativity, visualization, reading and prayer. However, participants also engaged in a broad variety of other activities including exercise, nutrition, crystals, aromatherapy and rituals. All participants sought information, support, or assistance with healing from a variety of traditional and alternative teachers and / or practitioners at various points in time.

Although the particular steps, techniques, and realizations of each participant were different, the process that led to their spiritual development and healing bore remarkable similarities. Participants described seven distinct steps in their process of creating healing through spiritual development. These steps are: (1) being open; (2) shifting to a spiritual perspective; (3) going within; (4) connecting with spirit, (5) clearing through: (a) watching; (b) feeling; (c) accepting; and (d) choosing and committing to drop the patterns

they identified; (6) setting intentions; and (7) following your inner guidance. Not every participant found each step necessary, and two different participants may have taken the same steps in a different order. The process I have constructed to encapsulate their experience is best thought of as a topographical map of the territory of drawing on spirituality for healing. Their common experience marks the general trail and provides signposts for the major crossings on a journey that each person nevertheless has to create on their own.

When participants encountered compelling challenges that stretched the limits of their knowledge and skills, they initiated the process of healing by becoming open to letting go of their old way of seeing and being. As they searched for and found understandings that resonated with their experiences in the spiritual realm they gradually shifted to viewing themselves, life itself, and their situation from a spiritual perspective. This fundamental shift in worldview and perspective led them to turn within to discover and connect with the greater spiritual reality that was in and of itself healing and liberating. One of the fundamental realizations that participants had was that they were healed simply by connecting with and living from with the deeper spiritual reality within themselves. Often, making this connection carried them directly into the process of setting or clarifying their intentions and following their guidance to realize those intentions.

Participants also experienced numerous blocks to fully realizing their connection with spirit. These blocks usually appeared as some form of emotional, physical or mental discomfort or disturbance. As participants attended to a particular experience they were having with awareness, they started to identify and clear interwoven patterns of thought,

feeling, sensation, behaviour and energy that were creating the blocks they experienced. Through watching, experiencing, and accepting these patterns they came to understand their origin, purpose and meaning, and were liberated to choose to drop the experience by committing to stop recreating the pattern in a step by step fashion. As new spaces for choice appeared through understanding and dropping their patterns, participants were naturally led to clarify their intentions and shift their focus to consciously creating the experiences they intended. Their intentions and intuition in turn led them to the experiences and resources they needed to realize those intentions. Finding and drawing on a community of like-minded individuals further supported their process of healing and realizing their intentions.

Participants experienced many individual variations of the common process I've described. Different participants employed the same step at different times and a single participant might use a slightly different process for a different issue. Participants trusted their internal guidance and intuition to lead them to the unique practices and steps they needed to address each challenge they encountered. At the same time, there was remarkable consistency in the elements and general flow of the healing process that participants shared through their stories.

The most consistent theme was that participants created healing through developing and exploring their spirituality. By coming to see themselves and understand their world from a spiritual perspective they were led to a process of connecting with and learning about themselves as spirit. Exploring and developing their relationship with spirit within themselves, and in the outside world, was a natural process of personal unfolding and expansion that generated healing in its wake.

#### **Section Four: Experiences of Healing and Wellness**

In section two we examined participants' paths to healing and we focused on their process of healing in section three. This section is devoted to an exploration of participants' concepts and experiences of healing and wellness. Participants moved well beyond increasing the effectiveness of their coping strategies as an outcome of their process of spiritual healing. What they described as the ultimate result of their spiritual exploration was a total transformation of identity and understanding that brought healing and wellness in its wake. Participants were not only able to dissolve and resolve their original issues; they also became empowered to create lives with more meaning, satisfaction, enjoyment and contribution than they had previously known. Virtually every area of their lives shifted in a positive way. Thus, participants' experiences reflect an understanding of healing as essentially a process of spiritual transformation and development.

In addition, the process of spiritual healing that they described was a process of progressively understanding and embracing the self as spirit. It differs from traditional experiences of healing which centre around the alleviation of disease. Participants' focus centred on reconnecting with or realizing that there is no disease or there is no separation from spirit. As they progressively realized their identity as spirit through dissolving the patterns that obscured that awareness and brought their thinking and behaviour into alignment with their realization of their identity as spirit they grew in health and wellness. In the experiences they described, their disease literally dissolved in the light of new awareness and was replaced by positive health, emotions, relationships and activities they enjoyed. This section summarizes participants' understanding of healing and wellness and goes on to explore their experience of healing and wellness in detail.

### **Definition of Healing**

Participants experienced healing as a holistic internal process that involved addressing and aligning the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of themselves into an integrated whole. Regardless of the area in which they initiated healing: physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual, participants understood the necessity of addressing the elements of an issue rooted in each area to fully realize transformation and experience healing. Participants viewed acceptance as an integral part of the healing. Healing became possible as participants first accepted and explored the condition they faced, themselves, their patterns, and their own role in creating and healing the condition. The healing and integration participants experienced progressed through various layers of exploration and acceptance, ultimately culminating in participants' understanding and acceptance of themselves as spirit itself. Regardless of participants' particular paths to healing and integration, they were united in the view that healing was a holistic process in which all the interwoven elements of a pattern and of the person must be addressed and integrated.

### **Healing is an Experience of Personal Integration**

Although some participants struggled with the conceptualization of "drawing on" spirituality, most people readily identified with and used the word healing for the experience they were having. Participants didn't merely talk about healing in terms of a restoration of health, but rather associated it with experiencing the qualities of love, joy, empowerment, expansion, freedom, and peace. By and large healing was conceptualized as a positive experience of personal integration and well-being. Participants expressed a sense of experiencing themselves as a unified whole, grounded within their physical body and feeling in tune with and responsive to their experience at the emotional, mental and

spiritual levels. Bruce provides an example of one such definition of healing when he says:

Healing to me is finding peace. ... Healing is finding that place where you're just at a very calm, pleasant, balanced, state of mind, state of being really, and it's not just about the mind, it's about the body. You just feel connected, and so that to me is healing, and so life for me is a constant journey for healing.

Participants associated the experience of distress or disease with being caught up in the ego drama of life in the human realm, dominated by their cognitive processes, feeling or sensory states, and most often unconsciously playing out patterns of belief, feeling, behaviour and energy acquired from their experiences. Healing represented breaking through their conditioned patterns and experiences to live in and from the greater reality of spirit within. The process of healing allowed participants to experience a positive state of health and well-being.

### **Healing is About Acceptance**

The central theme participants shared in their descriptions of healing was the theme of acceptance. Participants saw healing as emerging from a greater acceptance of themselves and what was occurring in their lives. Participants initially talked about healing in relationship to acknowledging, accepting and transforming the parts of themselves that they saw as creating or contributing to the problems they were experiencing. Participants also identified healing as accepting and coming to peace with those parts of themselves and their experience that they could not change. Through their experience of drawing on spirituality, participants came to value the totality of who they were and regard each aspect of their experience as valuable in contributing to who they had become. In this sense participants defined healing as accepting oneself and one's



experience. The process of connection and clearing that led to healing allowed for the alignment and synthesis of all the pieces of themselves and their experiences into an integrated whole that they were able to fully acknowledge, receive and celebrate.

Anne provides a succinct example of this common viewpoint on healing. In talking about what healing means to her, she says:

Healing for me is when you recognize something about yourself and you acknowledge it and transform it. It doesn't mean it is going to go away, but you are at peace with it, or if you are not at peace with it then, then you work at becoming at peace with it.

Janet similarly talked about coming to accept the fact that she would always miss her son and feel the pain of his loss. At the same time, she was able to appreciate the ways that she had grown in the process of responding to and learning to live fully with that pain. Janet believes that every part of her experience is "precious," including the loss of her son, because it all contributes to making her who she is today.

Participants also framed healing as accepting and experiencing the greater reality of their identity as spirit itself. Lila, Miriam, and Mia talked about integrating another aspect of themselves with each instance of clearing and growth. As they let go of each pattern, moving through the ego attachment to a certain belief or experience, they uncovered and accepted a new and greater aspect of the power, potential and well-being lurking underneath the pattern. Through this shift in perspective they increasingly identified and experienced the unlimited possibilities of themselves as spirit. Lila provides a good example of this view of acceptance in sharing her beliefs and experiences around healing. She explains:

coming to understand that I do have gifts, that I do have power, and it's okay for me to express them was a huge journey. ... How do I clear the energy so I can come into full acceptance of who I am? My fears; my fears just; I believe that when we have fears they just hide our greatest talents and the depth of the fear will equal the gift of the talent. We live in a world of duality, so, if we have an incredible amount of fear about doing something we have an incredible talent to reveal and it's [in] our unfolding or letting go of that fear that this talent is able to be brought to the world.

From this perspective, healing is really about acknowledging and revealing the gifts that lie buried beneath the patterns we've adopted over time. Healing lies in accepting our freedom and responsibility for moving into and living from those gifts.

Participants were united in identifying healing both as a positive experience of integration and well-being and as an unfolding process that involved progressive levels of acceptance. Accepting the reality of their experiences and moving into transforming their patterns created a greater acceptance of the self which formed one layer of healing.

Accepting those aspects of their experience that could not be transformed and accepting their responsibility for choosing to allow the challenges they faced to transform them into being more than they were before is another layer of acceptance. Finally, finding, acknowledging, accepting and living from their spiritual centre itself, and taking responsibility for bringing forward their deepest gifts, formed the final layer of acceptance that participants saw as being definitive of healing.

### **Definition of Wellness**

Participants' definitions of wellness also centred on an integrated response to their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs, suggesting that they saw the effort to

maintain wellness as a natural extension of the healing process. In talking about healing participants focused on bringing the aspects of self that were out of whack back into alignment with one another. In talking about wellness they focused on maintaining a balance between the various aspects of self.

Participants also identified wellness with being present and spiritually connected in the moment. By clearing the attachments to past experience and conditioning through their process of healing, participants were no longer caught up in thinking about the past or worrying about the future. They learned how to be fully present to the experience they were having in the moment. Their ability to be present in turn allowed them to remain spiritually connected and aware on an ongoing basis. Participants talked about being able to feel when something was out of alignment in their bodies and allowing their spiritual connection to guide them to exactly what it was they needed to do to restore a sense of balance and well-being.

Anne's definition of wellness brings these two elements of being spiritually connected in the moment and achieving balance together. She says:

Wellness to me is staying present, staying connected to who you really are, and being able to keep everything else in balance. ... Always, it's not just the body here, it's also using your mental, and emotional, and your spiritual in other ways, like what type of work do you do?, and keeping the balance between the play and the work, so it's all a combination.

Participants commonly drew on the same holistic array of interconnected practices to maintain wellness that they found effective in facilitating their healing and development. At the same time, participants' ability to tune into their spiritual centre

enabled them to respond uniquely and spontaneously to their needs in each circumstance. Although they continued to use core practices such as meditation as a central strategy over time, one day they might draw on chanting to meditate, while another they might choose a walk to the ocean for their meditation time. The specific technique they used changed in response to what they needed in the moment, and their cadre of practices and beliefs continued to evolve over time.

### **Wellness is Being Fully Alive**

Many participants also believed that wellness extended well beyond a state of positive health and well-being. Participants cited such qualities as being able to fully embrace life, live one's passions and make the most out of any particular circumstance as other important aspects of wellness. For example, Michaela talked about deciding to wear the pain of the loss of her son as a badge of honour, allowing the experience to make her stronger, more resilient and more loving in his memory. She believed that part of her role on the planet was to give back to spirit by becoming all that she could be and by using her experience to help others, for example, assisting another mother in crisis through her own intimate knowledge of loss. Participants were fundamentally concerned not only with their own continued realization and healing but were also interested in being generative by contributing positively to the lives of others through expressing themselves and sharing the knowledge and skills gained through their healing journey.

Participants also believed that wellness was reflected in their ability to embrace and grow through whatever they were experiencing. Although participants generally reported good health and well-being at the time of the interview, they understood that they would continue to encounter challenges of all sorts. They also associated wellness with being able to live fully and continue to grow at a spiritual level while they were in

the process of experiencing, healing, and even dying from a disease on the physical plane. Miriam provides a good example of participants' conceptualization of wellness as extending beyond mere balance and good health. She says:

Somebody can have all those things [in balance] and still not be well inside, and so wellness to me means an acceptance of everything that's in my life. I could have a physical disease, but I could still be mentally well, and so wellness is allowing me to take the very best of everything that I possibly can into every situation.

Thus, like healing, there are many levels of wellness. Participants initially described wellness as an extension of bringing the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual pieces of themselves into alignment through responding to their needs and balancing their activities in a holistic fashion. Like healing, they conceptualized wellness as emanating from and being achieved through tuning into and allowing themselves to be guided by their connection with spirit. Similarly, participants' experience of wellness had grown well beyond the original intention of maintaining health and well-being and into a vision of fully embracing, experiencing and responding to life from one's spiritual centre.

### **Experiences of Healing and Wellness: The Outcomes of the Spiritual Journey**

Although participants emphasized acceptance as the major characteristic of healing, the spiritual journeys they undertook led participants to amazing transformations. Every single participant experienced substantial changes in the issues that originally prompted their healing journey, and subsequent growth or transformation in issues they didn't even realize they had when they started. All participants reported high levels of peace, contentment, satisfaction, wellness, love and happiness. In being asked to reflect on their experience, they frequently expressed surprise at the enormity of the change that

had occurred in their lives. Participants talked most frequently about the way that their experience of life and of themselves had shifted. Despite the fact that challenges continued to occur, their perspective on their lives, and often their way of life itself had shifted so dramatically that challenges were much more easily faced and appreciated for their learning potential. By and large, participants were thoroughly enjoying and finding meaning in their lives, and were actively contributing to the lives of those around them.

### **Healing the Original Issues**

Most participants in the study had been deliberately engaged in drawing on their spirituality for healing for an average of 9 years or more. At this point in time, the physical and emotional issues that they cited as motivating their search were largely non-existent or relatively easily managed. Participants who had experienced chronic or acute physical and psychological conditions including cancer, head injuries, disabling back pain, intractable skin conditions, depression and addiction had recovered and were disease free without using any form of medication. Participants who experienced ongoing trauma such as sexual and physical abuse or the loss of a child considered themselves to be living fully or substantially free of the effects of abuse, or to be well and healthy in continuing to live fully with the losses they had experienced. In situations where previous issues such as panic attacks or back pain continued to arise periodically, the incidents were far less frequent and severe, and participants had effective responses in place. Participants reported that they experienced high levels of health, well-being and life satisfaction overall.

Robert provides a great example of participants' experiences of healing their original issues and moving into a state of well-being and self-realization. Robert was abandoned by an alcoholic mother at 18 months, and grew up in foster homes where he

experienced physical and sexual abuse that left him with behavioural and attachment problems as well a pervasive sense of fear, anxiety, and anger that made daily life a struggle. Robert talks about the trajectory he was on before he started drawing on his spirituality to begin working with the effects of the trauma he experienced. In reflecting back on the way things used to be, he says:

Robert before, I had all kinds of different problems. I was in special classes when I was growing up, behavioural problems. I used drugs, sniffing glue. I was shooting intravenous drugs when I was a teenager. The people I was hanging out with were very disturbed people. A lot of, one fella, he was called the balcony rapist; he was my best friend from grade 5 to grade 6. Another friend was shot and killed by the police, another one [is] in jail for life for murder, another armed robbery, just that kind of thing. And angry and passive aggressive, people would, someone would do something, and I would retaliate in some way. I was quite cruel to animals and people. ... I think there has always been a part of me, this kind of compassionate part, ... [I had] a lot of problems with fear and anger, but I've been working very hard to bring myself out of all of that for quite a long time.

Robert started life with a huge variety of challenges that had a very significant impact on his growth and development. His trajectory has shifted immensely over the course of the years. Each of the growth experiences Robert pursued including the mental training he did as a competitive weightlifter, his time in a twelve step program, and most of all, his experience as a Buddhist practitioner have played an important role in helping him change his direction over time. He sees meditation in particular as having been

pivotal to his healing process, crediting it with providing him with a way of identifying, experiencing and addressing the ingrained effects of the abuse he suffered.

Robert has substantially recovered from the effects of trauma through his many years of practice. He credits his spiritual journey with helping him rescue and become the compassionate person he had inside. The shift in his experience of himself and the world is so significant that he was somewhat overcome with gratitude in the telling. He says:

It just seems to be such a different way of being in the world in terms of my experience in the world and how I feel. ... It seems like it works. I feel so much better in myself and I feel more affection and understanding of other people and my suffering is eased tremendously, and I'm incredibly grateful, almost to the point of tears. It's such a wonderful shift for me ... I don't know what I would do without my practice. I can't imagine what I would do. I can't ever see myself stopping. ... It's just; I just have immense gratitude for not feeling so anxious or so fearful or so isolated or judgmental or hurt. All of those wounds that I've had are kind of healing over, have healed. I'm just so much more loving in myself and calm, and just changed, I've just got immense gratitude.

At this point in his life, Robert experiences peace within himself. He has a job that he enjoys which allows him to contribute to the community. He is a kind, generous, and present person who has meaningful relationships. Most recently he has started to assist the Zen master at his temple in introducing new people to the meditation practice that has been a powerful agent of change for him.

### **Healing Through Transforming the Self**

Participants saw the healing they experienced in the mental, emotional and physical conditions and circumstances that prompted their spiritual journeys as arising



out of the healing and transformation of the self. Through their process of spiritual exploration and growth, participants experienced a fundamental transformation in identity and in relationship to themselves. By clearing and connecting with the spirit within they came to accept and experience themselves as spirit. This in turn led them to further accept, enjoy and play with their human identity, and all of the experiences that went into creating who they were and who they had become.

For example, Bruce identified the transformation within himself as being the most significant healing on his spiritual journey. He says that recovering from his cocaine addiction involved a total restructuring of his personality. Bruce talks about learning to let a part of him, and who he thought he was, die so that he could be reborn into a bigger vision and experience of himself. It was Bruce's willingness to let go of his former vision of himself and his old way of life that allowed him to begin living on a spiritual basis. Through his spiritual practice, Bruce is discovering and accepting himself, and coming to live more authentically from the inside out.

Many participants identified the most significant shift they made as the shift in relating to themselves. As they changed from relating to themselves as a personality to relating to themselves as a soul or spirit, they grew in self-love, self-acceptance and freedom. They were able to take their human experiences and personality quirks less seriously, relaxing into the process of changing the patterns they chose to change and increasingly appreciating the unique expression of spirit that they were along the way. Many of the other most satisfying changes in their lives radiated from this renewed connection with self and with spirit. Anne summarizes this element of healing nicely in

comparing who she was before embarking on her spiritual journey to who she is now.

She says:

Not the same person. Two different people; entirely different. ... It's so different.

It's so hard to put that into words. I think now I am in love with me, that's the simplest. I've learned how to love every part of me, the shadow and the light, and my whole body feels connected, there isn't any separation. I feel as if I'm one with everything, whereas before there was so many insecurities and so many fears.

Anne's comments exemplify the sense of wholeness and integration participants experienced as definitive of healing. Through learning to relate to and love herself as spirit, Anne was also able to accept and appreciate every part of her human personality and experience. Like other participants, she very much identifies the healing she experienced in resolving personal issues and recovering from her head injury as emanating from the spiritual healing and integration of the self. The shift participants made in discovering themselves as spirit and relaxing into accepting and celebrating themselves exactly as they were created a catalyst for change in their experience of other elements in life in turn. Participants were amazed at finding the love, peace, power, joy and fulfillment they had always been looking for within themselves.

### **Healing Relationships**

As participants shifted in their relationship with themselves, they also shifted in the way they related to other people. Through their own process of working with and healing themselves, participants realized that their reactions to other people reflected their own internal beliefs and experiences. They developed empathy and compassion for their own struggles and for the struggles of others. Because they could see that their behaviour

was a reaction to their beliefs and experiences, they stopped taking other people's behaviour personally, and they stopped reacting to what other people did. Participants became skilled in recognizing and responding to their own patterns, needs and experiences in relationships. As participants grew in acceptance and appreciation of themselves, and took responsibility for their own experience in relating to others, they were increasingly able to share themselves authentically, and to be open and accepting of others. This opened the door to forgiveness and healing in existing relationships. For example, a number of participants described their former husbands and partners as best friends and two participants talked about being able to ease a former partner's passing through applying the healing strategies they had learned.

Eva provides a good example of someone whose relationships changed as she changed. As one of the youngest children in a large and close knit family, Eva talks about always feeling that she needed to compete and keep up with her siblings. Although her family always had fun together and she had many friends, Eva felt critical of her family members, didn't share very much of who she was, and didn't find the meaning and sense of connection she longed for in those relationships. As Eva became more grounded in her spirituality and her fears dropped away, she was able to share herself more profoundly, and enjoy and deepen the relationships in her life. She says:

My relationships in my life in the past 4 years have changed 360° and they were good before. I mean I have a good family. I have people all over, down the street, my brothers and sisters live all around me. I have my mom. I don't have my dad anymore. I mean I have a good relationship with people and always have, but the difference now is I feel different. I don't feel stressed as I was before.

Eva identifies her own feelings and approach to her family and friends as the first thing to have changed in her relationships. As Eva has taken responsibility for her role in relationships, she has learned how to share herself more authentically. She says that she no longer glosses over the hurts of the past, but has transformed the anger and blame of the past into forgiveness by examining her patterns, feeling the pain involved in past hurts, and talking about and coming to a mutual understanding of past experiences with her family members.

As Eva has grown to accept, understand and share with her friends and relatives, they are changing in turn. Several members of her family subsequently started their own journeys of self-exploration and change. She speaks with surprise about a brother in law who recently called to ask her to reflect with him on a decision he was about to make; an unprecedented occurrence. Eva talks about what a great time she had going to her mother's house for dinner the night before our interview. Her mother was sharing some bits of family history, information she would never have previously discussed, and the conversation around the dinner table was more genuine than Eva had ever previously experienced. Like many participants, Eva found that the personal changes she made have profoundly changed the way she experiences and relates to her loved ones. At the same time, Eva's own process of change is having a ripple effect; sparking growth in authenticity and sharing in others. Eva is gradually finding herself enjoying the meaningful and loving relationships she has always wanted to have with her family members.

Participants also talked about coming to see other people from the perspective of spirit which has further enhanced their ability to create profound, meaningful and healing

relationships. Just as participants have learned to see and relate to the bigger spiritual reality of themselves, so too have they become able to see and relate to others from the larger perspective of their identity as spiritual beings. They were increasingly able to simply notice when others were wrapped up in ego oriented behaviours, or were acting out of pain, and continue to relate to them with compassion and with an awareness of the spirit within. In the face of unconditional acceptance and understanding, they found that people often dropped their defenses and became more open. This created the opportunity for deeper conversations and more profound and harmonious connections.

The increased ease and harmony that participants found in relating to others extended from casual social contacts to healing their most important relationships. Their ability to see and relate to others from the perspective of spirit gave them an orientation towards helping others and towards viewing others positively. Mia talks about this evolution in her view of and relationship to others. Over time she moved from struggling with judging and reacting to others, to having compassion for people's struggles as she developed compassion for her own. Most recently, she has come to recognize and meet each person at the all powerful level of spirit regardless of how they are showing up in the world. Talking about the way she now chooses to relate to others, she says:

I can see that they are an infinite eternal being and that they are playing in this illusion. And they're playing and experiencing what may be pain, or whatever they are manifesting. They're playing with it, and they are free to play in any way they want and there is no judgement in it. Why am I to judge that; that's sad, or oh, what a pity. No, it's like; you are here to express, you are a powerful being, and I honour you. I see the divine in you. That's the whole concept of *namaste*.

For me that has been a tremendous level of allowing others their energetic freedom.

Mia's comments are emblematic of the shift that participants experienced in their views of and relationship to other people. As participants developed more understanding, acceptance for, and recognition of themselves as spiritual beings having a human experience, they also developed more compassion, acceptance and recognition of others as the magnificent spirits they are regardless of how they show up in the world. Participants reported experiencing a new level of love, harmony, and connection in their relationships, and a new level of comfort with and interest in the people around them. By relating to the people in their lives from the perspective of spirit, participants created positive, egalitarian, supportive and healing interactions with the people in their daily lives.

### **Living the Spiritual Life**

Over the course of their journeys of healing, participants found that as they changed on the inside they moved into a radically different way of perceiving, experiencing and creating their lives. Rather than struggling to get or create things they thought they needed in the outside world, they talked about putting their energy into their spiritual practice and intention to be a channel for source. Through focusing on listening to their spiritual centre and intending to live in alignment with what they heard, they found that they were guided to the decisions, activities and relationships that helped them blossom, enjoy life more, and contribute to the world around them.

As participants proceeded with their healing, many of them moved to new jobs, living situations and friendships that reflected their shift in viewpoint and values. As they moved towards realizing their spiritual purpose, they discovered an ease and grace in

daily living. The synchronicity they experienced in pursuing a healing journey became the reality of creation in their daily lives. The more they focused on their spiritual purpose or intention, the more easily the things they needed or wanted, things that they found truly satisfying, flowed effortlessly into their lives.

Mia provides a great example of the spiritual approach to life that evolved naturally out of the inner healing and transformation that participants experienced. Mia talks about the difference between her old and her new way of living in saying:

Let's say I have a project that I want to do and I don't know where to begin. In the old paradigm of the linear time and struggle, I would have felt: well it's going to take me a couple of years to build this and I'm going to have to plan each step, and I'm going to have to work really hard, and struggle through this, and be devoted. And those are all truisms in that they can be true if you give them energy. But through this new paradigm, I guess the easiest way to call it is [the] quantum paradigm. Now, instead of being very busy physically, running about, and I guess struggling through the process, or believing that it has to be a lot of work, I tend to be more apt to just focus on what it's going to feel like. What is the energy of this project? What is my intention with it? And, it's almost like I meditate with it and, the phone rings and the very perfect person that is needed for the first step calls me, instead of me having to research 50 or 60 people to get that right person, they've come to me. Or, I'll go outside for a walk and be doing this and I'll see something, or bump into someone else that just knows the perfect person to contact. Each step flows, the magic of synchronicity starts to come, and things unfold in a very amazing way and pace that I couldn't have engineered

myself. So it's like I've learned to allow universal forces to co-create with me a little bit more, and not feel like it's all on my shoulders. So that's one very pragmatic way of how spiritual teachings have affected my life.

Thus, as the process of spiritual development continued, participants not only resolved their difficulties and transformed their relationship with and experience of themselves and others, they also found that their spirituality became the basis for guiding their day to day lives and realizing their needs and goals. As part of opening up to their spirituality as a guiding force, many participants uncovered creative, intuitive, or healing gifts that became important for their own healing, and which also became part of the way they could serve others and earn their living. Several participants moved into the healing arts on a part or full time basis over the course of their journeys. Miriam, for example, began sculpting soul angels for people. Lila found that she developed the ability to do energy work. Katherine began receiving paintings in response to her own healing queries, and also for other people. Very often participants said that they never advertised their work but found that people would just come to them through the extended network of friends and family who knew about their talents. Their work, like the other facets of their lives had by and large become an intuitive process.

### **Changes on the Inside are Reflected in Changes on the Outside**

As participants moved towards a spirit driven life they had a much easier and more enjoyable time in their daily lives and their values changed in the process. By and large they became less and less concerned with the material world and acquiring physical things. Although they talked about being able to care more for the people around them and experience more meaningful relationships, they also cared less about what others thought of them and were less concerned with appearances and prestige. Ironically, as



they became more intrinsically focused, deriving their sense of themselves and their joy and empowerment from within, they often created the material circumstances they had struggled to experience earlier in their lives.

For example, Bruce talked about being driven by material success and estimating his value by his bank account and by what others thought of him up until bottoming out as a result of his addiction. At this point in his life, Bruce says that he is motivated largely by the desire to help others. He's more present, self-loving, and authentic than ever before, and he's really excited to be a conduit for spirit in his work to help others restore their physical health and well-being. Although it's no longer his focus, he is also experiencing as much if not more material success than ever before. Similarly, many participants talked about realizing the goals they struggled to accomplish in the past and coming to live the lives they wanted, easily and naturally as a result of their own internal transformation.

Participants often expressed a sense of surprise and awe at how their lives had developed. Although they were experiencing the peace, love, and satisfaction they had always craved, the path was very much about letting go of their preconceptions about the things they thought would bring them to those goals, and about what they imagined their life in general should look like. They described the spiritual way of life as non-linear and often counter to what their ego or mind might want and expect them to do. Thus, Bruce found more abundance through his journey despite the fact that it led him to move from the financial industry into alternative health and healing, a move that ran contrary to his business sense and many years of conditioning. Similarly, Katherine was led to realize her dream of going to Australia and continuing to explore spirituality while making a

living by becoming involved in a network marketing company, the very last place she expected to find herself, her spiritual journey, or a means to make a living and travel. Similarly, Mia left a government job to experience the incredible creative satisfaction and abundance she has always sought as a performance artist.

Almost every participant experienced radical changes in their life experience and circumstances through the course of their journey of healing. Many people talked about being engaged in activities they were surprised they were able to do, and being a person they could not previously have imagined. Even participants whose material circumstances hadn't shifted significantly talked about experiencing those circumstances in a completely different and more liberating way. The changes participants made in themselves and in their approach to life on the inside were quite naturally reflected in the realization of some of their most longed for experiences on the outside. Miriam reflects participants' amazement in talking about the magical quality of her journey and what she been able to accomplish by tuning into her spiritual centre. She says:

It's always such a gift, because, if anybody had ever said to me, that of all the things I have done in my life, I would have done this, I would have said you're crazy. It's not in capacity to do that ... heal my eyes, you know, the work that I've quote unquote fallen into. ... Anything that I studied, really didn't bring me [sic] anything to my careers that I've chosen [laughing]. That's hilarious, it's really hilarious. ... I couldn't have gone to university to do the things I'm doing today.

Thus, the benefits participants received from pursuing a spiritual healing journey extended far beyond healing the issues, however compelling that prompted their initial interest. Through the process of spiritual growth and exploration they undertook they

developed a new level of love and acceptance for themselves, resolved longstanding disputes and improved their ability to have meaningful relationships with others, and developed a way of living that was joyful and that brought them to realize a level of life satisfaction they could never have previously imagined. Most often, all of these changes occurred through avenues or abilities that came as a complete surprise. In short, virtually every area of participants' lives was transformed in incredibly positive and unpredictable ways.

### **Wellness and Generativity**

As a result of their healing journeys, participants reported routinely experiencing an overall sense of health and well-being. They were fully and meaningfully engaged in their work, families, and relationships. They generally enjoyed a balance between work, play, rest, renewal, and connection. They were highly creative and fully enjoyed their lives at every turn. Participants' experience of wellness also extended beyond health and well-being and into positive states of self-actualization and growth. Participants reported that their daily experience was dominated by positive emotional states including love, satisfaction, joy, oneness and peace at the time of the interview. They felt connected to the divine and often experienced their daily lives as unfolding in an effortless flow from intending a certain end to manifesting it. Participants were extremely adaptable; present and aware of themselves and others. Many reported transcendent spiritual experiences and spontaneously developed creative and intuitive gifts.

Mia provides a good example of the self-actualized state that many participants realized through their journey. She has not only been successful in healing her physical challenges and achieving a sense of emotional liberation and empowerment, she has also created a means of earning her living and satisfying the creative desires of her soul

through developing her own unique art form. In talking about how her experience of life has changed as a result of her spiritual journey, she says:

My life is completely different. Even my relationships with people, and how I attract opportunities, and how I experience reality is so different right now, it's night and day. Before I wouldn't have used the word joy very often, ... and now the word joy, the word bliss, and the word peace is just, I don't throw them around because they've become common place or anything, it's just, they are my experience now, and I truly have a connection to those, I guess you could call it an energetic pattern of joy, of peace, like what that feels like, and it's something I've chosen to be intimate with. ... Most of the time, I'm playing now, I'm not working. Everything that I'm doing in my life right now is something I want to do, and I'm so happy, I wake up everyday now and I just can't wait to see, what am I going to do today? ... It's almost like I'm just recently released from prison and I'm just like: wow, everything's delicious, everything's tasty, and I just can't wait.

Participants' experience of wellness very much encompassed not only a state of positive health and well-being, but also experiences of self-transcendence, self-actualization and optimal functioning.

Although health and well-being were the norm, participants were quick to point out that it wasn't as though they didn't still face challenges. Participants viewed the process of healing and growth as ongoing and continued to work towards new levels of freedom, creativity and awareness. Some participants had particular areas of their life that they were working on, others just wanted to continue to develop in all areas. Most

participants agreed that life continued to present them with challenges and opportunities to grow, some positive and others profoundly painful. Participants' spiritual grounding provided them with the experience and confidence to know that they could grow through whatever challenges they encountered.

Building on this basis of confidence and well-being, participants looked toward the future with relish and excitement. Not only were they focused on realizing further levels of growth and development for themselves, they were also fundamentally concerned with contributing to the world around them through their own growth and self-expression. Almost every participant was involved in some form of providing help or assistance to others through community organizations, friendship networks, or through their professional practices. Participants' orientation to taking responsibility for themselves and recognizing their interconnection with everyone around them through spirit made them supportive of others. The process of pursuing their own life purpose and passions led them naturally to contribute to their communities in some capacity as teachers, artists, volunteers, and healers.

Katherine provides a good example of the way participants sought to give back to the world around them. She uses her intuitive and creative gifts to help others in her professional life. In addition to spending time with her grandson, Katherine also uses her spare time to create songs about spiritual principles to teach his play group as a way of passing on the spiritual support she didn't have at his age. She says that her spiritual journey has left her feeling more empowered, more energized, and more inspired than ever before. Although she's nearing 65, Katherine has no intention of slowing down. She

weaves her experience of healing and wellness together with her need to give back to others in talking about how her spirituality has helped her. She says:

It's helped me to surrender and probably to be more present and to live in the moment. And I think the healing has gone on to change, like with [sic] some of my beliefs. It's interesting that at nearly 65 there are a lot of people, my peers, that are retiring and I can't imagine retiring in the traditional sense, because there is so much more yet to do and more places where I can make a difference in the world.

Like Katherine, participants all expressed a desire to be generative, share what they learned and contribute to the lives of others as a natural result of the healing and wellness they experienced through their spiritual journeys.

### **Coming Full Circle: Seeing Obstacles as Opportunities**

At the time of the interview, many participants had reached the point of coming full circle in their journey. They talked about the gratitude they now felt for the difficulties that had originally stopped them in their tracks. Participants had come to realize that the mental, emotional and physical health problems that were so painful and daunting at the beginning of the journey had ultimately served as a catalyst to help them transform their lives in amazing ways. Even those who lost family members, while always regretful of the loss, had come to an appreciation of its contribution to expanding their capacity for living fully and joyfully. Michaela summarizes this common realization succinctly in reflecting back over her experience. She says:

The terrible things that happen to us are; it's so cliché, but they're the opportunities for the greatest growth. I think that our purpose is to reach our potential, and the potential is of our highest good, our highest creativity and love.

Over the course of their journeys, participants came to understand that the pain they experienced was sometimes spirit's way of shedding light in a dark place. They realized that their experiences had transformed them in ways they could never have predicted or designed. By giving themselves fully to the task of spiritual growth and development many were enjoying lives they would have scarcely imagined at an earlier period. Gradually, participants lost their fear of pain, of illness and of trauma. Although they preferred to learn from joy and were increasingly doing so, they came to see pain as a signal, an indicator of healing to seek and liberation to be experienced. Rather than fearing obstacles in their path, participants now understood that the obstacles they experienced were spirit tapping them on the shoulder, and they started looking for the lessons, welcoming the transformation and opening to the gift in each experience.

### **Healing and Wellness: The Outcome of the Spiritual Journey**

Participants had profound experiences of healing and wellness over the course of their journeys. They identified healing both as an experience of personal integration and well-being and as an ongoing process of growth and development. Participants conceptualized acceptance as key to the experience of healing. They tied the alignment of the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of the self that represented healing firmly to progressive levels of accepting oneself and one's life experiences, and ultimately to opening to accepting and living from the reality of spirit within. Participants envisioned wellness as being a natural extension of the healing process. The healing participants created allowed them to become present to their experience in the moment, and to experience and be guided by their connection with spirit, enabling them to maintain a balance between various aspects of the self and enjoy an ongoing sense of health and well-being. Participants' experience of wellness also reached well beyond

simple health and well-being to encompass experiences of self-actualization, transcendence, self-realization and generativity. Participants commonly experienced the desire to share their own joy and personal discoveries with others and contributed actively to the lives of those around them.

Participants fundamentally attributed their healing to the journey of spiritual evolution and transformation they experienced, and conceptualized wellness as being created by their ongoing spiritual practice. Spirituality, in the form of an interconnected network of beliefs and practices that helped them experience and express their lived connection with spirit, formed the foundation of the healing and wellness they experienced, and of the self-actualizing lives they created. Participants linked their spiritual exploration and evolution to numerous concrete experiences of healing. They not only overcame the serious mental and physical health conditions that prompted their initial search for healing; they also learned to grow proactively through life's traumas, allowing them to be transformed in positive ways through the process.

Participants' journeys of spiritual healing led them to embrace the obstacles and challenges they encountered as a means of revealing and integrating the greater reality of the spirit underneath the personality patterns and past experiences that too often determine our ordinary experience of life. By allowing themselves to be transformed from the inside out through their spiritual journey, participants were also able to experience greater levels of love and self-acceptance, develop more meaningful relationships, and create an approach to living that helped them give birth to the experiences they most longed to have, and to enjoy what they were experiencing on a daily basis. In terms of outcome, participants' exploration of spirituality ultimately led to



a total positive transformation in every area of their lives from their innermost experience of self to their outermost experience of daily life in the world.

### **Section Five: The Role of Counselling Psychology**

This section addresses the study's final research question which asked: What is the role of counselling in the narratives of people who draw on spirituality for healing and wellness? Participants roughly divided into two major groups in regard to their experience of psychology and their utilization of counselling services. Four participants (Sigrid, Bruce, Mia, and Anne) who were exposed to a model of psychology that was narrowly oriented to traditional positivist views of science and was dominated by a cognitive orientation to training and practice quickly abandoned counselling in favour of the spiritually or holistically focused practices and healing practitioners that better met their needs.

On the other hand, the 8 participants who experienced a more broadly based, spiritually-infused version of psychology integrated counselling as a central tool in their process of healing and development. These participants regarded counselling itself as an avenue for spiritual healing and their commitment to the counselling process persisted despite the occasional negative experience with a particular professional. Participants tended to link facilitative experiences to their counsellor's personal integration of spirituality and to their counsellor's experiential understanding of the spiritual nature of the healing process. The counsellors participants most benefited from demonstrated a spiritually-infused approach to healing in their ability to connect with clients on a spiritual level. Facilitative counsellors were present, open, genuine and respectful, able to share themselves as a person, and communicate a spiritual understanding of the larger context and meaning of their client's life experiences in a way that resonated for the

client. They were comfortable and skilled in responding to clients' spiritual concerns and perspectives, they demonstrated their own personal integration of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual awareness and skills, and they often integrated a diverse array of healing tools that helped participants address needs and develop skills in various life areas.

The facilitative counsellors participants saw varied greatly in term of the relative sophistication of their integration of spirituality into practice. Interestingly, many participants talked about benefiting from characteristics they now associate with spiritually-infused treatment at a time when they themselves had not necessarily embarked upon or fully identified the value of developing their own spirituality. Counsellors didn't necessarily need to talk in spiritual terms to be helpful to their clients. Participants identified their ability to form a meaningful connection with them and to help them see and relate to themselves at level of spirit as the common element in beneficial experiences.

Participants also talked about feeling a profound love emanating from their counsellors that was unconditional and impersonal in the sense of being equally available to all rather than based on the mutual expectations and exchange of needs traditionally experienced in an interpersonal relationship. They labeled this form of love as "spiritual" and attributed it to a counsellor's personal integration of spirituality and often to the personal healing work that they believed the counsellor had done to experience and communicate their love and awareness to others. Participants valued a counsellor's professional skills and sophistication in drawing on a holistic variety of healing tools or in integrating spiritual knowledge. Yet, they conceptualized the fundamental

characteristic of effective spiritually-infused counselling as a counsellor's personal integration of spirituality and personal experience with healing, which was then reflected in the quality of their presence, the depth of connection they could have with clients, and the effectiveness of their understanding and approach to meeting a client's needs.

### **Participants' Exposure to Counselling**

Participants had a diverse range of experiences with counselling. Their exposure to counselling ranged from two or three individual sessions and some workshops to regular weekly counselling over a period of years. In general, participants sought help to achieve a better understanding of themselves or to address a particular issue or problem. For example, after her first energy healing session Mia realized that there was a lot more going on within her than she had been aware of, and attended counselling to understand herself better. Other participants sought counselling to deal specifically with mental and emotional problems or traumas including relationship breakdown, panic and anxiety attacks, losing a child, and physical health problems.

Five participants pursued counselling during one particular period in their lives, often near the beginning of their spiritual journey, 7 returned to counselling on several different occasions. Participants worked with a diversity of counselling practitioners including master's level counsellors, doctoral level psychologists and psychiatrists. It is impossible to pin-point the specific psychological tradition counsellors were trained in, but given the range of practitioners it is safe to assume that participants were exposed to practitioners who were trained in a range of traditional medical, clinical and counselling paradigms. Participants accessed counselling services through employee and family assistance programs, public health and community services, mental health and addiction services, university counselling centres and private practitioners. Some participants had

uniformly positive experiences in their exposure to counselling while others had a mix of negative and positive experiences and were able to comment on what had been and what had not been effective for them. Many participants had themselves become involved in some type of healing role over the course of their journey. Two out of the 12 I interviewed received formal master's level counselling training and were practicing in spiritually-informed settings at the time of the interview.

Participants split into two general groups with regard to their experience of counselling. Five out of 12 participants initially pursued counselling at the beginning of their journeys and found that it served as a bridge that helped them transition into drawing on their spirituality for healing in some way. Seven out of 12 participants saw counselling itself as another tool to clear patterns and access their spirituality. Counselling played a vital role in the larger process of spiritual healing and growth for these participants.

### **Views of Psychology: Mainstream Approaches**

Participants held a range of views on psychology. Participants were exposed to psychological ideas, concepts and viewpoints through the extensive reading they pursued on all topics related to spirituality and healing. Based on the type of psychological knowledge and perspectives they came into contact with, participants understood psychology primarily as a formal academic discipline that adhered to a traditional, positivist scientific viewpoint and was intellectually oriented. These participants tended to be critical of what they saw as the discipline's over emphasis on the scientific method at the expense of spiritual and experiential approaches. About a third of participants (including Sigrid, Miriam, Bruce and Janet) were critical in particular of what they

perceived as an effort to reduce complex healing experiences to a series of component parts that were then reformulated into cognitive helping strategies.

Sigrid is a prime example of a participant who contrasted mainstream psychological tools and research strategies with a spiritual perspective. For example, in talking about her healing process and how spirituality facilitates healing, Sigrid said: "It's not something you can measure like [with] psychometry." Although Sigrid wanted to share her story, she resisted what she perceived as psychology's interest in reducing her experience to measurable formulae, because she felt that this misrepresented the phenomenon of spirituality and healing itself. In sympathy for my struggle to represent her experience of spiritual healing she says:

You want specifics. No, I can't give you specifics. It is all of me, it is an integrated process. It is not something; I do this and then that happens. I have an intention and then it becomes visible. It's upsetting because you have to communicate with a world that always needs clear labels and logical explanations and measurable processes and all this type of stuff, but this is not what life is all about. We've made it this way because we have this enormously logic [al] and busy mind to categorize everything.

A third of participants like Sigrid who offered this type of critique were generally supportive of science as an enterprise. Often, they looked forward to the reintegration of scientific and spiritual ways of knowing as scientists become increasingly able to comprehend and trace the boundaries of spirit upon which their work touches. Their criticism focused rather on their perception that psychology as a discipline tended to use

science to reduce complex experiences to a rigid intellectual framework that they felt missed and misrepresented the larger and more complex experience of healing.

Even participants like Katherine and Eva who incorporated counselling into their process of healing alluded to having experienced this “linear” version of psychology and to having found it wanting. Although participants believed that traditional positivist approaches to science and cognitive approaches to healing certainly had a role to play in the whole process, they were critical of approaches to health, healing and personal growth that failed to fully utilize and demonstrate the broad spectrum of knowledge and skills available including spiritual, emotional and physical healing strategies, and experiential or subjective approaches to knowledge. For example, in response to my suggestion that one could view her story as a description of effective coping, and challenging her to identify what, specifically, spirituality might add to an understanding of her experience, Janet said:

The glue that holds it together, right? Because it's not a checklist and it's not individual events, or they're not tasks. They make sense because, and they have a rhythm and a fluidity all their own that happen, because you're trying to do the right thing, or move in this direction or create this space, you are much more intentional, you create the opportunities.

Janet's comments point to the contrast she sees between approaches to psychology that focus narrowly on a mechanistic view of the person and apply only specific cognitive or biological tools to build coping strategies, and Janet's own experience of the complex, organic and interconnected nature of healing through the spiritual growth and transformation of the whole person. Participants whose exposure to

psychology left them with an impression of the discipline as scientific in the positivist sense, cognitively-oriented, and narrow in its perspectives tended to regard counselling as a process of limited value in their greater journey of healing.

### **Views of Psychology: Integrative and Spiritually-Infused Approaches**

Other participants, particularly those who were exposed to a spiritually-infused or integrated model of psychology, valued its contribution to the healing process. These participants had generally experienced a version of psychology and were exposed to counsellors who drew upon one or more than one of experiential, emotional, energetic, creative or alternative health and healing strategies, or who incorporated a spiritual perspective in their approach to the field. Exposure to ideas and counsellors who integrated this broader base of tools and/or perspectives with mainstream cognitive behavioural approaches, and who demonstrated some of these skills in their interactions with clients led participants to see counselling as a potential tool for healing.

Eva, for example, has seen at least four different counsellors over the course of her journey and has herself received training in a spiritually-based model of counselling. Her definition of psychology revolves around doing the emotional work required to identify, experience, understand and heal her personal and family patterns. Based on this definition, Eva sees psychology as providing mental and emotional knowledge and tools that play a critical and complementary role to spirituality in her healing process. For example, she talks about the importance of psychology in her healing process in saying:

The two things go along hand in hand. I can't really say that if I just believe that we're more than he, she, this or that, or what we try to make the story about, or we're more than our bodies. I can say that, and I can believe that, and I can say that I'm pointing my finger at you, but I know that it's all what's happening inside

of me and my perception, and I mean I can say all those things, but if I don't actually work with the aspect of myself that wants to point at you, then all I'm doing is blabbing on about some spirituality thing. ... For me the two things go hand in hand. ... I must do the psychological work with the spiritual work.

Eva emphasizes participants' common perspective that spiritual beliefs alone are not enough to create healing, but that healing also requires drawing on spiritual, and in Eva's case, psychological and physical tools to finish old business and clear the way to allow for a lived connection with spirit in the moment.

Participants who experienced a holistic or spiritually-infused version of psychology tended to see psychological and spiritual approaches to healing as complementary and interconnected. Participants talked about how this holistic or spiritually-infused approach to psychology led them to become more aware of and investigate their spirituality, just as spiritual exploration led them to become aware of and begin to work towards dissolving the psychological patterns that interfered with their happiness. Participants' integrated view of the discipline is reflected in the fact that they considered much of the spiritually-infused literature they drew on to be part of psychology. For example, several participants pointed out to me that *A Course in Miracles*, which is certainly not considered to represent mainstream psychology in any way, was channeled by a psychologist at Columbia University, expecting or wondering if I might have been exposed to it. Others quoted Wayne Dyer, or Bernie Segal and other writers who focus on holistic or spiritually-integrated approaches to psychological as well as physical healing and well-being in identifying some of the psychological resources upon which they had drawn.



Katherine is another example of a participant who was drawn to psychology as a tool for healing through her exposure to holistic and spiritually-infused models of counselling. She talked about benefiting from her counsellors' integration of mainstream cognitive strategies with hypnosis, dream work, breathe work, alternative nutritional strategies and Reichian body work, reflecting a holistic approach to healing that addressed every area of the self to some degree. Katherine credits her counsellors' spiritual perspective and virtuosity in taking a holistic approach with helping her to develop and honour her intuition and reconnect with her soul. It was through the spiritually-infused counselling she was exposed to that she came to realize the importance of identifying and clearing patterns, and that she was actually able to clear many major patterns as part of her healing process.

### **Benefits of Counselling**

Both participants who used counselling as a bridge to their spiritual healing path and those who drew on counselling as part of their spiritual healing process talked about receiving many benefits from their counselling experiences! Particularly at the beginning of their healing journey, some participants talked about the relief they experienced at being listened to for the first time. Other participants found that counselling helped them begin to get in touch with themselves and understand what was going on inside of them at a deeper level than they had previously experienced. Often participants viewed counselling as a socially acceptable means of starting to look within and examine their own experience, while they felt that spiritual approaches were regarded as odd, "flaky," or "way out there." Because they perceived reading self-help literature and accessing counselling services as by far the more popular and acceptable means of beginning to

explore their experience, counselling was very often one of the first stops on participants' spiritual journeys.

In addition to helping them begin to get in touch with themselves, the other major benefit that both sets of participants talked about receiving from counselling was that it helped them begin to identify patterns that related to the problems they were experiencing. For example, Bruce is a good example of a participant who expressed appreciation for this aspect of counselling even though he moved on to using spiritual approaches to address his issues. Bruce credits the counselling he experienced in a treatment centre with helping him to identify the patterns of belief, behaviour and experience that were driving his addiction. He says:

The counselling process was very helpful in the sense that it, I think [it] had more to do with just patterns. How did I deal with things? What were the commonalities in my life and my past relationships? And how I deal with myself and how I think of myself. Now, the solutions that I came to for myself were through my spiritual journey. It didn't really come from a counselling journey, but the counselling was an important component of identifying things that I needed to work on.

Although Bruce created healing and wellness through spiritual avenues alone, he concurred with participants who went on to use counselling as a tool for healing in pointing to the important role counselling played in helping him begin to identify the patterns behind his problems.

All participants, even those who reported mixed negative and positive experiences, viewed the time they spent in counselling as a helpful and as a valuable part

of their journey. By and large participants' exposure to counselling helped them feel seen and heard and helped them begin to look within and to reconnect with themselves.

Counselling also helped participants start to become aware of the patterns that were playing an important role in the difficulties they were experiencing. Participants who experienced a version of psychology and a counselling framework that was effective in helping them develop their connection with spirit continued to draw on counselling as a part of their healing journey, and participants who experienced a version of psychology and a counselling framework that wasn't effective in helping them expand their connection with spirit moved on to other practices and practitioners.

### **The Limitations of Counselling: Counselling is a "Mental" Process**

More than a third of participants moved very quickly from their initial exposure to counselling at the beginning of their journey to seeking help and support through spiritual avenues. Often the principle explanation that participants offered for this shift reflected the fact that they found counselling inadequate to address the depth and breadth of their experience as a spiritual being. Participants in this category experienced counselling as primarily an intellectual or "mental" process, which stood in contrast to their holistic view of healing as involving the interconnection of body, mind, emotion and spirit.

Mia, for example, moved from the traditional counselling she explored at the very beginning of her journey into drawing on energy healing and "never looked back." She pin-points the formal, intellectual nature of the counselling she experienced as the main reason that she was more attracted to energetic approaches where the healer integrated a cognitive understanding with an emotional and energetic experience. She says:

For me, particularly, I resonated more with the spiritual or energetic healers, because I had; I am a very intellectual person and you'd think that working

intellectually would be very appealing and it was. But as a result, I did so much studying and so much reading, that when I went to see a counsellor, often I saw the textbook approach that they went to [in] the counselling session. Even the words that they chose to speak with me was [sic] not coming so much of [sic] an energy level, but they were really working on an intellectual level. I mean the desire to help was there, so I wasn't questioning their motives, you know, the reason that they entered the field was often the desire to be of service and to help, but it's more that the process and the approach was very intellectual. They were really referring to their training and a little bit removed from the process, even though their heart's in the right place. I often felt that there was too much of a mental process going on for me.

Like other participants who moved into spiritual modalities, Mia was drawn to an experiential and multi-dimensional means of healing. She moved away from counselling because she experienced it as unipolar, focused on generating and working from a cognitive understanding alone without fully integrating emotional, physical, spiritual and energetic perspectives. Although the counsellor she saw had a heartfelt intention, the actual approach to the counselling process reflected largely his or her training and not his or her personal knowledge, development and integration.

### **A Lack of Spiritual Integration**

Many participants attributed their experience of counselling as "mental" process to their perception that many counsellors generally had limited experience in pursuing their own spiritual exploration and doing their own healing work. The healing journeys participants took involved a total experiential immersion in the spiritual realm that caused them to develop an integrated array of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual skills in

turn. This experience changed who they were and how they perceived and related to other people. As we saw in the previous chapter, participants became increasingly able to operate from a more integrated and holistic perspective as they developed. They grew in emotional skills, confidence, openness, acceptance, they developed a new sense of personal integration, and were more able to feel and express love.

Participants questioned whether a counsellor who had not similarly entered into the multidimensional nature of healing through their own experience would be able to meet them on the spiritual playing field. When they experienced their counsellors as operating primarily on a mental level, and as lacking in the ability to relate in other ways, or express spiritual awareness in their behaviour, participants attributed the fragmentation they experienced to their counsellors' level of spiritual awareness and integration. Thus, operating at primarily a mental level was one signal for participants that their counsellor hadn't yet had much experience or developed skills in his or her own journey of healing and spiritual exploration.

Participants also experienced some of the counsellors they visited as being limited in their ability to form the interpersonal connection that facilitates growth in a helping relationship. Participants viewed this interpersonal connection as a spiritual connection involving fully recognizing and relating to the client not just as a personality but also as a larger spirit or soul. Participants framed the ability to perceive and relate to others on a soul to soul level as a spiritual skill that developed from one's experience of relating to oneself on the level of soul. Participants expressed doubt that a counsellor who hadn't done enough of their own healing to see through their personality patterns to experience some of the larger spirit within would have the skills to understand and co-create the

spiritual connection that they regarded as honouring and therapeutic. Sigrid exemplifies the doubt that participants expressed in this regard in saying:

The average counsellor uses certain techniques that they learn. If I want counselling, I want somebody who can actually get onto my wavelength, who can actually tune into me. There are very few people around who can do that.

Participants regarded the ability to make a spiritual connection as a skill arising out of personal spiritual growth and healing. They experienced the difference between people who had their own experience of healing, which was reflected in their behaviour, awareness, and approach to relating and those who did not. Becoming adept in traditional Western counselling techniques did not make up for the difference in personal experience and awareness of spirituality and healing. Participants who had negative experiences in counselling most often complained of a lack of being understood and met at a spiritual level by the counsellors they visited.

Katherine, who viewed counselling as an integral part of her spiritual journey had had experiences with a broad range of counsellors including both those who did and who did not integrate a spiritual approach. She also attributed a counsellor's difficulty in making a spiritual connection to a lack of personal exploration, awareness and healing. She linked the lack of spiritual integration among counsellors in general to the rejection or separation of spirituality from models of practice in traditional psychological training. She laments the way that psychological training has actually encouraged many counsellors to separate their spirituality from their professional skills and identity. She says:

I think traditionalists, there's some traditionalists that have blinkers on in terms of what fits into that [counselling] and where the boundaries are in terms of what they will do and they won't do. ... I don't think without the spiritual realm that healing can take place. I think it's so vital. It's paramount that that aspect be there, and I think there's times when counsellors or psychologists screen that aspect of themselves.

In her comment, Katherine alludes to the impact that the historical rejection of a spiritual, and therefore, of a holistic perspective in counselling theory and training has had in limiting the scope and efficacy of counselling. By encouraging the separation of spirituality and personal experience from professional knowledge and practice, many counsellors have been trained to remove important aspects of themselves, their knowledge, skills, presence and ability to connect at a spiritual level. The traditional rejection of spirituality and of the value of experiential and subjective forms of knowledge has led many counsellors to deny the very aspect of themselves-their spirituality- that participants considered intrinsic to healing. As participants aimed towards personal integration they found the fragmentation they experienced in some counsellors to be the antithesis of where they were going.

Ultimately, both participants who used counselling as a bridge to spiritual practice and those who viewed counselling as an important tool in their spiritual healing journey were critical of the lack of integration of spirituality in counselling practice when they encountered it. Participants understood this lack of spiritual integration as being related to the traditional scientific paradigm of psychology and to its accompanying model of counselling. Five of the 12 participants responded to their experience of these limitations

by moving away from psychological perspectives and counselling, seeking out spiritual approaches to healing instead. The remaining 7 went on to find counsellors who actively acknowledged and integrated spirituality into their own lives, healing journeys, and professional practices.

### **Counselling is a Vehicle for Spiritual Healing**

Nearly two thirds of participants felt that counselling played an important role in their spiritual healing journey. These participants identified a variety of ways that their counselling experiences facilitated their spiritual healing process. They talked about feeling met and witnessed in a spiritual sense, having an opportunity to hear themselves and tune into their experiences, being able to identify patterns they wanted to shift, drawing on counselling to feel and move through those patterns, and being supported in times of great suffering and transition. Participants in this category tended to view counselling as an extension of their spiritual healing process. It provided another important avenue for clearing and connecting with the spirit within.

For example, Robert compared what took place in counselling to his experience in spiritual community, viewing it as another opportunity to continue to identify, work with and dissolve the patterns that impeded his spiritual realization and freedom. In talking about his last 3 years in counselling, he says:

It's almost like, say with training with the *sangha*, training with other people, I get to come to counselling and have a way of letting things kind of materialize within the session and I can actually learn from that, same as I would if I were in the Buddhist group. I come with what fears I might have or what thoughts might be coming up, well basically, what it, ya, I think that's what it is. It's like Dogen Zengi said: 'to study Buddhism is to study the self, and to study the self is to



forget the self, and to forget the self is to be enlightened by all things'. So coming to see Daniel and counselling is a way to study the self, to see what thoughts I have. It's just an extension of what I'm doing, it's just another vehicle for that exploration of self, of seeing myself and coming to terms with myself.

Working with his counsellor provided Robert with another means of clearly seeing, experiencing and working through his patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviour. Robert stated that both participating in counselling and participating in a spiritual community offered him the added advantage of an interpersonal experience where others could reflect Robert's patterns back to him, assisting him in further addressing his patterns as they unfolded in interaction. Participants who integrated counselling into their spiritual journeys drew on it like meditation, like spiritual discussion in community, like journaling, as another means to do the work of facing and moving through the patterns that were in the way of their spiritual connection and development.

### **Spiritually-Infused Counselling**

Participants who viewed counselling as part of their spiritual healing process tended to choose counsellors who shared a spiritual worldview and approach, or who were responsive to spiritual issues. Eleven out of 12 participants indicated a preference for working with practitioners of any kind, and with counsellors specifically, who integrated spirituality into their practice. Of the participants who were seeing or had seen counsellors recently, 2 out of 3 worked with counsellors who based their work on a spiritually integrated model of counselling, while the third was referred to the study by his counsellor, suggesting an interest in and acknowledgement of the area. These participants wanted to talk about spiritual issues, experiences and perspectives in their

counselling sessions, and felt that their counsellors understood, responded to or helped them address their issues from a spiritual perspective.

Miriam provides a prime example of the need participants expressed to bring spiritual issues and concerns to counselling. As part of opening to her spirituality, Miriam talks about going through a period where she lost her sensors for reality because the spiritual understanding she was developing was so radically different than what is commonly accepted as ordinary social reality. She sought counselling to address her fear that she was going crazy during this period of rapid growth. Although the psychiatrist she saw didn't say very much during her sessions, his responsiveness to her spiritual beliefs and experiences in her final session gave her permission to trust and open to the spiritual expansion she was experiencing. Miriam describes the impact that his personal acknowledgement of her spirituality. She explains:

[He] said to me that a lot of your beliefs of the angels and different subjects that I had talked about, he also believed in them, but he couldn't share them with his patients. I thought that was profound that he had the courage to say that to me. But it was also profound in my life, that I realized that yes, we can go up and down in our feeling tones, and I'm going to bring it back to feeling tones because I wasn't schizophrenic like when you hear voices, or that you see images or anything like that. But when you bring that whole realm of intuition or knowing, or whatever it is, and to find the balance in that, ... He gave me my sense of purpose of being, that it was okay to be me in that aspect of, not normal, of the unreal world or the unseen world is part of my life, and it's very much part of my life.

Although most of Miriam's treatment was in keeping with a traditional medical model in that she talked to an "expert" who didn't frequently respond or share information, her counsellor's willingness to step outside of the box in acknowledging and validating the reality of her spiritual beliefs and perception as legitimate, and as one that he shared, played a critical role in helping Miriam continue to open to her spirituality. As a result, she was able to successfully move through the transitional disorientation she was experiencing and begin an amazing process of personal transformation. Miriam benefited not only from his professional validation of her confusion as transitional, but also from his willingness to take the risk to relate to her genuinely about his own experience as a person who also found meaning in spiritual beliefs. Her counsellor's ability to understand and respond to spiritual issues and to her needs as someone experiencing a spiritual opening that was frightening and disorienting was a critical intervention in her overall growth.

Participants recognized that their paths to healing and some of their spiritual perspectives and experiences did not reflect commonly acknowledged social norms and were not necessarily easily understood or discussed. Participants had spiritual experiences, believed in paranormal phenomena, and took part in alternative approaches including: dream work, visiting psychics, engaging in rituals or meditation to address a range of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual issues. They talked about their need to explore and make sense of some of these particularly meaningful experiences within a safe and supportive environment. They benefited from counsellors who understood and engaged with their approach to making meaning and creating healing. Participants found their counsellors' ability to understand and respond to their spiritual perceptions,

questions, and experiences, or to respond to their ordinary experience from a larger spiritual perspective, to be an essential starting point in drawing on counselling for healing.

### **Spiritually-Infused Counselling Facilitates Healing and Growth**

Participants found that their counselling experiences validated their sense of themselves as spirits having a human experience as well as validating their spiritual perceptions of their life experiences. Often the counsellors that they worked with approached their work from a holistic perspective and drew on an integrated array of mind-body-emotion-spirit approaches that reflected participants' own understandings of the healing process.

Katherine believes that the spiritually-infused treatment she received made a critical difference to helping her heal from uterine cancer. In order to help her prepare for cancer surgery, the integrative psychologist she was seeing guided her in fasting before her final preparatory the session and used hypnosis to help her connect more directly with the larger sense of spirit within. Katherine had what she now understands as a near death experience through this intervention. During the experience, she felt the presence of incredible love and came to understand that it wasn't her time to die and that she needed to heal. This experience freed her to commit more fully to her spiritual healing journey. Her connection to and gratitude towards her counsellor for facilitating this connection with her spiritual self comes through clearly as she describes his reaction to her near death experience. She says:

He was excited because he knew then that I wasn't going to die. He was so supportive and encouraging, and he was highly, highly intuitive himself, and just an amazing man and counsellor. And I think he also got, that, at the time, I was

sort of wallowing spiritually. And so it was certainly a celebration of the process.

He was the first one, I'd never been on a fast and he had asked me to do [it]. I didn't even know what the word was, what it entailed. And he helped me go on a fast for a few days, and I was more open to the insights coming through. ... I really feel that had I not done that [had the near-death experience], it would have been harder for me to stay on the planet.

Katherine attributes a great deal of the success and clarity she had in initiating a spiritual healing process to deal with her cancer to the near death experience her counsellor facilitated. His own spiritual knowledge and awareness combined with his clinical skills and integration of holistic and experimental approaches to counselling to create an experience which profoundly helped Katherine.

Although Katherine's counsellor had many years of experience in developing his spiritually-infused approach to counselling, participants benefited from counsellors who infused spirituality into their practice at various levels and in various forms. Participants enjoyed working with counsellors who were open and responsive to spiritual issues, exploration, and tools. Participants appreciated counsellors who demonstrated the integration of spirituality in their own lives by sharing a spiritual perspective, by validating participants' experience of themselves as spiritual beings, and by adopting a holistic approach to treatment. Finally, participants benefited from counsellors who demonstrated a spiritual understanding by establishing that profound and honouring interpersonal connection that participants experienced as spiritual.

### **Making a Spiritual Connection, Honouring the Soul**

In trying to isolate or define what made their counselling experiences part of their spiritual healing process, participants kept coming back to the idea of making a spiritual

connection. Although the use of spiritual tools, a holistic perspective, and a comfort with spiritual issues may all be a helpful part of a counsellor's integration of spirituality, it was the counsellor's ability to meet the client as a spiritual being that was the key to participants' experiences of counselling as facilitative of healing. In other words, participants felt that the connection that facilitative counsellors offered in terms of their presence, attitude and responsiveness to them was so profound as to be a spiritual connection. The counsellor's ability to see and relate to the client on a spiritual level had the impact of taking a client back to experiencing and relating to the soul within.

Thus, even counsellors who didn't provide an obvious integration of spirituality in the sense of using spiritually-based models, or integrating experimental techniques, or even talking about spirituality could facilitate spiritual growth and transformation as a result of their ability to relate to the client and understand his or her experience on the level of soul. For example, Eva's first experience of being recognized as a spiritual being occurred in the counselling she pursued during a period of depression after her divorce. She explains what made the experience with her counsellor healing by saying:

He sort of validated, I don't know, maybe, my soul, or something. It's just sort of hard to describe. ... So I think what that guy did for me, was really honed in on who I was in the middle of all this stuff, and that I actually did exist, because honestly I was starting to think I didn't. That this was all going to go on and I wasn't even going to be part of it. So that was a big part, right, you mean, you can see me? I didn't even know he could see me, and I can feel that right now, I can feel that in my body, because I did kind of have that thought that kind of nobody could actually see me. ... He kind of validated that actually he could see me, and

saw some stuff that he could only see if he saw me, right? So then I started to think that I actually am connected to somebody. You mean, okay, so you can see me and you think that I'm connected to you? That's interesting. I've never felt that before. It was that kind of moment. ... and I guess I started focusing on the part of me that was connected somehow, connected to something and connected to other people that I didn't notice before.

Eva's counsellor contributed to starting her spiritual journey by meeting her at the level of "soul." Eva had this counselling experience well before she moved into her own process of spiritual exploration. Her counsellor's ability to see and relate to the spirit within was the catalyst for helping Eva to become aware of the spirit within and begin to be able to experience her connection both to herself and to other people.

When counsellors were able to create this context of spiritual connection, participants described the psychological work they did as feeding into and complementing their spiritual growth and vice versa. They found that doing the work of identifying and moving through patterns took them back to uncovering more of the spirit within. At the same time, exploring and connecting with the greater spiritual reality helped them identify and become aware of the patterns that needed be cleared to better access and expand their spiritual connection. Several participants who experienced spiritually-infused counselling therefore described facilitative counselling as a marriage of spirituality and psychology.

The bottom line for participants who experienced counselling as facilitative of their healing was the sense that it brought them back to a connection with the larger spiritual part of themselves; the part where one's personality and psychological patterns

meets one's spiritual essence or soul. Counsellors who participants experienced as helpful were able to see and relate to clients at the level of soul. They effectively established a spiritual connection with their clients that brought their clients to a greater awareness of their soul, spirit, or inner self. Thus, the kind of counselling that participants experienced as healing functioned not only to address and integrate spiritual issues, perspectives and tools but, like meditation, or prayer, helped clients discover and develop a more profound connection with the spiritual part of themselves.

### **Effective Counsellors Demonstrate Spiritual Integration**

Participants also linked the facilitative nature of their counselling experiences to the personal spiritual integration of their counsellor. In exploring participants' understanding of wellness in the previous chapter, I quoted Miriam's observation that you could have a balanced life and still not be well, because wellness extends far beyond the technical feat of achieving balance. Similarly, participants were aware that a counsellor could meet some of the criteria they associated with spiritually-infused treatment, such as being open to discussing spiritual issues, or integrating holistic healing tools, and still not be effective in facilitating spiritual healing and growth. Participants believed that the essence of spiritually-infused treatment lay not so much in the trappings of the work, such as whether their counsellor used energy work or was knowledgeable about spiritual traditions, as in the counsellor's ability to relate on a spiritual level.

Participants linked a counsellor's spiritual skills and awareness to their own spiritual exploration and to the personal healing work he or she had done. They envisioned other aspects of spiritually-infused counselling as flowing from their counsellor's personal integration of spirituality and healing. They realized that each counsellor's approach would be uniquely reflective of their own journey of spiritual



awareness and healing. Thus, no two versions of spiritually-infused counselling would necessarily look exactly alike. Some participants identified the spiritually-infused counselling they experienced with their counsellor's ability to lead them back to their soul, others described it in terms of the "spiritual" love that emanated from their counsellor. Although participants used different conceptualizations to express their experience of spiritually-infused counselling as being related to the counsellor's integration of personal healing and professional training, they were consistent in coming back to this concept in their descriptions of facilitative counselling experiences.

Michaela provides a great example of the way participants linked effective counselling to the personal spiritual integration demonstrated by their counsellor. Like most participants, Michaela deliberately chose a counsellor who was both professionally "grounded" in the sense that she had her degree as a psychologist, and who she describes as being "very spiritual" in her approach to life and in her approach to practice. Although Michaela valued her counsellor's professional skills, she attributes the healing she experienced in that relationship primarily to the personal integration of spirituality that was reflected in her counsellor's ability to love and relate to her clients on a spiritual level. In talking about what made her counselling experience helpful, Michaela says:

Especially because she was spiritual and open to anything that I could say, like just nothing would, there were no doors closed. ... It's just her personality, ... she was open to everything, ... she wasn't afraid to share that she believed that there was more to life, and she wasn't afraid to give a little of herself. She had such love in her. ... I think one of the biggest things is she came to Justin's service and I don't even remembering her being that that day, but she was there. ... She

checked with all of her colleagues, and some agreed and some didn't, but she followed her heart and she felt it was the right thing to do and it was. She just was there with [sic] our service. And she gave me, I could call her at any time of day or night, her cell phone, anything, and I didn't abuse it but it was there and I did use it at times. Because of that I knew that she really cared, and you've got to feel like somebody loves you to trust them and that type of love is a spiritual love and I felt that from her and I trusted her.

For Michaela, her counsellor's integration of spirituality started with who she was as a person and was expressed through her ability to love. It was the "spiritual" love she felt from her counsellor that created a relationship that felt healing. Michaela's description of her counselling experience suggests that she experienced the other things that her counsellor did that were facilitative of healing including her openness to spiritual issues, her genuineness and willingness to share herself as a person, her ability to follow her heart in making informed ethical decisions as originating from her counsellor's own personal awareness and integration of spirituality with her professional skills and training.

Participants linked a counsellor's ability to integrate spirituality with professional training to a number of the facilitative aspects of counselling. They identified the spiritual love they experienced from a counsellor as creating a sacred witnessing space. The counsellor was able to be present, loving and connected to them on the level of spirit, but uninvolved in their personal stories or drama. As a result, participants felt supported in exploring their own perspectives and experiences. The spiritual companionship they enjoyed as a result of this combination of presence and detachment facilitated the process.

of clearing that they experienced in meditation and through their other spiritual practices. Participants talked about how spiritually-infused counselling helped them face and move through experiences that were challenging to approach on their own. The presence of a tangible spiritual witness made it easier to see and feel through particularly challenging patterns, and helped them further experience and develop their own ability to witness their experience from a spiritual perspective.

Participants also drew on their counsellors as role models. They learned from a counsellor's ability to be fully present and responsive to their needs and to demonstrate the multifaceted skills they associated with spiritual development. A counsellor's comfort and confidence in engaging with the unknown, their ability to face, experience, and share profound emotion, and their skill in trusting their own intuitive knowing modeled a level of personal spiritual integration and holistic development that made participants comfortable and confident in working with the counsellor, and that provided them with a model for developing the skills they needed to grow through the challenges they faced. Mia, for example, first realized that a non-possessive form of love existed by experiencing the combination of love and detachment that her counsellor demonstrated in her presence. This led her to begin to further explore love as a quality that was present within the self as well as one that could be experienced in reference to another person.

Similarly, Katherine brings together many of the elements that other participants characterized as critical to effective counselling in her comments. She talks about benefiting from the spirituality her counsellors demonstrated through their presence and approach in each session. Their integration of spiritual awareness and professional skills created a sense of safety, helped her expand her vision of life and facilitated her

development of tools and ideas that fostered her healing. Katherine clearly links her counsellors' ability to effectively demonstrate an integration of spirituality in session with their having undertaken and experienced their own journey of spiritual healing. In enumerating what made the counsellors she benefited from effective she says:

One, I think that they demonstrated to me that place [the spiritual place]. They made me feel safe, really safe, and they encouraged me to think beyond the box I was living in. They helped to give me hope. I think they gave me tools to resolve some of the issues at whatever level that I was in my healing. ... The people where it's really helped me, the methods that have really helped me, have come from people who have done their own work and are doing, have done their own spiritual work. It's interesting to sort of reconnect as time goes on with that, I think, I had to have a respect, and just a sense of being at peace, going back to the safety.

Katherine had respect for her counsellors and felt that they could foster her healing and growth because she saw and experienced their knowledge of spirituality and healing through their presence and their responses to her in session. Going far beyond an intellectual knowledge of spirituality or healing, they demonstrated their personal integration of spirituality and experience with healing through their own awareness and behaviour. The specific practices or steps each person took to create his own version of spiritually-infused treatment emanated from his integration of his personal exploration and awareness of spirituality and healing with his professional training.

Although all participants originally sought professionally trained counsellors and those who continued with counselling valued their counsellors' professional skills, it was

ultimately their counsellors' integration of their personal experience of spirituality and healing with their professional training that participants underscored when they talked about what they experienced as facilitative and healing about their counselling experiences. They described facilitative counsellors as demonstrating their knowledge of spirituality and healing through their presence, their spiritual perspective, their ability to understand and respond to spiritual issues, their ability to make profound emotional connections and facilitate emotional processes, their interest and skill in developing a variety of holistic approaches to healing, and in the spiritual connection and recognition that participants felt they offered. Thus, all participants described spiritually-infused treatment as emanating from a counsellor's personal integration of spirituality and healing with their professional role and training.

### **Active and Proactive Clients**

All study participants by and large took a very active role in the counselling process. In sharing their stories, participants talked about practicing strategies that they learned or living in accordance with realizations they had had in their counselling experiences. They were open to, sought out, and actively engaged with a broad variety of tools and techniques that different counsellors introduced or suggested to them. Even in instances where participants, at the beginning of their journeys, started counselling expecting the counsellor to fix them, or provide the answers to their dilemmas, as their immediate crises ebbed, they realized that counselling was one vehicle through which they could facilitate their own spiritual healing. Participants very much came to take responsibility for their healing journey, and moved from a sense of helplessness in response to being overwhelmed by their original challenges to a sense of empowerment

in deciding where counselling fit into their larger process of growth and how they wanted to draw upon it as a vehicle for healing.

All participants talked about combining counselling with other practices as part of their larger process of healing. They very much viewed counselling in context as one tool, often a very important tool, but still one tool among many in their ongoing process of drawing on spirituality for healing. For example, Lila added energy healing practices to her counselling process to further enhance the experience. She talked about taking the realizations she had in counselling regarding limiting messages she'd received as a child that were still part of her current patterning and "holding them in the light." Lila used visualization and emotional focusing to connect with her felt sense of the joy of her spirit as she experienced her old beliefs. She found that adding this process to her counselling experience helped to dissolve old beliefs and reintegrate disparate memories into her larger spiritual identity.

Silke, on the other hand, developed an ability to trust in and benefit from counselling regardless of the skill of the counsellor. Through pursuing a class in basic counselling skills, she found that by approaching counselling as another means of being open to communication with spirit in everyday life, she always received the information she needed. Her groundedness in her own spiritual perception helped her to make positive use of whatever was coming her way, even when her counselling experience was with someone who was just beginning to learn basic listening skills.

### **On My Own**

The proactive approach to healing and development that participants adopted over time fostered independence and resilience. Many participants felt that they had arrived at a point in their journey where they could address most of challenges that arose fairly

easily on their own and no longer needed to seek healing services or support. Although participants who drew on counselling for healing continued to be open to seeking services if they felt the need, and continued to see counselling as a vehicle for healing, many were able to meet their needs through their own spiritual health and wellness practices, and through the support of peer networks and friends.

Silke, who had returned to counselling on several occasions and found it an important part of her journey to spiritual healing, exemplifies the self-efficacy that participants achieved in their ability to maintain balance and generate healing through their own practices. She explains:

I find counselling for me, at this point in my life, is the long way around. That means I've got to go and sort through a lot of things. I like it. I like sorting through things though. I like it when they make sense for me. But I find that things kind of have a way of making sense in hindsight anyways, when I reflect on things, which I do a lot anyways.

Silke, like other participants in this group enjoyed counselling as a healing process. However, she generally found that just by keeping up with meditation or drawing on one of the other practices she developed, issues were addressed as they arose and she was able to continue to grow and maintain a sense of well-being. Like other participants, she focused more energy on her spiritual practices when challenges arose and by the time she got around to thinking about whether she might want to go back to counselling, she had usually grown through whatever lessons were being presented. The ten participants not actively engaging in counselling at the time of the interview periodically checked in with a counsellor or healer they trusted or were open to drawing

on counselling or healing practitioners when a particularly significant challenge arose or they wanted to do a concentrated piece of work. For the most part, participants found that their own ongoing spiritual practice was effective in helping them maintain wellness and continue growing without the need for ongoing professional support.

### **Counselling is a Step on the Healing Path**

All of the study participants displayed generally positive attitudes towards counselling. Interestingly, despite their experience of its limitations, even participants whose experience of mainstream psychology had inspired them to move to other forms of healing expressed a generally positive and appreciative attitude towards counselling. Although this could perhaps be viewed as reflective of their inclination to view all experiences as contributing to their growth, participants expressed appreciation for receiving many specific benefits from their counselling experiences.

Participants tended to frame their reactions to counselling within the context of their own personal needs or experiences. Those who moved to other modalities appreciated counselling for its contribution to getting them started on a healing process, or helping them identify some of their needs and issues. Those who experienced counselling as making a critical contribution to their healing talked about the benefits of counselling as a spiritual healing tool. Participants even talked about the contribution of negative experiences to helping them realize that a particular technique didn't work for them, or that they needed to look for a different counsellor. Participants tended to appreciate the way that each step in their journey contributed to the learning they needed to take the next step.

Participants in general viewed every step towards healing as positive and life enhancing. Because of their own diverse needs and experiences, they acknowledged and



embraced the intention to heal and to facilitate or contribute to healing for others in whatever form. They understood that different people would have different needs and a different comfort zone, and that everyone's needs change as they develop. Participants celebrated the increasing diversity of options for healing that are now available, allowing people to choose the approach that best resonates with their needs. Mia, who moved from counselling to other modalities of healing, exemplifies participants' generally positive attitude towards all forms of counselling, whether mainstream or spiritually-infused. She says:

I really resonated with the energy healers, but that's not necessarily the path for everybody. Some people would probably be more comfortable in a counselling session because it's more familiar, and maybe putting them into an energy healing session would be inappropriate. ... It's like having all these choices available to people is important, for those that resonate more, that would release more through the energy work, I'm glad it's there now. For those people who would prefer to release on a, I guess a, some people really prefer a linear path or something that is more familiar. ... I'm just glad that there's a huge variety of tools to choose from.

Thus, whatever their personal experience with counselling, participants recognized and championed it as another step in the journey towards healing.

### **Summary**

The role that counselling played in participants' journeys of healing varied according to the participant and to the version of psychology to which they were exposed. Although all participants were supportive of counselling as a step towards healing, participants who experienced counselling as one dimensional, and most often cognitively

driven, and who experienced counsellors who were not able to relate to them on a spiritual level tended to move towards other spiritual practices for healing.

On the other hand, participants experienced counselling which was spiritually-infused as playing a critical role in their healing journeys. They described spiritually-infused counselling as radiating from the integration of a counsellor's personal healing and spiritual awareness with her professional skills and training. The practitioner's integration of spirituality was primarily reflected in recognizing and making a connection with participants at the spiritual level of being. Participants felt safe in sharing their concerns as a result of the presence and impersonal love these practitioners communicated by their way of being and relating. Practitioners who integrated spirituality at this level were open to discussing and effective in responding to spiritual issues and concerns both named and unnamed.

Although facilitative practitioners often integrated an array of experimental and traditional strategies, reflecting their holistic understanding of healing, participants learned from their ability to embody spiritual integration as much as they learned from the particular techniques a practitioner used or didn't use. Participants' experiences with these practitioners led them to reconnect with and continue to develop their spirituality as an integral part of the healing process. These counsellors helped participants develop skills and capacities on the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual levels which facilitated their overall healing and encouraged their ability to heal themselves and continue to grow in response to challenges over the long term.

### **Summary of the Results**

This study focused on inquiring into how people who are or have been counselling clients use spirituality as a resource for creating healing and promoting well-

being in their lives. The purposive sample of participants who responded to my call for stories identified spirituality as the foundation of their experiences of healing and wellness. Section one responds to the first research question, namely, what are people's stories of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness by introducing you to each of the 12 participants and capturing their unique stories of healing and growth.

Although each participant developed their own distinctive mix of beliefs and practices to create healing and wellness, many common themes emerged regarding the process and outcome of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness. Sections two to five detail the meta-narrative of content themes drawn from participants' individual experiences and respond to the primary research question above by describing their collective story of spiritual healing. Section two in particular provides an overview of the many common experiences and elements which led participants to draw on their spirituality to solve problems that seemed irresolvable by conventional means. Along the way, participants discovered or deepened into a very personal form of spirituality centred in their experience of the divine and their relationship to the divine.

Section three responds specifically to the second research question which asked how people draw on spirituality to create experiences of healing and wellness. This section details the seven step process that I have developed to reflect exactly how participants drew upon spirituality to create healing in a practical way in their day to day lives. By (1) being open; (2) shifting to a spiritual perspective; (3) going within; (4) connecting with spirit; (5) clearing through: (a) watching; (b) feeling; (c) accepting; (d) choosing and committing to drop the patterns they identified; (6) setting intentions; and (7) following their inner guidance, participants were able to free themselves of long-

standing physical and emotional illnesses and increase their sense of presence, peace, happiness and effectiveness in life.

Section four outlines participants' understanding and experience of healing and wellness. Participants identified healing with a sense of personal integration and progressive levels of acceptance that led not only to outward balance but to an inward realization of themselves as spirit itself. They saw wellness as a natural extension of the healing process requiring an attention to balance and a freedom from past and future that allowed for increased presence and a positive focus on their capacity to learn and contribute in the moment. Participants believed that the tremendous range of healings they experienced in body, mind, emotion, relationships, and soul ultimately emanated from their increasing awareness of and connection with their own spiritual centres.

Section five addresses the final research question regarding the role that counselling plays in the narratives of people who draw upon spirituality for healing. In general, participants described counselling as a vehicle for facilitating spiritual awareness, healing and transformation. Although a significant minority of participants left counselling they saw as being too intellectually focused in favor of pursuing spiritual healing modalities, the majority described the counselling they received as spiritually-infused, which they linked to its effectiveness in promoting their growth, development and healing. Participants attributed the loving presence and holism demonstrated by effective counsellors with their integration of spirituality and professional training, and with their own personal experience of healing.

This interpretation of the content of participants' narratives is further supported by themes identified in the secondary formal and literary analysis of participants'

narratives found in Appendix A. The formal analysis of participants' narratives served to reflect and reinforce major content themes, further highlighting participants' emphasis on experience as an arbitrator of knowledge, their conscious utilization of language as a vehicle for healing, and their demonstration of qualities they associated with spiritual growth throughout the storying of their narratives. The literary analysis of participants' stories in particular served to highlight both the novelty of their perspectives and the significance of their stories as stories of spiritual transformation and discovery.

As a whole, the results of this study suggest that some clients already conceptualize and experience counselling as a spiritual process and that a counsellor's ability to facilitate a client's connection with their spirituality may be a critical source of healing. It also suggests that spirituality can and does form the foundation of a path to healing that helps clients overcome significant physical and mental or emotional challenges in life through a process which very much mirrors and often utilizes counselling as a vehicle for healing. The results of this study have significant implications for our understanding of the link between spirituality, health and healing and for our understanding of the role of spirituality in counselling which will be explored in the discussion.

## **Chapter Five-Reflections on the Research Process**

Reflecting on the process of research and analysis is a key feature of the narrative paradigm (Arvey, 2002; Reissman, 2002). The researcher's reflection on the research process highlights interpretative opportunities missed and chosen, and helps them account for their role in creating the findings of the study. This chapter serves to summarize my reflections on the process of designing and carrying out the study and analyzing the resulting data, thereby situating the results you just reviewed within the context of the process through which they emerged.

The design and analysis of this study was challenging, rewarding, surprising and an invaluable learning experience every step of the way. Just as participants struggled with language in sharing their stories, I struggled with language in designing the research questions and framing the research process in a way that would create the broadest possible conceptual field against which participants' experiences might emerge. My insider/outsider position in the new discourse on spirituality and the professional discourse of psychology created particular advantages and posed specific challenges. This dual positioning certainly had an impact on shaping the information that emerged from the research process which I've tried to account for through the reflexivity of the research design. The ease of recruiting participants, and many of the findings that emerged from both the research and analytic process were surprising, and pointed to the particular value and power of narrative research in investigating spirituality and healing. In addition, the process of implementing the study and analyzing and representing the results led me to learn more about the particular strengths and contributions of narrative research in general.

## **Linguistic and Conceptual Challenges**

The conceptualization of the study and its findings was a challenge from the start to the finish of the research process. I struggled initially with finding the language to frame the research questions in a way that captured spirituality precisely yet encompassed a broad range of traditional and non-traditional experiences and conceptualizations of spirituality, and also of healing and wellness. Because their conceptualizations of their experiences formed an intrinsic part of the investigation, I actively engaged participants as collaborators in commenting on, rejecting, reframing or adapting the language of the research questions. Neither my struggle with language, nor their struggle with language, nor our collaborative efforts resulted in a more precise wording of the questions. It did, however, mean that we spent a considerable amount of time discussing issues of language and conceptualization, which I believe added to the depth of information that emerged from our discussions. Certainly, my attention to languaging the questions was effective in creating a framework which attracted a broad variety of study participants whose practices sometimes reflected, incorporated and most often superseded traditional frameworks.

Conceptual issues also played an important role in the data analysis. Each level of analysis from the content analysis of participants' own stories, to the comparative analysis of content themes across narratives, to the formal and literary analysis of the individual stories, to the comparison of formal and literary themes across narratives added an additional level of complexity. The content analysis involved an iterative process of moving from a participant's individual experience to the larger narrative reflecting common themes and back again until all of the elements aligned and could be understood from either perspective. The codes and categories emerged naturally from the

initial review of participants' stories which helped me stay close to their language and conceptualization, facilitating the subsequent emergence and identification of formal and literary themes. Formal and literary themes were often initially coded as they emerged in the content analysis and then were developed and elaborated through a dedicated formal and literary review and a similarly iterative comparison of the individual narratives and the meta-narrative. Each subsequent layer of analysis added new themes, shed new light on existing themes and served to add to an understanding of the whole.

### **Insider/Outsider Positioning**

My dual role as an insider /outsider in the new discourse on spirituality and the discourse of professional psychology created certain advantages and introduced certain challenges. My own interest in spirituality and experience in drawing on a broad range of spiritual practices and spiritual and religious traditions created a base of shared interests and perspectives that facilitated the process of building rapport with participants and provided me with the familiarity needed to interpret their stories. This interpersonal rapport and mutual understanding in turn facilitated the co-creation of particularly rich narratives, contributing to the depth of information regarding drawing on spirituality for healing that emerged from the study.

At the same time, the sense of connection and mutual understanding that I shared with participants made it more challenging to investigate alternative views and visions of participants' narratives. I followed my supervisors' and committee members' suggestions in writing my own story of spirituality and healing and in journaling my own ideas about what I might find to help me be aware of my biases so that I could expand my vision and look for other angles or routes of investigation. I kept field and process notes to help capture questions and new ideas or conceptualizations as they emerged to further



encourage the generation of alternative interpretations and viewpoints. Certainly, I solicited participants' feedback on the interview process and used the reflective period in each interview to look for areas where I might be misinterpreting or overlooking a part of their story, as well as to create and confirm my understanding of their story as it developed. Nevertheless, my insider position led me to choose and follow a research question that focused in particular on understanding how participants drew on spirituality for healing and on the role that counselling played in that process. It would take a second study to fully investigate people's experiences of the limitations of drawing on spirituality for healing or to fully engage a critical as opposed to an exploratory reading of participants' narratives.

### **Finding Surprises**

Despite the limitations inherent in the purpose and framework of the study as a result of my positioning within and betwixt discourses, there were many surprises in the findings that emerged from the research and analytic process. To begin with, I was surprised by how easily and quickly I located participants. Although the statistics show that the majority of people who seek mental health intervention or are hospitalized for physical health problems draw on spirituality as a resource (Larsen & Larsen, 2003), I didn't want to narrow my population by drawing on participants with an identified health problem or with a specific spiritual or religious orientation.

Instead, I wanted to draw a purposive sample of people with diverse orientations who are undergoing or who have sought counselling for a broad spectrum of issues from the general population. As a result, I wasn't sure how many people might identify with and respond to a call for participants circulated largely through educational networks and casual social contacts. Yet, I had more than enough people who fit my criteria and were

interested in sharing their stories within a month of beginning to circulate flyers.

According to participants, the ease with which I collected my sample reflects the timeliness of the topic as an issue people are interested in exploring and also, in my view, the accessibility and familiarity of storytelling as a popular means of communicating information in our society in general, and of communicating spiritual information in particular.

There were also many surprises in the process of analyzing the narratives. In the content analysis I was struck by the actual number of common themes among narratives from individuals with very different backgrounds, problems and practices. The similarities in the process of drawing upon spirituality for healing that they described far outweighed the differences in their experiences. This was all the more surprising given their emphasis on the necessity of developing one's personal relationship with the divine within as a guide to facilitate healing. Although the particular content and the nature of each person's problems, challenges, beliefs, experiences and spiritual practices differed radically, the path they took to healing through spirituality was strikingly similar.

Specific surprises in the content area included the both/and description of spirituality that emerged from participants' experience of spirituality as an intrinsic part of the self and as a resource they drew upon through specific ideas or practices to create healing. This finding seems to suggest that new views and uses of spirituality have encompassed and superceded rather than opposed prior views in a binary way. Similarly, the sense that emerged that healing ultimately occurred as a result of spiritual transformation, and the many levels of transformation participants experienced, was unexpected and conceptually challenging to understand and represent. I must confess to

lapsing into the traditional psychological /scientific search for somewhat discrete and linear explanations to complex processes that Sigrid challenged me to transcend during our interview (p. 222). Thus, my conceptual struggle extended to trying to find the language to describe experiences that encompassed concepts we normally think of as binary opposites such as spirit being inside and outside at the same time. I also struggled with finding words to communicate participants' experience of distinct dimensions of themselves, or of an event, operating on different yet interconnected levels at the same time, such as being the spirituality that you also then draw upon.

Conducting a complementary formal analysis further helped new conceptualizations emerge that I hadn't previously anticipated. The extent to which participants' use of language and description of their experience supported, reflected and actually demonstrated content themes was a striking surprise. The fact that participants displayed many of the qualities and attitudes they talked about in connection with the healing transformation they had experienced in the way they told their stories provided a vivid example of the content themes. A formal analysis further revealed that participants consciously worked with, changed and chose language to shift their perceptions and experiences as part of their process of healing. The integral role that language and conceptualization played in their process of healing, and their actual application of the skills and perspectives they talked about acquiring through the process of healing were important dimensions of their experience that emerged through the formal analysis. Formal themes functioned to support, enhance and provide new information on participants' experiences.

In addition, a literary analysis also functioned to highlight the novelty and significance of participants' experiences and reveal more about how those experiences were constructed. I was similarly struck by the degree to which participants' narratives adhered to a common form. Although there was great variation in their individual experiences, their stories shared similar characterizations of the hero, the journey, the triumphs, the struggles, and an ongoing sense of positive spiritual unfolding and emergence set against the back drop of the difficulties they originally faced. A literary analysis of their narratives provided more information on how participants' conscious attention to conceptualizing their experience translated into images and plotlines that created their experiences as epic stories of triumph, return and realization. Setting their stories against the context of the Western literary tradition further highlighted the theme of transformation that emerged in earlier analyses, this time through their common creation of new characterizations of the hero and their post modernization of Homer's plot and cosmology. In this way, a basic literary analysis of their stories served to highlight the nature, novelty and significance of their stories as epics of spiritual transformation, emergence and healing.

### **The Value of the Narrative Approach**

The process of analysis also led to reflection on and new learning about the value of narrative methodology in investigating spirituality and healing. The formal and literary analysis led me to uncover dimensions of participants' use of language and the process of conceptualization itself in creating healing that contributed significantly to the depth of understanding that the study offers regarding how participants drew upon spirituality to create healing. The narrative method is one of a handful of postmodern or poststructuralist qualitative methods to include tools for understanding the construction of

experience at various levels of complexity including content, formal, and literary analyses. As a result of the multiple layers of analysis it offers, the narrative method was particularly powerful in capturing information in an area such as spirituality, healing and counselling that is conceptual in nature, and in responding to the process oriented research questions I framed. A method which focused on content alone would not have been able to produce the detailed conceptual map of participants' experiences that emerged from this study.

The process of analysis also highlighted the boundaries of narrative research. The attention that the narrative method assigns to language and conceptual processes through various levels of analysis helped to highlight participants' struggle to language their experience and my struggle to frame the study. The use of a narrative approach in this way underlined the importance of language in creating and communicating experience. This realization is a fundamental tenet of the social constructivist epistemology that underlies narrative research (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Throughout the study, I experienced a sense of the elusiveness of the experiences participants literally could not express because they could not find the words. It was as though the experiences were right there in the room with us, but neither they nor I could quite grasp and express their full meaning and flavour. Participants' struggle to language their experiences conveys the cutting edge nature of their experiences in that there is as yet no language for them. They are beyond ordinary linguistic and conceptual boundaries. It also conveys the limits of narrative research in capturing experiences that are beyond linguistic conceptualization. By tracing the boundaries of narrative research, the study further adds to our

understanding of the limits of narrative research by pointing to the fact that there are ineffable experiences that cannot currently be fully articulated.

Finally, I found that the narrative method creates an effective process for generating relevant and credible findings. Because the narrative model acknowledges the researchers' impact on the findings and challenges the subject/object dichotomy that forms part of the traditional perspective of positive epistemology, I felt an additional sense of responsibility in making my contribution to the project visible and accounting for my findings. In addition, the epistemological underpinnings of the methodology, the personal nature of the interaction with participants who are sharing intimate and meaningful stories, and my own location in an insider /outsider position also added a sense of pressure to produce a manuscript that accurately represented the stories and experiences participants had entrusted to me.

Different narrative researchers approach these challenges in different ways. I chose to incorporate suggestions for involving participants as collaborators in the research process from the conceptualization to the representation stage, but stopped short of engaging them in writing and analyzing their own stories. Looking back on the process, I recognize that the time I spent engaging participants in examining the questions and the process, reflecting on their stories, and providing feedback on their narratives was invaluable in terms of generating much broader and richer findings that I would have generated with a less collaborative process. I found this approach to narrative research to be a manageable compromise, allowing a broad range of participants access to participating in the research process according to their time and interest, while still engaging them as collaborators in the process in a significant and meaningful way. I also

found that my incorporation of reflexivity through engaging participants in the research process in these ways was essential for developing and checking on my interpretation and representation of their stories and the themes emerging from them.

### **Summary**

In summary, the dynamic nature of narrative research as a co-created and evolving process extended from this project's initial conceptualization through to its final representation. As a researcher, I started learning about spirituality and healing from my own initial struggles to frame the questions in a way that could target the experience I was interested in exploring but include the experiences and conceptualizations of a broad variety of participants. By inviting participants to reflect upon the framework of the study and its questions, I opened up a collaborative dialogue that helped to expand my conceptual framework and enrich the findings. My insider /outsider position provided unique access to information on people's experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing, while advantaging the questions that both participants and I were most interested in exploring limited my exposure to other types of information.

The multilayered process of narrative research and analysis proved to be particularly effective in revealing various dimensions of participants' constructions of their experiences of spirituality and healing. The nature of the area and the study itself further pointed to both the particular strengths and values of narrative research in investigating spirituality and healing as well as tracing its edges as a methodology. The rich conceptualizations that emerged from this study further underline the value of involving participants in the research process while also suggesting that effective collaboration can occur with a limited commitment of time and resources on their part. Finally, the incorporation of participants' feedback as a means of reflexivity is one of the

strengths of narrative research, ensuring credible results that are accessible and applicable in real world contexts.



## **Chapter Six-Discussion**

This chapter explores the relationship between the current study's results and existing knowledge in the field. I will begin by discussing how participants' conceptualizations of the major concepts of spirituality, healing and wellness reflect the literature, setting the current findings in context. Next, I will review how participant experiences reflect the framework of the new discourse on spirituality helping the reader assess the validity of this framework for investigation. Then, I will focus on the first major research question and examine the extent to which participants' stories of spiritual healing relate to the themes and experiences detailed in the literature. This is followed by a consideration of the second research question where I will assess how the process participants described of drawing on spirituality for healing compares to our existing frameworks and empirical findings. Then, I will review how the themes identified in relationship to the third research question reflect and inform our current understanding of the relationship between spirituality and counselling. The final section presents an assessment of the contributions and limitations of the study and offers recommendations for future research, clinical practice and counsellor education which are based on the results obtained. Each section of the discussion will address the extent to which the current results reflect, differ from or add to current findings and frameworks identified in the literature.

### **Overview**

Participant experiences are profoundly reflective of previous findings regarding the relationship between spirituality, health, healing and wellness. They are also reflective of emerging theory and findings on the potential value of spiritual exploration

as a path towards healing and as an integral dimension of effective counselling experiences. By starting from the postmodern perspective of the new discourse on spirituality, the study was able to capture and reflect the continuum of both traditional and emerging experiences of spirituality and healing that have been obscured in studies using a more traditional framework for understanding spiritual experiences. In addition, the narrative methodology used provides an in-depth view of the way that participants conceptualized and created their experiences of healing and wellness. As a result, the current study not only reflects but serves to add significantly to our understanding of the major common elements involved in drawing on spirituality for healing, as well as contributing new information on clients' perspectives on the role and importance of spirituality in the counselling process.

### **Major Concepts and Definitions**

#### **Spirituality**

Participants' views and understandings of spirituality reflect and are in-keeping with the major themes regarding spirituality in the existing empirical literature (Sutcliffe, 2003; Freshman, 1999; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Namely participants affirmed spirituality as a uniquely personal, lived experience of the divine and their relationship to it, however they conceptualized the divine. Participants viewed spirituality as a broad-based concept that could encompass experiences both within and outside of a traditional religious framework. They associated spirituality with responding to ultimate concerns such as illness, death, loss, happiness, growth, and meaning in life. They also associated it with such values and experiences as love, transcendence, acceptance, integrity, truth, compassion, passion, connection, peace, growth and expansion. Thus, participants' conceptualizations of spirituality reflect the breadth and

essence of the term as it has been identified in the empirical literature. In addition, participants' understanding of spirituality as a highly individualized phenomenon further underlines the importance of using a broad theoretical framework in research endeavors to capture the range of experiences of spirituality that reflect the current postmodern landscape of spiritual experience.

### **Healing**

Participants' understanding of healing reflects the concept of an emergent process which encompasses recovery, repair, renewal and transformation and which may or may not include curing. (Jonas & Chez, 2004). However, participants extended the definition in the literature to include the ideas of integration and acceptance as important aspects of healing. Participants identified healing with an experience of wholeness or integration. They described healing as bringing each part of the self into balance or alignment allowing for a progressively deeper sense of opening to and accepting the self and a deeper sense of opening to spirit within. The process of healing encompassed a transformation of the self and of one's experience that created a new spiritual awareness of the self and of one's connection to others. This transformation was accomplished through and was concomitant with a progressive acceptance of one's experiences, of the self, and ultimately of spirit within the self and in the world at large. Participants described an ongoing sense of well-being as arising naturally from the process of healing that they associated with various qualities such as calm, balance, peace, love and amusement.

### **Wellness**

Similarly, participants' understanding of wellness reflected and extended Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky's (2003) definition of practices which support but reach

beyond basic health to enhance physical, mental, social and spiritual resources and experiences. Participants saw wellness as a natural extension of healing and associated it with being fully present and able to respond to and balance their mental, physical, emotional and spiritual needs in the moment in order to maintain an ongoing sense of well-being. They also described wellness as extending to experiences of self-actualization, optimal functioning and generativity in terms of giving to others or making a positive contribution to society. Although most participants associated wellness with health and well-being, they also believed that wellness included the capacity to continue to live fully in the face of experiences of ill health, grief, loss or trauma. In this way, participants believed that it was possible to experience sub-optimal health in one area of life and remain well and healthy in one's response to one's circumstances. This understanding brings us back around to Jonas & Chez's (2004) idea of healing which leaves room for the possibility of healing and wellness in the absence of an effective cure to disease.

Participants believed that healing and wellness were both simultaneous and continuous processes. Many participants viewed themselves as continuously healing on various levels even as they were experiencing and maintaining ongoing well-being through being present and balancing their needs and activities. Thus healing and wellness appear to be developmental processes that continue to evolve and support one another even after a satisfactory level of well-being has been achieved. For example, participants suggested that the more that one's limiting beliefs are healed in a certain area, the more freedom and integration one experiences, the more continued expansion is possible and

the more sophisticated one gets about what is needed to maintain and continue to improve health and well-being in all areas.

Participants' experiences then are consistent with and reflect the major themes identified in the empirical literature regarding spirituality. They similarly reflect but also extend definitions of healing and wellness in the existing literature indicating that the study succeeds in both reflecting and in some cases adding to an understanding of the major constructs of spirituality, healing and wellness as they are defined in the field.

### **The New Discourse on Spirituality**

This is one of the first psychological studies to introduce the new discourse on spirituality as a framework for understanding postmodern spiritual experience (Granqvist, & Hagekull, 2001). Participants' experiences are broadly reflective of the seven major themes identified as central to the new discourse on spirituality across religious and non-religious forms of spirituality. These seven themes include: an individualistic approach to spirituality; the primacy of felt experience; functional spirituality; a central focus on healing; a holistic worldview and understanding of healing; syncretism; and a psychological understanding of spirituality.

Participants emphasized the importance of a unique and personal relationship with the divine as the centre of their spirituality, and defined the divine in a variety of ways reflecting the individual authority of the new discourse (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003). Participants regarded felt experience and intuition as central forms of knowledge, and as primary guides in their spiritual, and eventually, their material lives (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003). Participants drew on their spirituality to create a variety of experiences, initially focusing on healing but eventually leading to desired work, relationship or

personal experiences, reflecting the new discourse's emphasis on the function of spirituality in every day life (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003).

Healing appeared as a central theme in participants' stories. They regarded healing as ongoing and as contiguous with personal development, signaling the central preoccupation of the new discourse on spirituality (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003).

Participants' clearly adopted a holistic approach to healing and to spirituality, recognizing external events as mirrors of their internal consciousness or messages from spirit, and advocating for an awareness of the interconnection of mind, body, emotion and spirit as essential to healing (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003).

Participants' stories also reflect their development of a highly individualized spirituality, syncretizing elements from disparate sources, periods and traditions (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003). Participants talked about combining lessons from religious texts of varying periods and traditions, alternative therapies, and healing experiences together to form their own unique understanding of spirituality and their own spiritual practices. Even participants whose experience of spirituality generally adhered to the framework of a particular tradition tended to integrate previous experiences or elements of other traditions into their framework and practices.

Finally, psychology was clearly central to participants' spirituality in that they viewed the process of clearing patterns of thought, feeling, experience and behaviour as integral to their healing and development. While participants moved away from traditional psychological models and services, the concept of clearing remained central to their healing practices. In addition, the majority of participants regarded counselling as a

spiritual process and used it as one among many vehicles for their healing, testifying to the psychological nature of their understanding of spirituality.

Participants' experiences do not simply reflect, but also clarify and add to the new discourse on spirituality in some areas. For example, the new discourse emphasizes the functional use of spirituality as an experiential tool for making things happen in one's life in contrast to a more traditional understanding of spirituality as an experience of the divine, valuable for its own sake (Hunt, 2003). Participants introduced a both/and vision of spirituality. Although they drew on their spirituality to create new experiences in practical ways, they also simultaneously emphasized spirituality as an integral part of their identity. Participants' views of spirituality transcended this instrumental/essential dichotomy to suggest an integral vision of spirituality that represents a transcendence and extension of traditional models rather than an opposition or destruction of traditional approaches to spirituality.

Thus, participants' experiences are both reflective of the major themes of the new discourse on spirituality as well as further clarifying and developing this framework. Participants' narratives reflect all of the major themes of the new discourse on spirituality including: individualism, an emphasis on felt experience, functionality, a focus on healing, holism, syncretism, and a psychological understanding of spirituality regardless of whether, and to what extent, they drew on religious or non-religious frameworks for their spirituality. The broad range of experiences reflected in the study testify to the effectiveness of the new discourse on spirituality as a framework for capturing diverse spiritual experiences in keeping with the postmodern landscape of Western culture and society. Participants' experiences also clarify and develop the new discourse on

spirituality as a framework which transcends yet integrates the essence of traditional approaches to spirituality with new visions, capturing the central elements of a very broad range of spiritual practices, and building a new and more expansive framework for creating, understanding, and investigating spirituality and healing.

### **Participants' Stories: The Journey of Spiritual Healing**

#### **The Study Reflects the Literature**

Participants' stories are broadly reflective of the major themes identified in the literature on spirituality, health and healing. The literature documents the fact that people who face physical and mental health challenges, frequently turn to spirituality for assistance with coping (Koenig, 1997; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Pargament & Brant, 1998). Although some participants in both the literature and the study already had an active connection to their spirituality when they experienced illness or trauma, others did not (Baesler et al., 2003). The reality of experiencing an overwhelming event or facing a challenge so significant that it took them to the limits of their ordinary coping resources, and often to the limits of available medical, psychological, interpersonal and legal intervention, prompted participants in current study and participants in the literature alike to turn to spirituality to help them understand and develop new resources for meeting the challenges they faced (Pargament & Brandt, 1998).

Participants in the literature and participants in the current study drew on their spirituality to assist them with a broad variety of conditions ranging from coming to terms with grief and the loss of a loved one, mental health concerns such as addiction, depression, anxiety and panic attacks, and physical health problems including cancer, skin problems and other forms of physical illness (Kabat-Zin et al., 1998; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Mueller et al., 2001). Thus, the current study confirms that a broad cross-



section of people who are facing life threatening or profoundly life altering events may find comfort, assistance and even transformation in exploring their spirituality as a resource, whether or not they already have a sense of spiritual connection in place when illness or trauma strike.

Participants in the current study and participants in the literature described a similar experience of spirituality and drew on many of the same practices to develop their spirituality. Participants in both contexts saw their relationship with god or spirit as the pivotal element of their spirituality and expressed a profound felt connection to and experience of the divine as a primary source of acceptance, love, support and guidance (Chiu et al., 2005; Baesler et al., 2003; Gall & Cornblat, 2002). Participants in the current study engaged in many of the same practices as participants in the literature including prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, consulting with a spiritual leader, and occasionally attending services to continue to deepen, express and experience a sustaining relationship with the divine (Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Pargament & Brant, 1998; Somlai et al., 2000).

The quantitative literature suggests that at least a third of the population have spiritual experiences such as feeling the presence of god, receiving visions of a departed loved one, or communing with a spiritual presence, whether that may be a deceased ancestor or a loved one, an angel, or nature perceived from a spiritual perspective (Bibby, 2002; West, 2000). The qualitative literature further reflects that people who draw on spirituality view these experiences ranging from the supernatural to every day experiences of synchronicity as messages from the divine that promote their psychosocial adjustment, coping and healing (Richards & Folkman, 1997; Watt, 2003).

Similarly, while approximately a third of study participants had extraordinary spiritual experiences including visions of absent loved ones that they could interact with or a sense of communing with a spiritual presence, every participant routinely experienced day to day spiritual experiences that included instances of synchronicity, or suddenly receiving an answer, or a sense of guidance or comfort in response to previously puzzling dilemmas. Participants clearly saw their spiritual experiences as communications from spirit which provided reassurance and direction along the road to healing.

Research respondents in both the quantitative and qualitative literature identified spirituality as central to their ability to cope and to experience healing (Chiu et al., 2005; Baesler et al., 2003; Gall & Cornblat, 2002). Participants in the literature employed a broad range of conventional and/or alternative treatments to address the symptoms they were experiencing in addition to spiritual beliefs and strategies. Regardless of the treatments they employed, they viewed their healing as emanating from their relationship with the divine however they conceptualized that relationship (Chiu et al., 2005; Baesler et al., 2003; Gall & Cornblat, 2002). Thus, they attributed their ability to respond positively to their circumstances, to locate and pursue particular treatments, the efficacy of their treatments, and the support and assistance they received to their ever deepening faith and their spiritual practices, or regarded these abilities and events as evidence of divine care (Chiu et al., 2005; Baesler et al., 2003).

Similarly, participants in the current study believed that their spirituality was central to the healing process and frequently stated that they could not have healed without having developed their spirituality or their relationship with the divine both

within and without. Participants in the current study are reflective of links drawn in the literature in that they also practiced positive health behaviours including not smoking, moderate drinking or abstinence, regular exercise, attention to nutrition, and seeking both conventional and alternative health treatments to maintain their wellness (Chiu et al., 2005; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Townsend et al., 2002). Because participants believed in holism, viewing the mind, body, spirit and emotions as interconnected from a spiritual perspective, they described their health behaviours as part and parcel of maintaining their spirituality and an overall sense of well-being. Thus, like participants in the qualitative literature (i.e., Chiu et al., 2005; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Hall, 2004) they ultimately attributed their healing to their relationship with spirit, viewing this relationship and its development as the nexus point of their healing.

The qualitative and quantitative literature as a whole and the results of the current study suggest that turning to spirituality for coping and healing is not only a natural, preferred and an intrinsically rewarding means of responding to serious illness, trauma and mental and emotional disorders, but also an effective one. The literature documents that positive spiritual coping, a strong faith, and spiritual involvement is related to a reduction in or alleviation of symptoms and positive health outcomes for a broad variety of conditions (Koenig, 1997; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; McCullough et al., 2000; Mueller et al., 2001; Townsend et al., 2002). Specific spiritual practices or "treatments" including meditation, intercessory prayer or pursuing a spiritual treatment program such as AA for alcoholics has also been demonstrated to positively impact a broad range of physical and mental health variables and encourage pro-social behaviour (Harris et al., 1999; Freeman, 2001; Krebs, 2003).

Similarly, participants in the current study credited their spiritual exploration and development with healing the original physical and mental health concerns that drove them to investigate their spirituality. Like participants in the above literature, participants in the current study experienced dramatic positive shifts including: skin clearing, becoming cancer free, recovery from traumatic brain injury, freedom from drug addiction, depression and panic attacks and the successful resolution and healing of traumatic losses. The experiences of participants in the current study thus confirm and exemplify the fact that spirituality provides a powerful resource in coping with and healing from a broad range of the mental and physical health problems that people experience.

Although participants initially started out on a journey of healing regarding a specific challenge, they invariably found themselves on a much broader journey towards healing and transformation in every area of their lives. Through their process of drawing on spirituality, participants in the literature and participants in the study came to regard illness, disability or trauma as a doorway to personal healing and growth (Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Faull et al., 2004; Parappully et al., 2002). Participants' experiences are reflective of qualitative literature which suggests that drawing on spirituality in the face of crisis is not only normative but ultimately transformative (Albaugh, 2003; Faull et al., 2004; Parappully et al., 2002). Like people in the literature (Albaugh, 2003; Faull et al., 2004; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Parappully et al., 2002), participants in the current study not only reduced their emotional distress and gained a sense of internal strength, comfort and hope from drawing upon their spirituality, they also started to change other areas of their lives for the better. They re-evaluated how they were living, where they were

spending their time, addressed longstanding issues, improved their relationships, and reached out to their communities. Participants in the study mirror participants in the qualitative literature in describing themselves as becoming more accepting, more compassionate, more empathic, more resilient, as gaining more trust in life and in their spirituality, and as more fully appreciating and enjoying their daily experience of life whatever their circumstances (Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Faull et al., 2004; Parappully et al., 2002).

The personal transformation noted in the literature was so significant for some that they came to view life-threatening illnesses as a blessing (Gall & Cornblat, 2002). Although profoundly impacted by grief, participants in the literature and in the study were eventually able to begin to see the gifts available in their experiences of losing loved ones, abilities or dearly held ideals (Parappully et al., 2002). Ultimately, they felt that they actualized their potential in the face of initially overwhelming challenges, revitalizing dreams that were cast aside and values that were overshadowed by daily living, and moved towards fully embracing and creating the lives they really wanted to live (Albaugh, 2003; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Parappully et al., 2002).

The changes participants in the literature and in the study experienced not only improved their internal experience of life and their external circumstances vis à vis the problems they faced, but also had the effect of promoting pro-social behaviour as participants increasingly took action to reach out to others and take responsibility for addressing a range of social issues in their community (Faull et al., 2004; Hall, 2003; Parappully et al., 2002). These findings point to the power of spirituality not only to

facilitate coping and healing but also to help people actualize their potential and create increasingly satisfying, meaningful and generative lives.

### **The Study Differs From the Literature**

Although the current study generally reflects established findings regarding spirituality and healing there are a number of areas where the current findings differ from the literature. The most common spiritual coping and connecting strategy cited in the literature was prayer (Larson & Larson, 2003; Pargament & Brandt, 1998). Participants in the literature generally practiced active prayer including prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, confession and especially supplicatory or petitionary prayers requesting either general or specific forms of help and healing (Baesler et al., 2003; Gall & Cornblatt, 2002).

In contrast, one of the most common and significant spiritual practices in the present study was meditation, also sometimes framed as receptive prayer in the literature (Baesler et al., 2003). The focus in receptive prayer and in many forms of meditation is on communing with and listening to one's spiritual source (Baesler et al., 2003). Certainly, participants in the current study emphasized listening to and connecting with spirit within as fundamental to their practice, most often through meditation, but also through prayer. In explaining the low incidence of receptive prayer in their study, Baesler et al. (2003) suggest that receptive prayer has been linked to mature spiritual practice in the literature. As a third of their sample had only recently initiated a spiritual connection through prayer, they speculated that the low incidence of receptive prayer was reflective of the novelty of many participants' spiritual practice. My participants' focus on meditation or receptive prayer as a spiritual tool may therefore indicate that the population I studied had a preponderance of mature practitioners. This is consistent with

the fact that most participants had generally been involved in spiritual practice and development for 9 or more years at the time of the interview. Thus, the novel findings that emerge from this study regarding spirituality and healing may reflect the additional benefits of longer-term spiritual practice.

The literature also demonstrates an interest in gaining spiritual support through intercessory prayer and attendance at religious services (Argyle, 2002; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Hall, 2003; Harris et al., 1999; Pargament & Brandt, 1998). While many of the participants in my study evidenced a common shift towards more profoundly valuing their relationships with others as a source of spiritual support and deliberately sought the spiritual support of like-minded people, they identified their spirituality primarily as rooted within the self and within their own spiritual practices. With the exception of the two participants most connected to established religious organizations, intercessory prayer did not appear to play a large role in participants' spiritual practices. Although some participants attended religious services either occasionally or regularly ( $n=4$ ), the majority did not attend formal religious services but found spiritual support in diverse places from meditation groups, workshops and training events to spiritual discussion circles.

Participants in the current study mirror participants in the literature in using spiritually-oriented reading as one means of exploring and taping into their spirituality. However, the spiritual reading cited in existing studies generally refers to scriptural reading which connects people with a given tradition (Albaugh, 2003; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). By contrast, participants in the current study actually developed their own unique interweave of spiritual ideas and concepts through broadly

based reading in world religious traditions, and also in occult, metaphysical or "new age" literature, in addition to reading within a particular tradition. Some existing studies are vague about their definition of spiritual reading making it difficult to understand the extent to which participants' experiences are more generally reflective of the broader population of people drawing on spirituality for healing. Attending spiritually-oriented classes and workshops is another common aspect of the current study participants' spiritual exploration and development that is not mentioned in the existing literature.

The literature generally reflects the experience of participants who are drawing on established religious traditions for spiritual support and expression (Wulff, 2003). Existing studies rarely provide information on how participants became affiliated with their current traditions of choice. Most often participants in the current study actively rejected or discontinued the specific spiritual traditions they were raised within, or acclimatized to in their youth, adopting a new tradition within or outside of the same general framework (i.e., Christianity). It was even more common for participants in the current study to develop their own unique spiritual practice through interweaving themes or elements in received traditions with themes and practices garnered through their own reading and spiritual exploration.

Although the experience of participants in the study is broadly reflective of the major themes related to spirituality and healing in the literature, participants in the current study do differ in some regards. The current study's participants differ from reports in the existing literature mainly with regard to their emphasis on the specific spiritual practices that were central to developing their relationship with spirit and their emphasis on constructing their own unique and internally referenced approach to spirituality. The



literature suggests that these differences may reflect the duration and maturity of their spiritual practice and development.

Differences in participants' experiences may also reflect the expansiveness of the new discourse on spirituality as a framework for capturing the broad diversity of experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing within and outside of traditional religious contexts. Using the new discourse as a framework may have made it possible to capture participants with more diverse experiences of spirituality, expanding our actual knowledge of the population of people who draw upon spirituality for healing. In addition, the narrative framework of the current study may have provided more detailed information regarding people's paths to and experiences with spirituality and healing than the positivist framework underlying many previous studies, including qualitative efforts. It is therefore difficult to determine the extent to which differences in the current findings reflect any actual divergence from the population captured by existing studies, or simply reflect an additional layer of information in the area that may mirror common experiences, particularly amongst those with a mature spiritual practice in the population.

### **Spirituality and the Process of Healing**

#### **The Study Confirms and Adds Significantly to the Existing Literature**

The narratives of participants in the current study not only reflect all of the major themes regarding spirituality and healing in the literature, they also add significant detail to the more general descriptions of drawing on spirituality reflected in the literature, and bring previously identified and novel themes together to form a comprehensive, common process that details the steps participants took to draw upon spirituality for healing.

Participants described a seven step process to their journey from being initially overwhelmed by the crises they faced to healing and wellness. These steps included: (1)

being open; (2) shifting to a spiritual perspective; (3) going within; (4) connecting with spirit, (5) clearing; (6) setting intentions; and (7) following their inner guidance. Despite their diversity in spiritual and religious orientation, and their belief in the necessity of developing one's own unique spiritual relationship with the divine, participants' experiences by far reflect more common than disparate elements in terms of the process they went through to create healing and wellness, and to self-actualize through their spirituality. Although this process reflects elements previously identified in the literature, participants' description of the process as a whole is a unique addition to the literature to date.

In the previous section, we saw that participants in the study mirrored the experience of participants in the literature by turning to spirituality in the face of illness and tragedy. The literature reveals that the occurrence of illness and tragedy frequently sparks difficulties in coping such as depression and may inspire a spiritual crisis (Larsen & Larsen, 2003, Pargament & Brandt, 1998; Pargament et al., 2004). On the other hand, the literature that we've reviewed clearly suggests that people can and do cope effectively with illness and tragedy by further developing their spirituality and are able to transform their overall quality of life (Faull et al., 2004; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Parappully, et al., 2002). Participant narratives add to the literature by suggesting one explanation for this discrepancy. Participants described their willingness to surrender to the reality of the event and its impact and to let go of their existing frameworks of understanding as a first step on the path to healing (step 1). Participants talked about becoming truly open to embracing new ways of being and to growing in response to illness or tragedy as the key to unlocking the process of healing.

Participant observations reflect and further clarify existing findings in this regard. Pargament & Brandt (1998) demonstrate that people who see their illness as part of the will of the divine report better coping. Appraising a tragic occurrence as part of the will and under the control of a loving god represents surrendering to the event and letting go of a framework which suggests that it is bad or wrong, embracing instead a willingness to grow through and find the positives in painful circumstances. Pargament & Brandt's (1998) writing demonstrates the importance of this concept within a traditional religious context and participants in the current study confirm and explain the principle behind the observation as it applies to spiritual healing from a broader perspective embracing both religious and non-religious spiritual frameworks.

The second step that participants described in the process of healing is shifting to a spiritual perspective (step 2). Pargament & Brandt (1998) argue that spirituality assists people in coping by serving as an important part of their general orienting system, helping them make meaning of and respond to difficult events. Similarly, in shifting to a spiritual perspective on the issues they faced, participants necessarily started to see and interpret all of their experience through the spiritual concepts and frameworks they were gradually acquiring. This increased openness led in turn to their perception of new spiritual meanings in everyday events. They began to see the results of the spiritual concepts they experimented with in their lives, and to find affirmation for new beliefs in spiritual experiences ranging from everyday synchronicity to supernatural spiritual experiences. Through shifting to a spiritual perception ordinary life events acquired new significance and they began to view their lives as an ongoing dialogue with spirit in the world.

Participant experiences further reflect Pargament's (Pargament & Brant, 1998; Pargament et al., 2004) findings on effective spiritual coping in that the shift participants described involved seeing themselves as being loved and supported by the divine and working collaboratively with the divine to address their issues. The shift in belief and perspective that participants avowed is diametrically opposed to negative and harmful spiritual coping strategies such as seeing their illness as an instance of punishment by the divine. Thus, participant narratives further confirm the efficacy of positive spiritual coping strategies already identified in the literature.

Participant narratives further extend Pargament and Brant's (1998) work in suggesting that their spirituality not only formed an important part of their orienting system, but that it indeed became their general orienting system. Participants suggested that shifting their framework to think of themselves as a spiritual being playing in the field of human experience actually changed their experience of events in the world. This shift provided them with a new place to stand vis à vis their challenges where they viewed those challenges as spiritual lessons and saw themselves as having a continuity that extended beyond their human existence. Participants described this shift as providing them with a new perspective on the life-altering issues they faced which allowed them to process and respond positively to those experiences as spiritual challenges offering the opportunity for further development and healing. Their spirituality became the organizing principle for their lives and guided them in developing the specific spiritual practices and health and healing strategies that they would use to create healing and wellness in their lives.

Shifting to a spiritual perspective led participants to turn within which constitutes the third step of their process (step 3). As participants experienced the limits of their frameworks for understanding their lives or addressing their issues through previously accepted cultural concepts and existing treatments they began to explore their inner connection with spirit as a source of healing, direction and guidance. By engaging in spiritual practices including reading spiritual texts, meditating, visualizing, sensing energy, and prayer participants were able to connect with the greater reality of spirit within the self (step 4), further enhancing their ability to see and respond to the divine in the world around them. As they connected with spirit within, suddenly daily stresses and crises no longer seemed so significant and participants started to experience the lived reality of themselves as a larger spirit beyond the personality. This is reflected in their understanding of spirit as a benevolent animating force within which unites, and supports, and is existent in all aspects of creation. In discovering this lived connection to spirit within participants found comfort, strength, love, peace, hope and understanding.

Participant experiences are consistent with reports in the existing literature on the many benefits of practices such as prayer and meditation in enhancing coping and increasing positive affect (Baesler et al., 2003; Harris et al., 1999; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Participant narratives also reflect the qualitative literature which suggests that these benefits are derived from uncovering, rediscovering or enhancing a lived connection with spirit (Albaugh, 2003; Faull et al., 2004; Gall & Cornblat, 2002). The current study adds to our understanding not only by describing participants' process of connecting with spirit more fully, but also by adding to the current understanding of that connection. This is one of the first studies where

participants have directly articulated not only their connection to “god” or the divine through spiritual practices, but also a greater awareness of themselves as an intrinsic part of that larger divine reality itself.

Although several studies document the fact that developing their spiritual connection inspired participants in the literature to identify and address longstanding issues, heal past relationships and make significant changes in behaviour in their lives (Albaugh, 2003; Faull et al., 2004; Gall & Cornblat, 2002), the current literature does not explain how these changes relate to the process of drawing on spirituality for healing. In contrast participants in this study provided a framework to articulate precisely how their spiritual exploration led to healing the issues that triggered their initial search and further guided them to healing and transformation in every area of their life.

As participants in the study searched for a connection to spirit within, their self-exploration helped them to identify patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviour which blocked their connection to spirit. By connecting with the light of spirit within, they were able to see the remaining areas of darkness linked to experiences of disease and distress. Participants thus identified the four step process of clearing (step 5) which involved: a) identifying and watching a pattern; b) entering the felt experience of the pattern; c) accepting and surrendering, and, d) choosing and making a commitment to different thoughts and behaviours as integral to healing any condition they were experiencing, and as integral to their overall spiritual development.

Regardless of whether the pattern involved a physical, or a mental and emotional disease, or their response to an external condition such as a significant loss, participants began by becoming aware of the pattern and watching their suffering as it unfolded.

Although they described the sense of detachment they acquired through connecting with the reality of spirit within as critical to the process of watching and identifying patterns, they also underlined the importance of entering the felt experience of the pattern.

Entering the felt experience of the pattern from the perspective of an observer allowed participants to fully experience all aspects of a pattern as it unfolded and understand the connections between their thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and past and current experiences.

Acceptance is a theme that appears prominently in the stories of people who drew upon spirituality to create healing, but which lacks elaboration or contextualization in the literature (Albaugh, 2003; Faull et al., 2004; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Parappully et al., 2002). By contrast, participants in this study identified acceptance as an attitude that played an important role in many stages of the process of creating healing. Participants talked about needing to accept the condition itself enough to begin watching the patterns associated with it. They talked about the importance of being sufficiently honest with themselves to become willing to truly examine how they were using their energy; the thoughts, feelings and behaviours they were engaged in, in a non-judgmental way, in order to create a basis for change. They also talked about accepting and welcoming the feelings involved in any particular pattern in order to develop a full understanding of the pattern.

Ultimately, participants found that they had to accept the pattern itself, and they had to accept themselves while they were experiencing it, in order to be able to watch the pattern. They found that any attempt to resist or overcome the pattern, disease, or feelings associated with it simply kept them involved in acting out the pattern. Acceptance was a

critical aspect of liberating them from simply repeating a pattern, enabling them to watch and understand it as they were experiencing it. The ongoing and interwoven process of watching, experiencing and accepting their patterns led participants to a new understanding of the pattern, how it worked, and its origin and purpose.

Sometimes the patterns participants watched dissolved as new understandings arose and they were able to spontaneously realize that they no longer agreed with the beliefs and interpretations of reality that originated the pattern. In this way, the process of clearing patterns helped bring unconscious beliefs or unresolved experiences to light, allowing participants to dissolve the charge around the experience and reinterpret events in the light of new perspectives. Healing occurred spontaneously as participants dropped the patterns that were creating problems and developed new responses. At other times participants found that they had to make a conscious choice to stop engaging in the elements of a pattern that they could see in order to gain clarity about another layer of the pattern. As they continued to watch, each progressive step towards healing brought a new understanding that changed their perception, feeling, and ultimately their behaviour as the pattern came to light, was understood, and dissolved over time, layer by layer.

Taking responsibility for their responses to the conditions they were experiencing was another key feature of participants' healing process. The literature notes the outcome of this process whereby people were empowered by assuming a greater degree of responsibility for how they wanted to live their lives in the face of the crises they were experiencing (Albaugh, 2003; Gall & Cornblat, 2002; Faull et al., 2004; Hall, 2003; Watt, 2003). Participants in the current study further add a new dimension to our understanding



in that their spiritual explorations led them to take responsibility for actually creating the mental and physical conditions and distress that they were experiencing.

Through watching and unraveling the patterns they saw, layer by layer, participants came to understand how the unconscious patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviour that they had grown accustomed to, actually created the mental and physical diseases or distress they were experiencing. As they tracked their patterns back to the unresolved experiences that led to the particular beliefs which created their patterns, participants reinterpreted past experiences in the light of their conscious beliefs and current understanding. The new perspectives they gained in turn led to new perceptions, feelings, behaviours and experiences. As former patterns dissolved in the light of new understandings, participants experienced a healing of the conditions that had troubled them. Through this process participants realized that they did indeed have the power and responsibility for creating their life experiences.

Healing occurred naturally and spontaneously for some as old patterns dissolved and new understandings took their place in rapid succession. Other participants found that dissolving old patterns provided an increased sense of freedom, opening up space for the creation of new ways of being. These participants then set conscious intentions to pursue new behaviours and beliefs that contributed to their continued healing and development (step 6). As participants shifted their energy to focus on their intentions and continued to tap into their spiritual centre, they found that they received the inner knowledge, direction, courage, and external support to pursue the healing intentions they had set (step 7). They described this process as one of ongoing development.

Some participants experienced very rapid healing of formerly intractable conditions. Other participants described an elongated step by step process that led to a point of recognizing that they no longer experienced the same struggles or distress. Often less deeply rooted issues could be quickly shifted while issues that were more firmly rooted in traumatic experiences took more time. Dissolving each layer brought with it not only the gift of healing, but also increased awareness of the self and a new awareness of the remaining patterns which continued to separate them from fully realizing their intentions, or their identity as spirit itself. Each participant's process with each issue was unique and the process of healing itself grew more rapid as they progressed through clearing more and more of their issues, and therefore experienced themselves as increasingly integrated as a person, and increasingly conscious of their own process of living and development. Most participants used some combination of both the processes of consciously dissolving old patterns and consciously creating new patterns in their overall process of healing.

The process of clearing and healing that participants described parallels the major elements of a range of psychotherapeutic paradigms. In keeping with the humanist tradition (Rogers, 1986/1989), participants described a positive view of the person as being naturally adaptive, powerful, creative, and as containing all of the wisdom needed for their own healing. Participants emphasized the importance of exploring and processing their feelings to separate themselves from conditioned attitudes and behaviours that no longer served them and to integrate and move beyond limited self-perceptions. By shifting to a spiritual perspective, participants created what Rogers (1986/1989) labeled as a facilitative environment for their development. Tapping into the

spirit within provided a connection to a source of unconditional love and support that allowed participants to take a non-judgmental stance in witnessing and exploring their own experience. By thus drawing on the spiritual dimension of experience which Rogers (1986/1989) himself recognized and utilized, participants were able to facilitate their own process of exploration and healing.

Participants' process of clearing also mirrors many of the aspects of a modern psychodynamic paradigm. Participants traced many of the patterns that they identified to unresolved early experiences through which they acquired certain beliefs, fears, expectations and behaviours (Safran & Muran, 2000). Through examining these patterns as they experienced them, participants gained insight into their own behaviours and developed new understandings which led them to shift existing patterns and develop new and more effective responses (Safran & Muran, 2000). Through shifting to a spiritual perspective, participants entered into a dynamic experience with existence itself. They used the reflections they received from their experiences as the catalyst for reflecting on and learning about their patterns as they unfolded.

In addition to traditional humanist and psychodynamic descriptions of therapy, participants' process of healing further reflects more recent solution-focused and narrative models of therapy in some regards (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 2003; White & Epston, 1990). For example, participants emphasized the importance of focusing on their positive intentions, putting energy into visualizing, affirming and acting on those intentions as part of their spiritual practices. Participants also spent a great deal of time focusing on their strengths, reframing their self-judgements, and celebrating the positive aspects of themselves and their experiences. Similarly, participants were acutely

conscious of the role of language in creating their experiences mirroring narrative strategies. They deliberately examined and shifted the language they used to describe their experiences as a means of changing their conceptualization of and responses to their experiences and ultimately as a means of changing their experience itself.

Participants' process of healing not only reflects major psychotherapeutic ideas and principles, the results of their process also mirror the outcomes for psychotherapy documented in the literature. Thus, participants experienced a reduction or remission of the symptoms of mental distress that they were experiencing, they experienced an increase in functioning, they developed increased self-acceptance and self-love, reported a greater sense of well-being, empathy for others, and adopted increasingly pro-social behaviours (Harris et al., 1999; Lambert, 2004; Seligman, 1995; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

Through drawing on spirituality for healing, participants appear to have experienced what Miller & C' de Baca (2001) call a quantum change. Participants experienced a total transformation of their identity and experience through spirituality such that positive behaviours and perceptions that were previously imagined or rarely experienced became an operative part of their regular experience. Longstanding patterns of negative behaviour and social and emotional problems were resolved and healed as this transformation was realized. Participants were able to face devastating losses and use the opportunities they presented to grow into freer, more loving, more open people who were better able to enjoy their own lives and contribute to the lives of others. Many participants described rapid shifts and healings after long periods of diligent practice. Others described their change process as a step by step development over time. Yet, even participants who experienced a slower rate of change often noted that their development

was punctuated by small epiphanies leading to significant changes in perception.

Participants' experiences reflect Frankl's (1992) belief in the transformative power of facing traumatic events.

Perhaps one of the most striking elements about participants' experiences is that they not only resolved challenging mental and emotional issues, or developed positive ways of growing through traumatic experiences, they also healed persistent and sometimes life threatening diseases. While some participants continued to pursue Western medical therapies in conjunction with their spiritual healing practices, others did not. Although all participants practiced a wide variety of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual self-care strategies, they didn't view these strategies as separate treatments. Instead they viewed all of the strategies they used as interconnected to and as operating with or emanating from their spirituality. In shifting to a spiritual perspective, participants shifted to an understanding of mind, body, emotion, and spirit as interconnected. They talked about needing to take steps towards healing and wellness in each quadrant, and indeed, viewed the patterns they discovered and dissolved as interconnected across all four dimensions of being.

Participants' perspectives also add to the literature in that their shift to a spiritual understanding also involved a shift to a holistic perspective on healing. They described healing as occurring once a person's needs had been addressed and the roots of particular pattern dissolved in all four areas of being. Thus healing in participants' experiences quite literally meant dissolving the various unresolved issues in each plane of being in order to bring each aspect of the self into alignment or integration with each other aspect of the self. Participants therefore viewed physical well-being as part and parcel of

facilitating a spiritual connection in their lives. Previous studies have suggested that religion has a preventative effect against disease in that it encourages positive health behaviours through religious injunctions against, for example, drinking (Argyle, 2002; Larsen & Larsen, 2003). The current study suggests that in some cases it is participants' understanding and experience of spirituality as interdependent with the mental, emotional, and physical aspects of the self that encourages the adoption of self-care strategies that are then perceived as part and parcel of spiritual well-being.

The current literature reflects many of the changes that participants experienced in well-being and self-actualization as part of the outcome of people drawing on spirituality for healing (Albaugh, 2003; Argyle, 2002; Faull et al., 2004; Gall & Cornblat, 2002). However, most existing studies focus primarily on people using spirituality as a means of coping with mental and physical health problems and with traumatic experiences. The current study is one of the first to extend the common emphasis on coping to include a framework for, and investigation of, healing, well-being and self-actualization. Participants viewed well-being and self-actualization as a natural result of healing existing problems through dissolving the acquired patterns which separated them from fully realizing their connection with spirit within the self and within the world.

The current study adds to the literature by documenting participants' framework for understanding and creating wellness as well as healing in their lives. Through the process of resolving past issues and patterns, participants found that they were able to become "present" to the moment and deepen their connection with spirit. They associated wellness with the capacity to be present, respond to and balance their ongoing needs with the same spiritual strategies they used to heal. Their experience supports and reflects

Rogers (1961) contention that the actualizing tendency grows naturally from self-reflection and self-integration in a facilitative environment. Through their spiritual practices, participants achieved a state of being where feelings of love, peace, connection, hope, excitement and enjoyment were part of their ordinary daily experience of life.

Participants' experiences further reflect and confirm Maslow's (1973) description of the characteristics of self-actualized individuals and his contention regarding the critical role that spirituality can play in spurring self-actualization. As their healing progressed, participants not only started to experience well-being on an ongoing basis they also regularly enjoyed transcendent experiences, developed higher order values, grew in authenticity, adopted increasingly relational and pro-social behaviours, and became increasingly interested in contributing to the community around them. At the time of their interviews, participants displayed and reported experiencing many of the traits that Maslow associated with self-actualizing individuals.

Participants' stories also serve to further elaborate on Maslow's (1973) description of self-actualization and its relationship to spirituality. Participants not only began to enjoy more transcendent experiences and continued to deepen their spirituality through their process of healing; they also came to experience life fundamentally as a spiritual adventure. As they grew increasingly adept at the process of healing and creation, participants became increasingly inner-dependent, turning within to draw on spiritual tools to set and work towards intentions that defied their conditioning and many of the conventions of socially accepted reality. By focusing within and trusting the spiritual messages they received through synchronicities, dreams, visions, intuitions, and their own inner sense of spiritual knowledge they found themselves increasingly led to

develop the work, relationships, play, and creative experiences they longed to enjoy. They described themselves as enjoying a new sense of flow in their lives and they experienced desired events as manifesting in almost magical ways. Participants' experiences confirm Maslow's perception that the spiritual path is indeed a central route to self-actualization.

### **Summary**

The current study adds significantly to the existing literature on spirituality, health and healing. First, the current study builds on previous efforts in the field, reflecting many of the major themes identified in previous qualitative and quantitative work. The current study adds to the field by elaborating on the meaning and the role of concepts such as acceptance that are only touched upon in other studies. More significantly, the current study fills-in gaps in the literature by explicitly outlining the step by step process that participants used to draw upon spirituality to create healing in their lives. The fact that the process that participants described dovetails with and indeed brings together disparate elements of information found in the existing literature further underlines the value of a close investigation of people's experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing.

The current study describes how people draw upon spirituality to make meaning and grow through devastating events. It explains the process behind the transformations people experience in their relationship to themselves and others. It identifies the specific role and importance that feelings play in people's process of spiritual healing, and it details how people arrive at a greater sense of empowerment, generativity, connection to, and appreciation for life through their spiritual practices.



Perhaps the most significant new information that it contributes is an understanding of the process of spiritual healing itself. Participants' description of watching, experiencing, accepting and committing to change the patterns that they perceived as creating the mental and physical diseases or distress they were experiencing resonates with popular and ancient spiritual texts (Chodron, 2001; Hahn, 1992), but is unique in the empirical literature in the area. Participants' descriptions suggest that shifting to a spiritual perspective helped to create the facilitative conditions for healing that allowed participants to make significant therapeutic shifts. Participants' experiences of mental and emotional healing rival the best psychotherapy outcomes, suggesting the effectiveness of their model for healing.

In addition, participants clearly credited their spiritual practices and development with healing debilitating physical as well as mental and emotional conditions. Establishing the linkages between psychological and physical health is a relatively new area in psychology. Due to the impact of holistic thinking on spiritual and popular trends, research on spirituality is one of the areas where the mind-body connection is being explored. To date, only a handful of other studies have linked various forms of spiritual coping and healing to physical as well as mental and emotional healing (Harris et al., 1999; Byrd, 1988; Kabat-Zin et al., 1998; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Sephton et al., 2001). Participants' narratives not only confirm the power of the mind-body connection in healing physical as well as mental and emotional diseases, they also provide a detailed explanation of the process of translating spiritual perception and practice into physical healing.

The findings of this study also extend the boundaries of traditional and current visions of spirituality in relationship to healing. Participants located their spirituality both within and outside of traditional religious frameworks. They evidenced a developmental process of spiritual unfolding that led them to reject some ideas and traditions, accept others, and create their own unique forms of spiritual understanding and expression. Participants drew upon a wide variety of spiritual readings, workshops, communities, and practitioners to facilitate their development, adding new information on possible avenues to spiritual development that are not currently reflected in the existing literature. Although their practices also reflected an emphasis on common spiritual tools such as prayer, and especially various forms of meditation, they also extended to energy work and other innovative practices.

Participant experiences reflected the literature's common focus on developing a relationship with the divine as the nexus point of the spiritual healing process. Participants evidenced a broad variety of understandings of the divine but emphasized turning within to forge a spiritual connection. Ultimately, as their healing proceeded, participants came to understand spiritual development itself as a process of progressively accepting the reality of one's own identity as spirit itself, adding a new view of spiritual healing to the literature. From this perspective, healing truly involves healing what participants came to experience as the illusion of their separation from spirit as it operates within and outside of themselves. Thus, participants came to view the process of spiritual healing as contiguous with self-realization and self-actualization. Participants came to create and enjoy increasing levels of health, wellness, and freedom through their process of drawing upon spirituality for healing.

### **Spirituality, Healing and Counselling**

There is little current information available regarding the integration of spirituality and counselling practice. The majority of the current literature is comprised of theoretical offerings on integrating spirituality and counselling practice (i.e. Kelly, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). There is a very small body of empirical studies on spiritually or religious-oriented interventions, or on the use of spiritual or religious practices as a counselling treatment, or as an adjunct to existing therapies (Harris et al., 1999; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). What remains is largely survey data addressing therapists' beliefs and use of spiritual perspectives and ideas in counselling (Smith & Orlinsky, 2004; West, 2000); clients' interests in complementary and alternative therapies that include spiritual principles and practices (Astin, 1998; Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004); and, clients' interest in the integration of spirituality into counselling treatment (Rose et al., 2001; Worthington & Sandage, 2002).

The findings of the current study are broadly reflective of and consistent with the empirical findings regarding counselling and spirituality in the literature. They also affirm many of the theoretical recommendations suggesting that spirituality is an important dimension of the counselling relationship for many clients (Richards & Bergin, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). Whether or not spirituality is overtly acknowledged as a dimension of counselling, clients are impacted by how spiritual issues and the spiritual dimension of life is addressed or ignored by their counsellors (Lowenthal, 1995; Kelly, 1995; Schulte et al., 2002; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). The current study adds significantly to our understanding of how clients view the spiritual dimension of the counselling relationship, and to our understanding of the therapeutic effects and

limitations created by the way that counsellors approach their own and their clients' spirituality in the consulting room.

### **The Study Reflects the Literature**

The current study is broadly reflective of the small body of existing literature on spirituality and counselling. Although participants were not necessarily spiritual in orientation when they initiated counselling services, developing their openness to spiritual perspectives was an integral part of their process of healing. At the time of the interview, most participants reported a specific interest in working with or seeking services from spiritually-oriented practitioners in keeping with their shift to a spiritual perspective on their issues. Although little information is available on clients' perspectives on spirituality in counselling, the few studies and the anecdotal information that exists suggests that clients' are generally open to addressing spiritual issues as part of the counselling process (Rose et al., 2001; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). The existing literature also reflects the fact that clients who have developed a strong spiritual or religious framework are likely to seek spiritually or religiously-infused services (Worthington & Sandage, 2002).

The literature also reflects the fact that clients do bring spiritual issues to counselling and that more than a third of the population have spiritual experiences (Holloway, 2003; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005; West, 2000). Several study participants similarly presented specifically with spiritual concerns, while others presented with the types of ultimate concerns about life, death, loss and meaning that have a significant spiritual dimension. About a third of study participants reported spiritual experiences which contributed significantly to their process of healing.

The literature demonstrates that clients with strong religious or spiritual belief systems may be reluctant to attend secular psychotherapy, and that clients may be afraid to discuss spiritual experiences for fear of being pathologized (Argyle, 2002; Lowenthal, 1995; West, 2000). Participants in the current study were similarly sensitive to potential negative social perceptions of their spiritual beliefs and experiences, and some reported a reluctance to talk about their spirituality for fear of stigma. Further, some participants reported that they initially investigated mainstream forms of therapy because of their own fears about or perceptions of spiritually-oriented treatments as being "woo-woo" or "crazy."

Mainstream psychotherapy training has traditionally rejected spirituality and spiritual concerns have by and large been ignored or even stigmatized in clinical training (Brawer et al., 2002; Richards & Bergin, 2005). The theoretical literature documents the iatrogenic effects of therapy for clients whose religious and spiritual concerns are overlooked or whose practices and beliefs are pathologized (Kelly, 1995; Lowenthal, 1995). It also suggests that an appropriate consideration of the role that spiritual practices and beliefs play in contributing to existing concerns, or in providing resources for healing, is facilitative of effective therapeutic interventions (Richards & Bergin, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). Similarly, participants in this study discontinued treatments that failed to respond to their spiritual needs, and cited incidents where counsellors were appropriately responsive to their spiritual beliefs and concerns as facilitative of their process of healing.

Although mainstream psychological models have traditionally marginalized religious and spiritual concerns and perspectives, empirical studies demonstrate that some

mental health professionals and counsellors, in particular, currently integrate spirituality in their approach to treatment, or acknowledge that their spiritual or religious frameworks impact their decisions in the consulting room (Schulte et al., 2002; Smith & Orlinsky, 2004; West, 2000). Certainly, participants in this study encountered clinicians who evidenced an integration of spirituality in the treatment room at various levels of transparency and sophistication. Perhaps what is most concerning in this regard is that the traditional rejection of spirituality within the discipline creates a situation where few clinicians have received any training on how to appropriately integrate their spiritual perspectives and understanding with their counselling practice (Brawer et al., 2002; Schulte et al., 2002).

The literature on spiritually or religiously-infused approaches to treatment demonstrates that particular spiritual practices or support groups such as meditation and AA can act as effective adjuncts to treatment and as effective elements of a larger treatment program (Harris et al., 1999; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). Several therapy models that integrate spiritual principles have proven as effective as standard forms of treatment, or uniquely effective for particular populations and issues (Harris et al., 1999; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). Participants in this study found that various forms of spiritually-infused counselling, and counselling that reflected a range of degrees of spiritual integration played an important role in their spiritual healing process.

Thus, the current study broadly reflects both the findings of the empirical literature and many of the suggestions of the theoretical literature (Koenig & Pritchett, 1998; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Smith & Orlinsky, 2004; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005).

The current study reinforces the importance of equipping counsellors to address spiritual concerns with sensitivity in the assessment and intervention process in order to avoid iatrogenic effects. It serves to further highlight and acknowledge the reality that many counsellors do integrate spirituality into the treatment process to varying degrees, and in various forms, with or without specific training. It also underlines the potential for appropriate spiritually-infused treatment to facilitate the healing and developmental process of clients with a broad variety of concerns including: grief and loss, trauma, absence of meaning, relationship concerns, addiction, and mental and physical health challenges.

### **The Study Adds to the Literature**

The current study also builds on existing frameworks and adds valuable new information to the literature on counselling, spirituality and healing. Participants in this study saw spirituality as an intrinsic element of effective counselling. They viewed effective counselling as taking them back to their soul, and helping them make and deepen the spiritual connection within. Within the context of a spiritual framework, they described counselling as another means of identifying and dissolving the patterns that were creating problems in their lives. They likened it to the process of meditation or to self-reflection in general. Counselling provided a concentrated opportunity to continue the process of reflecting on the messages they were receiving from spirit within, and in the world, and helped them use those messages to identify and work through barriers to spiritual awareness that showed up as personal difficulties in their lives. The spiritual connection established in the counselling relationship created a sacred space and a sense of safety that facilitated their exploration, and helped them practice the process of exploring patterns and connecting within. Participants described counselling as

paralleling the sense of safety, witnessing, connection, and exploration they created in their relationship with the divine through their spiritual practices.

Counselling appears not only to be facilitative of clients' spiritual healing processes, but also sometimes to give birth to them. Several participants found that counselling intervention served as a means of reconnecting with their inner selves. Counselling allowed them to feel witnessed often for the first time, and actually helped each participant experience themselves as a soul that transcended their personality and physical circumstances, again, often for the first time. Thus, counselling acted as a bridge to spiritual awareness and spiritual practices for some participants. It provided an introduction to processes, including witnessing their experience and exploring patterns that many participants who started their journey with counselling went on to internalize through their spiritual practices. This finding supports Kelly's (1995) suggestion that spiritually-infused counselling may be facilitative for a broad variety of clients, not just for those who present as spiritually-motivated. Certainly, participants in the current study who came to find spirituality intrinsic to their healing varied in age and socio-economic status, exhibited a broad range of issues, drew upon different spiritual traditions, and covered the spectrum of spiritual and religious involvement from completely skeptical and uninvolved, to deeply spiritually or religiously committed at the time they presented for service.

Some theoreticians in the area view the integration of spirituality and counselling as essential across general practice frameworks (Richards & Bergin, 2005), while others view spiritually-infused counselling as an area of specialty (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). One of the major gaps that exists involves understanding what exactly spiritually-infused



counselling entails (Worthington & Sandage, 2002). While there are many versions of spiritually-infused counselling (i.e. Richards & Bergin, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005), there is no framework unifying the field or offering an understanding that transcends individual paradigms. Participants' experiences offer a new understanding of spiritually-infused counselling that extends across various theoretical frameworks.

Participants identified spiritually-infused counselling as centred in the spiritual awareness, integration and personal healing of the practitioner. They located the essence of spiritually-infused practice with the practitioner's ability to be present to their own and to their client's soul within the counselling session. Effective practitioners were able to see and address their client as spirit beyond the realm of their personality and issues. They created a profound connection with their clients that participants experienced and described as a spiritual connection. Clients associated this connection with the non-possessive love they experienced from practitioners in their sessions. By addressing their clients as spirit or soul, effective practitioners were able to facilitate their clients' connection to their own soul, and to the love of the divine through experience and example. Effective practitioners literally created the sacred holding space that clients found in the spiritual practices and awareness that forged their own relationship with the divine within.

This finding mirrors literature that suggests that the effectiveness of the working alliance or counselling relationship accounts for a large percentage of the change clients experience in psychotherapy, regardless of the theoretical framework and tools the practitioner employs (Lambert & Barley, 2002; Wampold, 2001). It is consistent with outcome literature identifying the critical impact of the therapist's interpersonal skills and

presence in forming the alliance that makes for effective therapy (Wampold, 2001). It also reflects theoretical offerings in the area of spiritually-infused counselling, identifying the therapy alliance as a spiritual alliance and characterizing the spiritual love a counsellor offers his client as an important element of the healing relationship (Richards & Bergin, 2005).

Participants' descriptions of the spiritual nature of the counselling relationship and the central importance of the person of the counsellor within that relationship further mirrors and affirms the theoretical offerings of seminal researchers in the field such as Rogers. Rogers (1986/1989) became renowned in the field of counselling for breaking the components of the facilitative relationship down into the elements of genuineness, non-judgmental acceptance, and empathy. Later in his life, Rogers identified a fourth characteristic of presence, a sense of working from his spiritual centre, as another ingredient in building an effective therapy relationship. Rogers (1986/1989, p. 137) experienced his own spiritual connection as intuitively facilitating his understanding of the client and guiding him towards helpful interventions in the counselling process.

Similarly, participants attributed their counsellors' ability to meet clients at the level of the soul or spirit to practitioners own spiritual exploration and understanding, and to their counsellors' personal healing experiences. Participants suggested that effective counsellors embodied a sense of spiritual integration through their ability to perceive, address and respond to a client's concerns at mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual levels of being. Participants experienced a very real sense of love from effective counsellors which provided role modeling and occasionally an initial exposure to the reality of the non-possessive love of the divine, which they described as spiritual.

Participants distinguished between counsellors who exhibited a "text-book" approach to practice and operated largely at the level of mental processes, and those who demonstrated their own experience and integration of spirituality and healing through their presence, spiritual awareness, and holism in choosing interventions that responded to various levels of clients' needs and issues. Effective counsellors were genuine and open, exhibiting a willingness to share the process of spiritual exploration. They respected a client's independence in developing their own spiritual awareness and solutions to the issues they presented. They were willing to give of themselves and share their spiritual understandings and explorations in ways that facilitated rather than detracted from a client's healing process.

This finding not only mirrors Rogers' (1961; 1986/1989) identification of the characteristics of genuineness and congruence, openness and empathy, non-judgmental awareness, and presence as characteristics of effective counsellors, it also takes these characteristics to a new level. Participants explicitly identified these skills with a counsellor's personal spiritual awareness, integration, and experience of healing and development. This observation applied to counsellors across nominally secular and overtly spiritually or religiously-infused frameworks. Thus, participants could experience a counselling process as spiritually-infused as a result of the presence and spiritual integration of the practitioner, even if spiritual terms and issues were never explicitly discussed. Although participants did not specifically report this experience, the natural corollary of this finding suggests that clients could potentially experience a counsellor who overtly integrated spiritual perspectives, but operated primarily at a mental level as not providing effective spiritually-infused treatment.

Participants made a clear distinction between counsellors who operated primarily at "a mental level" and those who provided spiritually-infused treatments. Participants' experiences reflect the increased demand for and use of complementary and alternative medical (CAM) and psychological approaches suggested by the new discourse on spirituality and increasingly documented in national health surveys (Astin, 1998; Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004; Moss, 2004). Nearly 50% of Americans report using complementary and alternative therapies among which spiritually-based practices or treatments such as prayer are the most popular (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004). Closer to home, 70% of British Columbians report using complementary and alternative medicine up to 3 times per month (Moss, 2004). Current literature suggests that the majority of North Americans use CAM in conjunction with standard medical and psychological therapies (Astin, 1998).

The current study adds to the literature by highlighting the fact that many of the clients psychologists see may also be using adjunctive complementary or alternative treatments. It also suggests that some clients may in fact terminate traditional counselling treatment in favour of spiritually-infused treatments, or seek out practitioners who better evidence a spiritually-infused perspective, when they experience their treatment as lacking in spiritual integration. Participants in the study who described their counselling experiences or counsellors as primarily focused on mental processing and traditional models of psychology left treatment to seek out other avenues of spiritual exploration and support.

Some participants who left treatment quite clearly described their termination of services as relating to a failure of alliance where the counsellors' responses fell far short

of meeting them at the level of soul and demonstrating empathy, genuineness and spiritual awareness. Other participants appreciated the role that counselling played in helping them proceed through the mental process of identifying relevant issues and experiences, but experienced counselling as having limited value in comparison to spiritual practices or practitioners that facilitated a connection with the soul and an understanding of the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual roots of their dilemmas. Regardless of their experience and decision to terminate or continue treatment, all participants viewed all forms of counselling as a beneficial step on the healing journey, acknowledging that different forms of practice may meet the needs of different clients. This finding suggests the critical importance that integrating spirituality into counselling practice may hold for effectively facilitating change and healing for some clients.

Participants' descriptions of spiritually-infused treatments reflect varying degrees of spiritual integration and the wide variety of approaches to spiritual integration cited in the literature. At a minimum, facilitative practitioners met the client on a spiritual level and moved towards a holistic perspective on healing in their own integration of emotional, spiritual, and physical knowledge and awareness in their practices. Participants also experienced facilitative practitioners as open to spirituality, able to recognize spiritual issues and engage in spiritual discussions. Facilitative practitioners were able to assess and respond to the spiritual dimensions of their clients' concerns, and provide understanding and support in integrating their spiritual experiences and development with other aspects of the self. In particular, participants talked about the significant role that effective practitioners played in helping them use their spirituality as a resource to grow through the re-evaluation process prompted by the life crises they

faced. Facilitative practitioners supported participants in using the growth potential of the conditions they faced to clear old patterns, work through unhelpful beliefs, and process unresolved experiences, enabling them to step more fully into enacting the wisdom and awareness that they connected with within. In this way, facilitative practitioners supported the development of healthy spirituality as a foundation for their clients' overall growth and functioning.

Participants described the counsellors that they experienced as most facilitative as evidencing a mature personal integration of their spirituality. In many instances these counsellors reflected a more sophisticated integration of holistic approaches to healing; using experimental treatments, or evidencing their openness to healing approaches that fall well outside of mainstream psychological frameworks. For example, one participant found her therapist's disclosure that he too believed in angels to be particularly affirming during her period of transition to a spiritual perspective. Another participant found her counsellor's understanding and appreciation for her exploration of mediumship as a means of communicating with and accepting the loss of her son as helpful in supporting her through grieving his loss. A third participant attributed her counsellor's integration of alternative physical health treatments including fasting, and his facilitation of a near-death experience through hypnosis, as integral to her ability to heal from cancer. Similarly, participants who left traditional counselling settings and sought spiritually-infused treatments viewed these treatments, which included meditation, energy work, Reiki, various forms of bodywork, rituals, and many other approaches, as integral to their healing.

These findings reflect the contentions of current and past counselling theorists who viewed spirituality as integral to generating psychological healing and personal growth and development (Frankl, 1992; Maslow, 1973; Rogers 1986/1989; Wilber, 2000). Participants' experiences also reflect the growing popular interest in, and acceptance of, complementary and alternative treatments which include spiritually-infused treatments (Astin, 1998; Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004; Moss, 2004). Participants' experiences further mirror the increasing popular interest and integration of alternative physical, emotional, and psychological therapies as part of a holistic approach to treatment, healing, and wellness (Astin, 1998). Participants in this study viewed the holistic integration of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual strategies and tools as fundamental to a spiritual understanding of healing and wellness.

The therapists that participants most valued come closest to embodying the integral paradigm described by Ken Wilber (2000). Wilber's model proposes a conceptual integration of spiritual, mental, emotional and physical aspects of healing and envisions the integration of Eastern and Western approaches to psychotherapy and development. Participants' conceptualization and practice of healing is most reflective of Wilber's integral vision, seeing various elements of experience as an integrated pattern or whole operating on the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual levels simultaneously. The therapists that participants most valued similarly operated from a holistic vision of the person, and commonly reflected Wilber's vision of integral therapy by integrating a broad variety of Eastern and Western approaches to healing and development within the context of a spiritual vision or framework.

The healing outcomes that participants achieved through spiritually-infused counselling, and through drawing on spirituality for healing in general, reflect the best of the psychotherapy outcome literature (Lambert, 2004; Seligman, 1995). Over time, participants were able to significantly decrease or eliminate psychological symptoms and conditions that included depression, anxiety, panic attacks, suicidality, debilitating grief and addiction. Where symptoms remained they were reduced to non-problematic levels that were effectively addressed by self-management strategies. Participants developed increasing independence in their ability to care for themselves, with many stating that they had arrived at a point in their development where they received their answers from their own spiritual practices, and only occasionally sought additional support from outside practitioners. Participants also reported significant positive transformations in their quality of life, relationship to themselves and others, and in their ability to cope with stress and actualize their potential. What may be perhaps the most novel and surprising is that participants attributed experiences of physical healing and symptom reduction to drawing on their spirituality for healing both within and outside of a counselling relationship.

One of the interesting aspects of participants' experiences is that they viewed counselling as part of their larger repertoire of spiritual healing tools. Although some participants started their spiritual journeys with counselling, over time their spiritual orientation generally provided the larger framework within which they sought and evaluated counselling services. Thus, they did not attribute the positive outcomes they experienced to spiritually-infused counselling alone, but rather to their spiritual



understanding and practices in general, viewing counselling as only one aspect of their larger journey towards healing.

The nature of psychological studies in general, and outcome studies in particular, dictates that they narrow the focus of clients' changes to the counselling intervention, making the intervention the focus of healing. This stands in contrast to the increasing acknowledgement in the literature that most clients present for brief courses of treatment, often intermittently, and that the majority of the change that they experience takes place outside of their work in counselling sessions (Miller, Duncan & Hubble, 1997). Although this makes it difficult to separate out the specific impact of spiritually-infused counselling, it does reflect the reality that the outcome of counselling treatment is impacted by the clients' integration of the skills they learn or the insights they gain in counselling with other skills, practices, supports and insights gained in their lives outside of the consulting room. Participants in this study found that drawing upon spirituality through a variety of avenues in their lives in general, and specifically through spiritually-infused counselling for a period of time, helped them transform their lives to create ongoing health, healing, wellness and growth.

### **Summary**

The findings of the current study both mirror and add significantly to existing information in the literature on spirituality, counselling and healing. Participants' experiences reflect empirical data on clients' interests in integrating spirituality into counselling practice, and addressing relevant spiritual issues in counselling sessions. They further reflect the diversity of clinicians' actual integrations of spirituality in counselling practice, and support theory regarding the iatrogenic effects of ignoring or pathologizing clients' spiritual perspectives, or the spiritual concerns they present. The

current findings support the efficacy of spiritually-infused counselling in general, and further reflect the growing popular acceptance of holistic models of healing and interest in integrative or spiritually-infused treatment alternatives.

The current study further adds to the literature by suggesting that counselling is perceived as a spiritual process and that spirituality is viewed as an integral element of effective counselling by some clients. The study also adds to the literature by suggesting a framework for spiritually-infused treatment that can span and encompass a range of specific theoretical models. Participants highlighted the counsellors' ability to create a profound interpersonal connection marked by a feeling of the counsellor's presence and non-possessive love, which clients experienced as spiritual, as fundamental to effective spiritually-infused counselling. Effective counsellors used the spiritual alliance they created to help clients gain deeper contact with their own souls, or with the spirit within, and facilitated a process of exploration that helped clients identify, experience, and drop problematic life patterns, and take responsibility for and action towards creating empowering new patterns that were in alignment with their deepest beliefs, needs and desires.

Participants identified the process of effective counselling as paralleling and facilitating their own process of spiritual exploration and healing outside of sessions. They attributed an effective counsellor's integration of spirituality in treatment to their personal exploration and integration of spirituality in their life, and to their own personal experience with healing their life patterns. Although effective spiritually-infused treatment encompassed many of the aspects mentioned in the theoretical literature including an openness and ability to identify and respond to spiritual issues and concerns

knowledgably, participants identified a counsellor's own demonstration of spiritual awareness and holistic development in their presence, connection, responsiveness, and treatment choices in session as the nexus of spiritually-infused treatment. At the more sophisticated end of the spectrum of spiritually-infused treatments, counsellors' sometimes integrated experimental practices or spiritual tools and perspectives that fall outside of the boundaries of accepted mainstream norms of practice. Participants' experiences reflect the fact that they viewed spiritually-infused counselling as one of a larger array of services and practices that facilitated and sustained their healing and wellness, and sparked their actualization over the long term.

### **Contributions of the Study**

The findings of the current study contribute to an understanding of the interconnections between spirituality, health, healing and counselling in several unique ways. The current study is one of the first attempts to examine the experience of people who draw upon spirituality for healing and who are or have been counselling clients. It is also one of the first studies to provide an in-depth examination of how people initiated, conceptualized and realized their journeys of spiritual healing. It reflects and addresses gaps in the literature uniting the themes and outcomes evidenced by previous studies by providing a description of the seven step process participants went through to create healing and wellness in their lives across different spiritual paradigms.

The current study unites ideas and findings from the theoretical and empirical literature by tracing participants' entire journeys from turning to spirituality for coping, to realizing healing, and extending into wellness and self-actualization. Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of the study is that participants' healing involved taking responsibility for clearing existing patterns of thought, feeling, experience, and behaviour

that they conceptualized as creating the mental, emotional, and physical challenges that led them to investigate spiritual healing in the first place. The four step process of clearing which participants identified as integral to their healing mirrors the process of integral or holistic psychotherapy that involves cognitive, affective, behavioural, physical, and spiritual elements. The current study confirms the efficacy of drawing upon spirituality for healing and functions to explain precisely how people whose experiences reflect the findings in the existing literature go about creating healing through drawing upon their spirituality. In this way, the current findings contribute significantly to addressing gaps in the existing literature and to developing a model for spirituality and healing.

The current study also reflects the small body of existing findings and offers new information on clients' perceptions and experiences of the role of spirituality in counselling practice. Participants viewed spiritually-infused counselling as a natural extension and facilitative tool in their process of spiritual healing. Their experiences confirm the move towards integrating spirituality into counselling treatment, suggesting that spirituality may be a critical element in effective counselling relationships that has thus far been overlooked or minimized. The current findings confirm that many counsellors do integrate spirituality into counselling treatment in various forms and to varying degrees. The current study also documents the fact that some clients may reject counsellors or counselling interventions which fail to effectively address their spiritual needs and development.

The current study can assist in guiding the appropriate integration of spirituality and counselling practice by offering a new framework for spiritually-infused treatment

built on client perspectives and experiences. The findings mirror and add to existing empirical and theoretical literature that underlines the importance of the therapeutic alliance and introduces spirituality as a critical element of an effective alliance (Richards & Bergin, 2005; Rogers 1986/1989). Participants' comments reflect the literature in identifying a counsellor's ability to create an effective alliance with his or her genuineness, congruence, empathy, openness, non-judgmental acceptance and presence (Lambert & Barley, 2002; Rogers 1986/1989; Wampold, 2001). Effective counsellors were also perceived as creating a profound spiritual connection that demonstrated their own personal integration of spirituality and their own personal healing experience through their ability to be present and loving, spiritually-aware and responsive, exhibit holistic development, and facilitate the holistic development of others. Effective spiritually-infused counsellors sometimes integrated experimental treatments or responded to clients' issues in ways that extended the current boundaries of clinical practice further suggesting the need for a re-evaluation of the limits of mainstream paradigms.

The outcomes participants attributed to their counselling experiences and to drawing on their spirituality for healing in general reflect ideal outcomes reported in the literature including symptom reduction or elimination, an increased sense of intrapersonal well-being and integration, the development of interpersonal and pro-social skills and values, and increasing independence in addressing, healing, and growing through the issues and challenges that present themselves (Lambert, 2004; Seligman, 1995). The current findings add to the traditional outcome literature and are in-keeping with emerging studies which also suggest that spiritually-infused treatments can contribute to

healing physical as well as mental and emotional health challenges (Harris et al., 1999; Larsen & Larsen, 2003; Sephton et al., 2001).

As one of the first psychological studies to utilize the postmodern theory of the new discourse on spirituality as a theoretical framework (Granqvist, & Hagekull, 2001), the current study contributes to existing findings by capturing the experiences of the spectrum of people who draw upon traditional and non-traditional, religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality and spiritual healing tools and practices. Although participants' experiences reflected definitions of spirituality, healing, and wellness that were in-keeping with the current literature, and reflected the use of recognized spiritual tools including prayer and meditation, they also added to our knowledge regarding the integration of re-emerging practices such as energy healing and Reiki, and regarding the use of spiritual practitioners, groups and workshops which fall outside of the domain of traditional counselling practice. The current study therefore validates the utility of the new discourse on spirituality as a framework which renders visible the range of traditional and non-traditional spiritual practices, understandings, and uses of spirituality that are part of the landscape of spirituality in postmodern Western society.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are a number of limitations to the current study. What narrative methodology offers in facilitating a depth of understanding, it correspondingly sacrifices in capturing a breadth of experiences. Because the data for the current study reflects the experience of 12 participants identified through purposive sampling, the extent to which these findings are transferable to a broader population is undetermined. The characteristics of the sample reflect the characteristics of populations who traditionally express particular interest in religious and spiritual questions in that they are mature to

older adults and predominantly women (Hunt, 2003). The sample also reflects the demographic profile of people who pursue counselling and who are interested in non-traditional approaches to spirituality, namely a preponderance of relatively well-educated, largely middle-class women (Hunt, 2003).

There is also some evidence to suggest that the experiences of participants in the current study may reflect the experiences of people with a mature spiritual practice. Their experiences may be particularly comparable to the experiences of advanced meditators or spiritual practitioners across traditions. Similarly, this sample is heavily weighted towards people with non-traditional approaches to spirituality which may be reflective of the population of urban British Columbia (Todd, 2004), capturing the vanguard of the North American trend in spiritual expression that sociologists have described under the rubric of the new discourse on spirituality (Hunt, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2003).

The sample for the current study is also overwhelming comprised of Caucasians from a Euro-Canadian background with only one participant identifying as South Asian. The content themes identified in the current study are broadly reflective of themes and experiences identified in the literature on the psychology of religion. The content themes also mirror many of the themes identified in the literature on the experiences of culturally diverse populations. However, the purposive nature of the sample, its small size, limited variability and specific characteristics make it impossible to generalize the results of the study. Additional research to determine the extent to which participant experiences are reflective of the experiences of the general population and of culturally diverse groups in particular is needed.

In addition, the current study focused on people who self-identified as drawing upon spirituality for healing and wellness. While I did not exclude people with negative experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing, or negative experiences of the integration of counselling and spirituality, the direction of the research questions predisposed the study towards capturing successful experiences of drawing upon spirituality for healing. Despite the fact that I made every effort to elicit a diverse range of experiences and to invite participants to challenge my conceptualization and formulation of the study, the study is oriented to generating an in-depth view of how participants used spirituality to create healing. The study offers no new information on spiritual strategies or approaches that interfere with healing or on negative experiences of spiritually-infused treatments.

The design of the demographic questionnaire proved to be somewhat inadequate to the task of providing an overview of participants' spiritual practices and experiences. Because participants who responded to my flyers were by and large no longer experiencing the problems that prompted their spiritual search, questions surrounding the problems they were drawing on their spirituality to heal were ineffective in capturing their experience, and I had to resort to the descriptions they provided in their interviews instead. In addition, it would have been more useful to have participants rank the importance of the spiritual strategies they were using themselves to gain a more accurate picture of their spiritual practices. I drew on field notes or asked follow-up questions to reconcile discrepancies between participants' reports on the survey and their interview responses. The limitations of the questionnaire point in some ways to the limitations of quantitative research in this complex area. However, given the benefit of my interviews



with participants, I believe that I could now design a questionnaire that might better capture and compliment the richness of the qualitative information gathered by the current study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study provides a rich resource of information upon which future research can build. The findings of this study clearly suggest the utility of using the new discourse on spirituality as a framework for capturing the broad range of postmodern spiritual and religious practices. They also suggest the utility of employing a narrative methodology to capture the intricacies of the process of drawing on spirituality for healing, and to uncover the relationships between language, conceptualization and experience in this concept-laden area. While the current study offers a new and more inclusive framework within which to investigate the relationships between spirituality, health, healing and counselling, it is only a bare beginning.

Based on the findings of this study, I would recommend future research which employs the framework of the new discourse on spirituality and uses a narrative methodology to:

- 1) investigate the experiences of a much larger sample of people who self-identify as drawing on spirituality for healing; verifying and extending the results of this study;

- 2) investigate people's negative experiences of drawing upon spirituality for healing and ineffective instances of spiritually-infused counselling to learn more about what does and does not work; and,

- 2) explore the experience of immigrants to Canada, or people of minority heritage, either through including them in the sample in sufficient numbers, or by

conducting separate investigations of the experiences of these groups, integrating and comparing the results of these studies to the current study and others like it.

The current study not only contributes to the furtherance of qualitative work in the area, it also serves to provide a new framework for understanding the relationship between spirituality and healing, and for understanding spiritually-infused counselling which may prove useful in future quantitative studies. The findings of this study also provide a basis for quantitative work which:

- 4) creates and validates an instrument for assessing spiritually-infused treatment;
- 5) investigates the relationship between clients' perception of their treatment as spiritually-infused and client retention, satisfaction and treatment outcome; and which,
- 6) compares the effects of spiritually-infused treatments with standard approaches to treating a range of mental, emotional and physical health problems.

In addition to these specific recommendations, the current study may contribute more broadly to both psychotherapy and health services process and outcome research by further suggesting that spirituality may be a critical variable to investigate with regard to counsellor/practitioner characteristics, the helping alliance, and client/patient characteristics.

### **Recommendations for Counselling Training and Practice**

The current study offers a wealth of practical information on how clients who draw on spirituality for healing perceive the role of spirituality in the counselling process. Current findings support proposed models of integration in the literature which suggest that counsellors and counsellor training programs begin the process of integrating spirituality into counselling practice by helping practitioners and trainees explore their own spiritual frameworks and assess the implications of their viewpoints for clinical

practice (Kelly, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 2005). The current findings support empirical evidence that suggests that counsellors' personal spiritual orientations influence their clinical practices (Schulte et al., 2002; Smith & Orlinsky, 2004; West, 2000). An important place to start integrating a spiritual perspective in counselling practice includes developing an explicit awareness of one's current beliefs and an understanding of how these beliefs influence one's work, and limit or suggest limits to the kinds of clients that one could benefit.

The current study also suggests that spirituality is an intrinsic aspect of effective counselling relationships for some clients. It encourages clinicians and counselling training programs alike to integrate a spiritual view of the counselling alliance into standard protocols for understanding and developing counselling skills. Because the literature reflects the iatrogenic effects of ignoring or pathologizing spiritual concerns and experiences (Kelly, 1995; Lowenthal, 1995), case scenarios involving spiritual concerns, and specific training in assessing and responding to the nature of clients' spiritual concerns should be integrated into existing training programs. Practitioners already in the field should seek out such training through professional development courses or supervision from those knowledgeable in the field, whether or not they currently see a significant number of religious clients. A particular emphasis on gaining skills in assessing the differences between problematic and supportive spiritual beliefs and practices, and an effort to gain a broad understanding of the diversity of spiritual traditions and practices and their unique dynamics and implications for counselling practice is further indicated in counselling training.

Some theoreticians have suggested that the integration of spirituality into counselling is a general practice competency, (Kelly, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 2005), while others view spiritually-infused treatment as an area of specialty within counselling practice (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). The current findings suggest that spirituality may be an integral aspect of building an effective alliance and that some clients may discontinue treatment that is not spiritually-responsive. Previous literature documents the fact that clients can experience iatrogenic effects from a practitioner's lack of knowledge and sensitivity in responding to spiritual issues (Lowenthal, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 2005). Based on these findings, it seems clear that counselling practitioners should have a basic level of competence in assessing and responding to spiritual concerns and in forming a facilitative alliance with clients (Kelly, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 2005). Treatments that elaborate on specific models of spiritually-infused therapy such as Christian counselling, energy psychology, or spiritually-oriented therapy which integrates a variety of models, may indeed constitute an area of specialty with specific competencies that practitioners and students may need to acquire through reading, dedicated training and supervision.

The literature suggests and the current study confirms and documents the fact that many counsellors do in fact integrate spirituality into counselling treatment in a more or less obvious fashion (Richards & Bergin, 2005; West, 2000; White, 2003). What is particularly concerning is that as a result of the traditional rejection of spirituality in counselling theory and research, very few practitioners have any training in integrating spirituality into practice (Brawer et al., 2002; Schulte et al., 2002). In addition, given the narrow focus of mainstream training models and the mind-body dualism of Western

science in general, few practitioners may be effectively equipped to respond to the integrated model of spiritual healing that clients in this study assumed (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005).

Some spiritually-infused treatments push the boundaries of mainstream psychological models by integrating other states of consciousness, spiritual perceptions such as angels and psychic phenomena, and complementary and alternative therapies including natural remedies or energy healing. Although there are precedents for some of these practices, they are not generally recognized or considered to be legitimate within mainstream psychological models (Grof, 2000; Wilber, 2000). In order for psychologists to integrate alternative systems of healing that reflect the holistic perspective of the participants in this study, and the increasing openness and interest in holistic healing in the general population (Astin, 1998; Hunt, 2003), the discipline itself and its regulatory bodies must move towards a paradigm of psychological health and well-being that includes an understanding of mind-body integration, and begin integrating existing evidence on the effectiveness of alternative forms of healing.

In the meanwhile, practitioners with an interest in the area may benefit from further exploring the evidence for alternative treatments and techniques, and should begin lobbying their associations for information and support regarding alternative practices. If national health surveys are correct, the fact is that many current counsellors are already seeing clients who are integrating alternative treatments including spiritual practices into their approach to healing (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004; Moss, 2004). Just as psychological training has evolved to include an increasing emphasis on understanding the biological substrata of existing conditions, and the effects of

psychoactive drugs, so too should counsellors begin to become familiar with the range of alternative treatments that their clients pursue, and understand their implications for therapy. Training institutions can assist with this process by integrating evidence-based variants of spiritually-infused treatments in the curriculum, and by providing more information on popular alternative, as well as allopathic, adjuncts to treatment and their implications.

To summarize, the findings of this study mirror existing literature in the field, both suggesting that clinical and counselling training programs may benefit from developing curricula which:

- 1) acknowledges the client's and the counsellor's spiritual beliefs and orientation as an important aspect of psychological treatment;
- 2) reflects a holistic model of counselling practice that integrates the spiritual dimension of human experience. Ken Wilber's integral therapy is arguably the most comprehensive current example of such a model;
- 3) helps trainees identify their spiritual orientation and beliefs and explore the impact of their beliefs on their world-view, their approach to counselling, and their work with clients;
- 4) teaches trainees how to accurately assess and respond to their client's spiritual orientation and needs;
- 5) teaches trainees to balance respect for the spiritual worldviews and beliefs of their clients with their duty to do no harm and encourage positive development;

- 6) teaches trainees how to distinguish between helpful and harmful spiritual beliefs and practices, and employ respectful and effective means of helping clients build on spiritual resources and develop beyond limiting practices;
- 7) acknowledges and teaches trainees how to use the spiritual element of the working alliance to build strong facilitative relationships with their clients, and to enhance their effectiveness in practice;
- 8) encourages trainees' personal spiritual and interpersonal development and integration as a central element of continuing development as a practitioner;
- 9) includes experiential exercises to help trainees practice responding to clients' spiritual concerns, explore and address ethical dilemmas in relation to spirituality in treatment, and which encourages trainees' own development and appropriate integration of their spirituality with their professional practice frameworks.

Clinical and counselling programs may further benefit their trainees by following the example of the medical and psychiatric programs that have developed specific courses on addressing and working with spirituality in practice (Puchalski, 2001).

Adopting a holistic approach to counselling and clinical education which reflects an integrated understanding of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the discipline, and which addresses these areas of development for trainees would take the field to the next level in terms of truly integrating the information on human development that is beginning to emerge from scientific and spiritual quarters alike.

Practitioners who are already in the field may also benefit significantly from the results of this study. An analysis of participant narratives underlines the value of

integrating an awareness of the spiritual dimension of clients' experiences and counselling processes into one's approach to practice. Based on the findings of this study and existing literature in the field, I would recommend that practitioners:

- 1) Explore their own spiritual orientation and beliefs and examine how their beliefs impact their world-view, approach to counselling, and their work with clients;
- 2) Seek professional development opportunities or supervision which helps them develop skills in assessing and responding to clients' spiritual orientations and issues;
- 3) Seek opportunities for personal growth and development, and reflect on their ongoing development as an important part of continuing to enhance their professional skills;
- 4) Adopt a holistic framework for practice such as Wilber's model of integral psychology and investigate alternative as well as mainstream therapeutic modalities that may contribute to building well-rounded practice skills;
- 5) Lobby their professional associations for information, guidance and support in integrating spirituality and understanding and working with alternative therapeutic treatments; and,
- 6) Ask clients about the alternative as well as the mainstream health and healing practices which they are pursuing while attending counselling.

Practitioners already in the field would be well advised to assess the impact of their current spiritual orientation on their development and practice.



Developing basic skills in assessing and responding to clients' spiritual issues, understanding and respecting clients' spiritual perspectives, distinguishing between problematic and supportive spiritual coping, and helping clients' draw on their spirituality as a resource for development where appropriate are important general practice skills that each practitioner needs to acquire.

Practitioners who have not had dedicated training in the area of spirituality and religion as it applies to counselling would benefit from pursuing experiential professional development courses. Because spirituality is a particularly value laden area, ethical dilemmas are likely to arise and may be difficult to identify and negotiate given the dearth of training and awareness regarding these issues.

Experiential training which helps practitioners identify and confront a range of common dilemmas not typically highlighted in general counselling curricula would help practitioners broaden their knowledge and develop their practice competency in this important dimension of counselling practice.

### **Conclusion**

Popular interest in spirituality and spiritual healing has spurred a reconsideration of spirituality in clinical and counselling theory and practice. Research suggests that people are increasingly interested in having the spiritual aspect of their experience addressed in health and counselling settings and are seeking out treatments and clinicians who integrate this dimension of practice. The positive findings linking spirituality to health and wellness and beginning to validate spiritually-infused adjuncts or approaches to treatment are important steps on the road to acknowledging the contribution that spirituality makes to human growth and development and can make to clinical and counselling practice. Yet, we are only at the very beginning of exploring the landscape

and understanding the contribution of people's spiritual beliefs and practices to sustained healing and transformation in every area of life.

This study joins the existing literature that suggests that spirituality can be a powerful change agent that people are naturally inclined to turn towards in periods of crisis and distress. Just as participants in the current study had to let go of existing frameworks and become open to new perceptions and a new awareness to begin tapping into their intrinsic spirituality, so too the discipline of psychology itself may need to loosen its grip on existing paradigms, and become open to new perspectives to fully utilize and integrate the full potential of spirituality as a force for healing in counselling practice.

Counselling psychology is particularly well-placed to aid in the appropriate re-integration of spirituality in counselling practice. By definition, counselling psychology is a health service provider specialty that spans the spectrum of practice from treating psychopathology to encouraging optimal growth and development. Counselling practice not only covers the full range of human development, and is particularly associated with health and healing, but also has a tradition of theoretical and practical integration.

Counselling theory has been significantly influenced by the human potential movement and such writers and researchers as Rogers and Maslow who emphasized the integration of emotion, creativity, intuition and spirituality in their work. Despite its penchant for innovation, counselling psychology is also firmly rooted the positivist tradition of mainstream psychology. As a result of this combination of a broad theoretical heritage and span of practice, and its foundation in the empirical tradition of mainstream psychology, counselling psychology is uniquely positioned to help the discipline expand

beyond traditional boundaries, supporting the positive theoretical and practical re-integration of spirituality into counselling.

The current study provides another step forward in the direction of integrating spirituality into psychology in general and counselling psychology in particular in a positive, open and thoughtful fashion. By drawing on the broad theoretical field, empirical findings and methodological flexibility of counselling psychology, the study at hand offers new perspectives on spirituality and its role in healing and in the counselling relationship. By drawing on the new discourse on spirituality, the study encourages an integrated vision of traditional and innovative spiritual perspectives capturing the broad range of the spiritual practices which postmodern culture encompasses. By choosing a narrative methodology and focusing on participants' descriptions of their own experiences, the study adds novel descriptions of the process of drawing on spirituality for healing which reflect, unite and further previous quantitative and qualitative findings. By focusing on clients' experiences, the study offers practitioners and educators a vision of effective spiritually-infused practices as they are experienced through client eyes. In this way, the current study succeeds in using the rich array of tools and possibilities inherent in counselling psychology to support the discipline as a whole in recognizing, reconsidering and benefiting from the full potential of spirituality as a resource in the process of healing and development.

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## Appendix A

### Telling Their Stories

This chapter focuses on the themes that emerged from the formal and literary analysis of participants' narratives. An integral aspect of narrative methodology lies not only in analyzing the content of the stories that participants tell, but also in looking at what we can learn from the way they tell their stories. Information is conveyed not only by what is said but also by the way that it is said: the words that are chosen, the way that they are used, and by analyzing their consistency or lack of consistency with what is being said (Lieblich et al., 1998). A formal analysis searches beneath the content of the narrative to uncover the meanings inherent in the way language is selected and used to construct the narrative (Lieblich et al., 1998).

A literary analysis examines how participants' representation of their experiences; the images and metaphors they use, the characters they draw, the flow of action they describe, helps to shape the meaning and message of their stories (Lieblich et al., 1998; Murray, 2003). Because we, as North Americans, all draw upon the cultural reservoir of Western literature to shape the stories we tell about our lives, comparing participants' stories to paradigmatic cultural narratives helps to place their stories in context, shedding new light on the experiences they are describing (Sarbin, 1986). Many effective narrative analyses have brought new knowledge to the fore by highlighting the information available through a formal and literary analysis of participant narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998; Sarbin, 1986).

The process participants went through to create their narratives and the decisions they made in describing their experiences mirrored, extended and added to the content

themes that emerged from the narratives. Participants' formal choices; their struggles with language, their choice of words, and their deployment of language were important formal elements in creating their narratives. Particular linguistic devices appeared consistently across narratives reflecting common formal themes. Participants' use of language and the choices they made in conveying their experiences served primarily to reflect and reinforce many of themes that emerged from the content analysis, adding to the validity of the content analysis and supporting participants' descriptions of their experiences. The formal analysis of participants' narratives also functioned to bring to light new aspects of their stories. Elements of their stories that were overshadowed in the content analysis came more sharply to the fore in the formal analysis of their narratives, highlighting different aspects of their experiences and offering new information about their process of drawing on spirituality for healing.

A basic literary analysis of participants' stories complements the formal examination of participants' narratives and adds yet another layer of understanding. Each of us ultimately draws on the reservoir of common cultural narratives and themes for the raw materials to story and thereby understand our own experience (Sarbin, 1986). By comparing participants' narratives to paradigmatic forms of secular and spiritual literature in Western culture, we can learn more about the meaning of the stories participants chose to tell (Murray, 2003; Sarbin, 1986; Thornborrow & Coates, 2005).

### **The Formal Analysis Supports and Extends the Content Analysis**

Participants' struggle with languaging their experiences, their distinctive choice of vocabulary, and their use of multiple terms to convey a concept served to reinforce such content themes as the uniqueness of spiritual experience and spirituality as a personal felt

experience of one's relationship with the divine. Participants' deployment of the word "experience" further highlights the weight they attributed to personal experience as an arbitrator of knowledge. Similarly, their use of the word "knowing" as a noun reflects a formal effort to communicate the validity of intuition as a form of knowledge, a theme which emerged from the content analysis.

Participants' consciousness and conscientiousness in using language further sheds light on their use of language itself as part of their process of healing. They used language to help them shift their perception, understanding, and relationship to a problem they were experiencing by changing their conceptualization of it. Their conscious deployment of language in turn reflects and highlights their acceptance of responsibility for creating and shifting the problems they were having. The central importance of taking responsibility for their experiences and for their healing was initially reflected in my discussion of a number of themes in the content analysis including: shifting to a spiritual perspective, choosing and committing to change, and "clearing" patterns as a means of creating healing. The formal analysis not only reflects but further emphasizes their commitment to taking responsibility for their healing by revealing their conscious deployment of language itself as part of the process of healing. In addition, the transformation participants reported in their experience and outlook on life as a result of the healing they experienced is further supported and demonstrated by the acceptance, positive outlook, responsibility and pro-activity they evidenced in the way they describe their experiences and opinions of counselling.

### **It's Hard to Find the Words**

There were many points in the interview process when I witnessed participants having difficulty finding the words to express a particular experience or idea. Each and

every participant talked about or acknowledged how challenging it was to put their experience of spirituality and of creating healing through their spirituality, in particular, into words at some point. For example, participants would often say things like: "There's no language to it." (Sigrid); "I don't have a label for it" (Eva); "It's hard to describe" (Lila); "it's indefinable" (Bruce); or, even more directly: "our language has not come to be able to describe what god is" (Michaela). Participants clearly identified the limits of language in being able to describe and express the full measure of their spiritual experiences.

Language not only plays a critical role in communicating experience, it is also vital in helping us to think about and understand our experiences (Thornborrow & Coates, 2005). Janet was one of the participants who most clearly articulated the struggle to language her experience of spirituality and healing. She identifies the link between the lack of language for spiritual experiences and the difficulty in conceptualizing as well as expressing those experiences. In talking about trying to describe spirituality and its relationship to healing, Janet explains:

It moves into those places where there aren't a whole lot of words. And so when people are talking, they'll go, like, I don't know how to put this into words, but I'm just going to say it like I think it. So that it doesn't even have a course of language to attach to or it hasn't been fully conceptualized yet, and you're trying to describe something you don't even have a concept for.

Participants not only had difficulty in expressing their experiences through language, they had difficulty in actually formulating and conveying their felt sense of the nature and complexity of some of their experiences. Participants could articulate the



limits of language in capturing an experience but try as they might they were unable to fully overcome those limits. Participants' struggles with languaging their spiritual experiences reflects and supports themes in the content analysis which centre around their identification of spirituality as an ineffable experience which defies definition and extends well beyond the boundaries of what we can understand through traditional scientific and psychological approaches to knowledge.

### **Multiple Identifiers**

Participants used a variety of strategies to surmount the linguistic and conceptual barriers they encountered in conveying their experiences. One strategy participants used was to combine a whole series of complementary identifiers which represented qualitatively different aspects of a much larger experience to try to express the quality of that larger experience. For example, when I asked Robert how he would describe the spiritual connection he experiences through surrendering to what is, Robert says: "acceptance, love, affection, just a warm feeling, ... It's a wonderful thing, joyful. I guess it's hard to put into words, but I tell you it's pretty nice." Robert attempts to convey the full force of the experience by describing some of its qualities. Participants often appeared frustrated or at a loss when they had to resort to adding up language in this way to try and approximate an experience they didn't have the words to express.

As I noted in the content analysis, participants commonly used multiple identifiers such as: spirit, god, life force, universal energy, or higher self to express various qualities of the divine as they experienced it. Rather than being particularly frustrating, in this case the use of multiple identifiers was not only an attempt to overcome the linguistic barriers to describing an elusive concept, but did itself convey meaning. Using multiple identifiers for the concept of god not only worked to express the larger quality of god, but also

reflected the magnitude and ineffability of spirit as it exists beyond the capacity of language to encapsulate. The use of multiple identifiers for spirit further signaled a degree of flexibility in conceptualizing spirit that expresses and supports participants' understanding of the unique, personal and therefore diverse nature of people's experience of and relationship to the divine. Participants' use of multiple identifiers thus supports, extends, and helps to communicate two central themes regarding the nature of spirituality that were identified in the content analysis.

### **Distinctive Vocabulary**

The use of multiple terms to describe the same experience also proved to be an important aspect of the formal analysis when comparing individual narratives to identify common themes. During the process of analysis I started to notice that different participants used different words to convey roughly the same meaning. The terms acceptance, surrender and letting go are perhaps the best examples. Although each term implies a slightly different shade of meaning, their connotations in the way participants used them were the same. Different participants used these terms, sometimes interchangeably, to convey a sense of fully acknowledging and relaxing into the reality of an experience without judgement or resistance. Noticing and comparing the different terms participants used to convey similar concepts and experiences led me to a richer understanding of the concept they were describing. It also led me to realize that the differences in vocabulary were not significant enough by and large to represent appreciable differences in the particular experiences they were describing, allowing me to collapse these terms into one rich thematic category in the meta-narrative.

However, when I compared the total set of the vocabulary that each participant used in his or her story to the vocabulary that other participants used in their stories,

differences in their vocabulary as a whole served to convey the distinctiveness of their individual experiences of spirituality and healing as variations on a common theme. For example, Mia emphasized words such as energy, choice, being intimate with, commitment, magic, and empower, while Robert favoured such terms as reality, surrender, suffering, accepting what is, and practice. Although Mia and Robert's stories revealed many of the same core themes in terms of their experience and process of drawing on spirituality for healing, even a brief scan of these two lists of key terms serves to communicate the unique way in which each participant viewed and shaped similar experiences within the context of his or her own journey. This formal finding reflects and reinforces the theme of the unique nature of spiritual experience that was noted in the content analysis, and extends this theme to some degree to suggest that the uniqueness of spiritual experience lies in part in the way an individual conceptualizes and responds to common dimensions of spirituality and of the process of drawing on spirituality for healing.

### **Referring to Experience and Experiencing Emotion**

In the content analysis, participants identified spirituality as a lived experience of the divine and one's relationship to the divine, and emphasized the critical importance of feeling through their experience as a means of coming to know or understand their experiences, and as a critical element of the healing process. A formal analysis of participants' narratives further supports these themes and clarifies the way that participants viewed their felt experience as a primary source of knowledge. Participants not only talked about the salience of emotion as a dimension of experience, they also demonstrated it. At various points in their interviews, participants cried with awe or connection, beamed with joy or wonder, or shuddered with fear in remembering. They

demonstrated the profundity of their experiences and their own integration of emotion as a form of knowledge through their felt expression in the research interviews.

In addition, participants also evidenced their reliance on felt experience as an arbitrator of knowledge by referring to their felt experience to legitimize their knowledge. You may recall in the content analysis that participants talked about learning to think less and feel more as the process of healing unfolded, to be guided more by their felt experience and their skill in understanding and decoding the meaning of their felt experiences. Thus, when participants were trying to explain how they knew something, they generally referred to their felt experience as the reason that they knew something to be true. Bruce provides an explicit example of this deployment of the word and concept of experience as a form of knowledge in talking about where his knowledge of spirituality comes from. In comparing his understanding of spirituality before he started on his spiritual healing journey to his current understanding he says:

I would have explained it based on what I read. I explain it now based on what I've experienced. ... It's just all experiential now, and ah, there's nothing based on, not much anyways is based on research and what I've read. It's all say, this is my experience and that's all I know.

Bruce's comments exemplify participants' tendency to refer to their lived and felt experience as the reason they knew something to be true throughout the interviews. Participants' integration of emotion and tendency to refer to or contextualize their knowledge according to their felt experiences not only reinforces themes that emerged regarding spirituality as a lived experience, and the importance of emotion in healing, but

further extends these themes to highlight participants' trust in their own felt experience as a primary arbitrator of knowledge.

### **Deploying Language to Create New Concepts**

Participants also deployed language in ways that attempted to create new meanings to convey new experiences. For example, in chapter two of the findings which explored participants' paths to drawing on spirituality for healing, I talked about the way participants challenged the language of "drawing upon" spirituality because it implied an instrumental use of the term spirituality that they found reductive. They had come to experience spirituality as an essential part of their being, yet they also engaged in specific thoughts and practices that they considered to be spiritual as a means of facilitating their healing. Both the participants and I struggled to come up with a word that better encompassed their experience and were unable to do so. Participants bridged this dilemma by switching between talking about their spirituality in both an essential and an instrumental way, creating a both/and vision of spirituality as an essential part of their identity and as a resource they turned to for healing.

In a similar move, participants used existing words in new ways to try to convey novel experiences. Participants not only relied on their ordinary felt experience as a primary form of knowledge, but also identified the specific form of felt knowledge they received through tuning into their connection with spirit as a particularly clear and profound source of knowledge. Participants struggled with trying to convey the unique quality of this kind of knowledge most often resorting to the word intuition to describe it. Yet, the word intuition denotes a form of felt experience that is often viewed as ephemeral or unreliable in Western culture thus making it seem inadequate to express the sense of certainty that participants associated with intuitive knowledge or guidance.

As a result, Linda, Miriam, and Katherine started to use the verb "to know" as a noun to try to express and legitimize the knowledge they received from their spiritual connection. Thus, all three participants identified the awareness and direction they received from tuning in to their spiritual source as a "knowing". This knowing led Katherine to leave her job and Miriam to put energy into making a living through sculpting, steps which proved to be critical to their development, but which could easily have been and were considered "crazy" or illogical by the standards of others. Participants' use of "knowing" as a noun reflects a formal strategy for validating and communicating participants' sense of the critical importance of the felt experience of spiritual awareness, often called intuition, which is barely recognized as a legitimate form of knowledge in our culture. Their creative use of language reflects and supports their description in the content analysis of the pivotal role of spiritual knowledge or intuition in their process of healing and development.

### **Deploying Language as a Tool for Healing**

Participants also demonstrated a conscious deployment of language itself as an intrinsic aspect of their process of creating healing. Participants identified the critical importance of taking responsibility for creating their life experiences and their healing through themes that emerged in the content analysis such as shifting to a spiritual perspective, going within, clearing patterns and making conscious choices about healing. Participants' recognition of the role of language in forming the perceptions which then shaped their experiences, and their conscious deployment of language to create healing both supports these content themes and adds new information to our understanding of their process of healing.

Participants were aware of the critical role that language played in conceptualizing experience and that conceptualization in turn played in the experiences they were having. Eva encapsulated this view in the content analysis in saying "what you perceive, you receive." Participants saw how their choice of language limited their perception of a phenomenon or experience and deliberately changed their use of language to help them conceptualize and perceive their experience in ways that dissolved old patterns and brought preferred experiences to life. Mia exemplifies participants' awareness and deliberation in deploying language as a tool for healing. In the following passage she describes the way she changed her experience of relationships through letting go of the way she thought about and labeled her experiences. She counsels:

Be careful not to label an experience, because it may not be what it seems. So for me, I'd label something as a disappointment and so that kind of locks that experience under that umbrella, and you end up not really learning more than that about it. So I opened up the umbrella and just threw it away basically and said I'm open to new interpretations of things that have happened to me before, and as a result of releasing the stringent labels of what that was and what this was I, I allowed more fluidity in my new relationships.

Mia's comments exemplify participants' awareness of the power of language to structure their thinking and experience. Participants' deliberate deployment of language in creating healing reinforces and adds a new twist to themes identified in the content analysis. Participants' sense of responsibility in creating their experiences and the tools they used to create healing extend not only to unraveling existing patterns of thought,

feeling and behaviour, but also to unraveling and consciously choosing the language they use to understand, describe and ultimately create their perceptions and experiences.

### **Demonstration as Confirmation**

Another theme that emerged from the content analysis was that participants experienced a transformation of their perception and experience of life, themselves, and other people through drawing on spirituality for healing. They associated their experience of healing with a new found acceptance of themselves and others, they began to see the obstacles on their path as opportunities for development, and they increasingly took responsibility for finding the positive lesson in each and every experience. Although these themes emerged in relationship to their description of process of healing in the content analysis, a formal analysis of the text reveals that participants later demonstrated these new attitudes and skills in discussing their attitude and approach towards counselling.

Thus, although a sub-group of participants moved away from drawing on counselling as a vehicle for healing because of their sense of its limitations, and despite the fact that several participants in both this sub-group and the majority group that drew upon counselling as a tool for healing had negative as well as positive experiences with counselling, they all endorsed counselling a positive step on the path towards healing. By contextualizing their experience of counselling in terms of their particular needs, they acknowledged and accepted that other people with different needs might find counselling to be absolutely invaluable. In their comments, they focused on celebrating the fact that there is now an array of approaches available for healing that can accommodate and respond to people's different needs.



In addition, participants also believed that they received the experiences that they needed for their development, and reflected on how useful their negative counselling experiences had been in moving them onto a different counsellor or modality of healing. Several participants talked further about how they used, added to, or drew upon counselling, demonstrating their ownership of their own process of healing. In this way, participants demonstrated: a positive acceptance of their experiences and of the equal value of others' potentially different experiences of counselling; their tendency to look for the positive lessons in each life experience; and their pro-active approach to healing through their attitude and responses to counselling. Thus, themes that emerged regarding the transformation of their experience of life, and their experience of the positive qualities associated with healing in the content analysis were actually demonstrated by participants in other sections of their narratives.

### **Summary: Formal Analysis**

In summary, the process participants went through and the choices they made in telling their stories: their struggle with and use of language, as well as their description of their experiences served to support, enhance, and add to many of the themes identified in the content analysis. The difficulty participants had in finding the words to describe their experiences, their use of multiple identifiers, and their distinctive choice of vocabulary all helped to support and convey their sense of spirituality as a unique and ineffable lived experience of one's relationship with the divine. Participants' demonstration of emotion and their tendency to contextualize their knowledge in terms of their experience supported and fore-fronted the importance they place on felt experience as an arbitrator of knowledge of the divine, of themselves, and of life itself.

Participants' consciousness of the power of language and their deliberate deployment of existing words to try to convey new concepts reinforced their dual awareness of spirituality as both an essential aspect of the self and a resource for healing, and conveyed their sense of the importance of intuition as a legitimate form of knowledge. Participants' tendency to change their use of language as a means of creating new experiences not only supported their emphasis on taking responsibility for their experiences and their healing but also brought their awareness of language and of conceptualization itself to the fore as part of their process of healing. Finally, participants' representation of their experience of counselling actually demonstrated their deployment of many of the attitudes and skills they associated with healing in the content analysis, supporting the notion that they had experienced a personal transformation that left them with a new accepting, empowered and proactive perspective on life. In this way, participants' deployment of language and description of their experience of drawing on spirituality for healing supported, enhanced and extended many of the themes that emerged from the content analysis.

### **The Literary Analysis Supports and Extends the Content and Formal Analyses**

Another means of learning from participants' narratives involves examining their stories in the light of the Western literary tradition. Storytelling is an important form of conveying information in Western culture, and storytelling has certainly served as the central vehicle for communicating spiritual wisdom both in oral and written form from ancient times to the present (Sarbin, 1986). The type of stories that we choose to tell and the way we tell them say things about our experiences, interests and worldview. The stories we tell also emerge from our experience of the paradigmatic stories that shape and reflect our culture, its values, and our experience of ourselves within it (Sarbin 1986;

Thornborrow & Coates, 2005). The formal analysis of participants' stories demonstrated how they formed their stories and experiences in part through the linguistic and descriptive choices they made. A literary analysis reveals new dimensions of participants' narratives and experiences by setting them within the context of the Western literary tradition.

From a literary perspective, participants' stories most clearly adopt an epic form. The *Odyssey* is the paradigmatic example of the epic form in Western literature (Rutherford, 1998). The metaphors participants drew upon to describe their experience of spirituality and healing, the images they presented and the plot-lines they chose created their stories in an epic form. The literary devices they used to story their experience in epic form serve to reinforce the description of their experience and some of the themes that emerged from the content and formal analyses.

In addition, participants' narratives don't simply mirror but also innovate on the Homeric classic in ways that reflect a uniquely postmodern take on spirituality. A comparison of the similarities and differences between the *Odyssey* as a paradigmatic epic and their epics, and an analysis of their characterization of themselves as the story's hero, further supports content and formal themes suggesting that they experienced a significant transformation in identity and worldview through drawing on spirituality for healing. In addition, participants' innovation on the Homeric plot and worldview and invention of a new kind of hero further dramatizes and adds to the depth of our understanding of the novelty of their spiritual experiences, and of the new worldview that emerged from their process of drawing on spirituality for healing.

## **An Epic Form**

Despite the uniqueness of their experiences, the narrative structure of participants' stories, like many of the content themes they reflected, were very similar. For example, although tragedy was often an important factor in many of their stories, participants' responses to their tragic experiences gives their stories an inspirational rather than a tragic turn. Similarly, although many of the stories included elements of comedy, drama, romance, suspense and adventure, none of the stories fit any of these forms specifically. If we consider the great spiritual classic of Western Literature, the Bible, we see that the most broadly used forms of spiritual literature in the Bible are histories, dramas, epics, parables, letters, poetry and morality tales. Although participants' stories are histories of their experiences, the common form that participants' stories observed most closely was that of the epic. The biblical story of Moses leading the Israelites from Egypt is an example of a spiritual tale that similarly combines an epic structure and a historical perspective. Homer's *Odyssey* represents the paradigmatic epic narrative in Western literature that is structured in historical form (Rutherford, 1998), and participants' narratives parallel many of its features.

As the central character of the *Odyssey* (Griffen, 1987), Odysseus is on a long journey home. He travels in a magical world in which gods regularly interact with mortals and supernatural events provide obstacles and lessons on his journey. As part of the journey, Odysseus must descend to the underworld of shades and survive many psychic and physical challenges to which other men succumb. The plot is non-linear and meandering, and Odysseus dons many disguises along the way before revealing his true identity at the end of the story. Ultimately, he is triumphant, able to return home, reunite his family and win his place as king back from the many suitors aiming to usurp his

wife's hand and his kingdom. The story itself is a long appreciated metaphor for the spiritual journey we make to maturity as human beings which allows us to take our rightful place as wise and just monarchs in our own realm.

### **Participants as Spiritual Seekers**

Participants' narrative choices frame their stories within the context of a classic epic journey. Odysseus' journey itself can be viewed as spiritual in the sense that he sought to fulfill the ancient Greek value of achieving his *télos* [end] in returning home to take his rightful place in family and community. Study participants similarly characterized themselves as seekers on a spiritual journey. For example, Lila says:

I've always been a seeker. Inside of me there has been a push to learn about who we are. I don't know where it came from, but I know that we're greater than our physical bodies.

Similarly, Michaela characterizes her spiritual journey as a search for life's deeper meaning and purpose. She says: "Everything has always been trying to explore what it means, and going deeper, always." Mia refers back to classic mythic tales such as the Odyssey in making the connection between her search to "understand things unseen" and the human search for life's meaning that has been a central topic of spiritual and secular literature since ancient times. She says:

The power of the human spirit is kind of what I was looking at. So I was also fascinated by legends, myths and fairytales. ... It was more than entertainment or the plot of the story, it was something deeper about the hero's journey.

By placing themselves in the role of spiritual seeker, participants cast their stories in the tradition of the hero's journey towards mastery, self realization, and spiritual liberation.

### **A Meandering Journey**

Participants' stories also mirror the design of the epic in that they conceptualized their spiritual experiences as a journey. At least 8 of the 12 participants used the word journey to describe their spiritual search at some point in the interview. Like the Odyssey itself, participants' stories and experiences follow a non-linear and meandering path to the goal. Participants sometimes spent years in a particular kind of practice or experience without making what seemed like significant progress and then made great leaps forward in short periods at other times. In talking about his spiritual experiences, Bruce provides an example of the way that participants consciously framed their stories as a journey within the context of the larger human journey. He says: "It's a journey that I create a story about. ... We all have a journey."

### **A Magical World**

Like Homer, participants also set their journeys in a spirit filled world where magical occurrences which reflected their spiritual viewpoint regularly occurred. In both cosmologies, the traveler finds spiritual messages at every turn through interacting with gods, through events that happen on the journey, through seers and guides. Often the key to the journey lies in learning to understand and interpret the messages of spirit, gaining the aid and assistance of the gods. Although the nature of participants' spiritual cosmology differs for Homer's, the journey that is experienced in both types of epic is by definition a spiritual journey because it is shaped by the hands of divine forces.

### **Learning Through Experience**

Like Odysseus, participants learned and matured principally through the challenges and experiences they encountered on the journey. Participants' journeys were adventure and challenge filled, requiring their own decent into the underworld of their

psyches in order to be able to return home. Despite the copious amounts of reading and study participants did, their orientation to learning resembled the ancient Greek's view that the test of learning was the ability to live the good or just life. Participants counted experience as their greatest teacher and based their knowledge not on what they read, but on what they had been able to put into practice and experience for themselves.

### **Demonstrable Wisdom**

Odysseus' moral character and learning was reflected in his ability to survive the challenges he faced. Similarly, participants valued experiential knowledge as being demonstrable through the abilities people displayed. This was reflected in their own integration of emotion, and their demonstration of the positive outlook that they identified with healing in their narratives. It was also reflected in the fact that they felt they received the most from counsellors who had done their own spiritual exploration and healing because they were able to demonstrate superior knowledge, skill, and the integration of a spiritual understanding through their behaviour. Like the epic hero, participants' principle route to wisdom and maturity has been the route through their own experience on the journey, and they have similarly come to value knowledge gained through experience and demonstrated through behaviour.

### **Coming Home**

Like Odysseus, participants also experienced their spiritual journey as a journey that took them home. For example, Silke in a previous quotation relates spirituality not only to healing but ties both concepts to coming back home. She says:

Being spiritual is a healing process. Spirituality is healing, *oh, oh, oh*, [italics mine] because it takes me home. The more spiritual I am, the closer I am to home.  
... I come back to who I really am.

Just as Odysseus found that successfully negotiating the many challenges on his journey led him to develop wisdom and gain the cooperation of the gods in returning home, so too did participants find that they developed wisdom and an acquaintance with spirit through their journeys that allowed them to come home to a whole new experience of themselves and their lives.

Analyzing participants' narratives within the context of the Western literary tradition demonstrates that the images and metaphors they used, the setting they created, the plot they constructed, and the way they characterized themselves as heroes creates their narratives in the form of an epic journey. The narrative and literary devices participants use in framing their stories supports, reinforces and plays a role in creating the themes that emerged from the content and formal analyses of their narratives. An example of these themes include: viewing spirituality and healing as a journey, emphasizing experience as an arbitrator of knowledge and wisdom, and experiencing interaction with spirit in the world at large. Participants' creation of their narratives in epic form further serves to cast the overall character of their narratives as stories of triumph, discovery, and completion. The fact that the stories they tell are epic stories further crystallizes the meaning and emotional impact of their experiences as experiences of spiritual discovery for the reader.

### **A New Kind of Epic**

Participants' narratives don't merely mirror but also innovate upon several features of Homer's classic tale. These innovations are meaningful in reflecting the postmodern context of participants' spiritual tales and reinforcing themes that were identified in earlier analyses. Odysseus' journey is an external physical journey that is legendary because it acts as a metaphor for the spiritual ground he covers in his travels.



Participants' stories reverse this narrative device by focusing on the internal spiritual and psychological journey they took with their external experiences being portrayed as reflecting and inspiring their internal changes. This perspective reflects the shift to an internal and psychological focus on spirituality in the postmodern age.

Although participants shared Homer's sense of a spirit filled world and also made interacting with the divine and experiencing magical events a normal part of the journey, they fundamentally differed in their cosmologies. The world of the *Odyssey* was peopled by external gods that determined the fates of men and were sometimes cavalier or cruel. Odysseus' ability to court their favour and negotiate a protective relationship was key to completing his journey. Experiencing spirituality within the context of a relationship to an external divinity whose protection or favour is necessary represents the paradigm of spirituality that dominated Western society from the Hellenic to the modern period (Hunt, 2003).

By contrast, participants experienced spirit not just as an external force but also as a benevolent presence that was at once the most essential part of themselves and external to the self at the same time. Thus, the spirit filled world they experienced reflected their ability to connect and communicate with their essential nature as spirit inside and outside of the self. This unified, both/and vision of spirituality is a hallmark of the postmodern paradigm of holistic spirituality (Sutcliffe, 2003). The magical world participants experienced was one where spirit is always present and available should they choose to go within to discover and align themselves with the greater reality as they experience it.

Similarly, the home to which participants returned was not the wood and stone world of the palace or city-state, or the social world of family and community that

Odysseus came to reclaim, but rather the internal world of the spiritual self. Miriam talks about the irony of the fact that our internal yearning leads us to embark on a journey that eventually finds us headed back to ourselves to discover that which we are seeking. She says:

That spiritual aspect of ourselves that we know that we're searching for something and yet within us is the knowing, also within us, that we are really whole.

In this way, participants' journeys extend beyond the circular process of completion through a triumph of lessons learned and purpose fulfilled that is represented by Odysseus' return home. Their journeys resemble more of a spiral as participants' return also represents an awakening to the reality of themselves as spirit itself and to the never ending process of unfolding and integrating that awareness in their lived experience. Thus, Bruce talks about his spiritual journey as one of both return and discovery. He says:

Now I know what peace feels like. ... I've found something in myself in my journey. Yet in the spiritual context it's always been there, but I just didn't know it.

Participants' narratives thus reflect the spiral or story within the story design common to postmodern literature (i.e., Barth, 1972) that is effective in conveying the never-ending journey of spiritual experience and unfolding that was identified in the content analysis of participants' stories.

### **A New Kind of Hero**

Participants' stories also introduce a new brand of hero or heroine. The traditional epic hero is a strong character who overcomes impossible odds and becomes renowned

for his character and skill (Griffen, 1987). Modern epic, action, and adventure tales have introduced new types of heroes (Lacy, 2005). The flawed hero: a bag guy who rediscovers a sense of caring and comes through by the end of the story, often dying in the process, is one example of a modern epic hero. There is also the underdog hero who initially appears ordinary but discovers and demonstrates his inner strengths and talents through the process of overcoming challenges. The manner in which participants characterized their experiences fit none of these paradigms and offered instead a unique vision of a hero or heroine who is at once empowered and surrendered.

On the empowerment side of the equation, our heroes take complete responsibility for themselves, their experiences and the life they are living. They recognize that they are at choice in their response to each situation in their lives and that their choices will by and large determine their experience. They know that growth is the only way through challenge and actively engage with the challenges they confront on the spiritual realm knowing that the results of their skilled decisions within will show up in the material realm. Participants very much presented themselves as empowered heroes through statements like: "I am fully responsible for my life. I create my life, and whatever is in my life I have created and I want it precisely the way I want it."

Similarly, Anne talked about the way spirituality helped her come out of the "victim mode" in response to her head injury and refocus on her power to heal herself. Participants were on the same wavelength in terms of taking responsibility for their reaction to life and believing that their quality of life and their experiences would be determined by their willingness to engage with, understand, and respond to the spiritual significance of their experiences. They very much presented a vision of themselves as at

choice and as having all the knowledge and power within that they needed to heal and grow through any situation.

At the same time, participants were also united in describing themselves as surrendering to a larger spiritual reality that was moving through them and providing guidance, support, inspiration, comfort and healing in the process. Thus, they also expressed a great deal of humility in finding their way through the process of spiritual growth and healing. For example, when participants talked about how they created change in their lives or in the world they also said things like:

It's about me being a conduit for whatever is out there, the energy, to move through me to the other person through my intention, and my intention is I just want to help you. I don't know how I'm going to help you, but I'm just putting it out to the spiritual world to say, just use me as your tool.

Thus, participants also viewed themselves fundamentally as a conduit for spirit. They often said that they didn't know exactly how they made something happen. They could describe the process they went through and they trusted that if they followed the same steps in terms of moving towards their intentions and employing their spiritual practices, healing and growth would follow. However, they also believed that all they were able to experience and accomplish occurred through their ability to allow and work with the greater energy of spirit as it manifested in, through, with, and around them.

In this way, participants presented a unique characterization of the epic hero. At once responsible, empowered and capable of amazing skills, talents and knowledge, yet totally surrendered and acting as a vehicle for the greater movement of the divine through him in everything he does at the same time. This characterization of the spiritual hero

supports participants' description in the content and formal analyses of the transformation they experienced through drawing on spirituality for healing. Their spiritual heroes demonstrate a progressive integration of both their identity as spirit and of their acknowledgement of the greater reality of spirit in and around them. Participants' creation of a new kind of hero not only reflects and supports the notion of their transformation but also evidences the creation of new kind of experience. Participants' narrative choices highlight the uniqueness and novelty of their experience of spirituality and healing.

Therefore, participants' narratives don't simply mirror Homer's classic epic paradigm, but innovate upon it in meaningful ways. Participants' recasting of the spiritual journey in terms of one's internal development, and their updating of Homer's cosmology as one where a single benevolent spirit enervates all matter reflects a uniquely postmodern take on spirituality. Participants' innovations on Homer's epic reflect and reinforce such content and formal themes as their belief in spirit as a benevolent force within the self and within the world, their awareness of spirituality as a never ending journey of unfolding, and their transformation to realizing and accepting the reality of their identity as spirit itself through their healing journeys. Similarly, participants' characterization of the spiritual hero reflects a subject who is at once empowered and surrendered. This characterization of the spiritual hero also supports and demonstrates content and formal themes surrounding their personal transformation, and their realization of their identity as spirit while also opening to the greater reality of spirit beyond the self.

Participants' creation of their stories in epic form and their particular recasting of the Homeric saga further serves to dramatize and highlight their success in drawing on spirituality for healing, and the novelty of their experiences of spirituality and healing. Participants' narratives were amazingly similar in adhering to an epic form. Like the paradigmatic epic, the *Odyssey*, their stories were stories of triumph, discovery and reclamation. Participants' recasting of the Homeric plot, cosmology and hero also reflect a postmodern take on the spiritual journey as an internal journey of realization and transformation as well as one of return. Participants' own experiences of healing and transformation are reflected and dramatized in their invention of a new plot structure, cosmology and a new kind of hero. The necessity of innovating forms to express their experiences highlights the novelty of their experience of spirituality and healing and the novel world view that has emerged from their journeys. A literary analysis of participants' narratives therefore confirms themes from the content and formal analyses and further enhances our vision and understanding of the novelty and significance of participants' experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness.

Participants themselves were often aware of the significance of their narratives. They expressed a sense of themselves as participating in the greater discovery and exploration of new frontiers of being and experiencing through their journeys of drawing on spirituality for healing and wellness. In reflecting on the meaning and significance of her experience, Michaela puts participants' stories into the context of the larger human story of growth, healing and expansion. She says:

I'm not sure, because it's so much. But just the growth that I've been through, and the growth of love, and to know that we're part of something so much bigger, and

that we mean so much as part of that, all of us. And it's an incredible story that we're part of. The story we are living just in this life, the story that we're part of and have no idea of, that we are surrounded by love and by help on this side and on the other side. That the terrible things that happen to us are, it's so cliché, but they are opportunities for our greatest growth. And I think that our purpose is to reach our potential, and that potential is of our highest good, our highest creativity, intelligence and love, and all of the things that happen to us are the universe's way of interacting with us.

### **The Formal and Literary Analyses Add to Our Understanding of Participants' Experiences**

In summary, a formal analysis of participants' narratives functions to support, enhance and add new information to the content analysis in previous chapters. Participants use of and struggle with language and their description of their experiences supported identified content themes such as the importance of entering one's felt experience as part of the process of healing. An analysis of the formal themes and devices that created the narratives also served to highlight dimensions of a theme that didn't emerge as clearly in the content analysis, such as revealing the importance of felt experience as an arbitrator of knowledge throughout participants' narratives. In addition to supporting or enhancing content themes, the formal analysis of participant narratives further revealed novel information such as participants' conscious deployment of language as tool for healing. By supporting, enhancing and adding new information to content themes, the formal analysis of participants' narratives adds depth to our understanding of their experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing.

Similarly, participants' innovations on Homer's plot, cosmology and characterization of the hero further reflect a postmodern recasting of the classic epic. These innovations also support central content and formal themes such as a focus on the spiritual journey as an internal journey of discovery, and the transformation that participants experienced in identity and experience through their spiritual journeys. Finally, participants' recasting of Homer's story and invention of a new heroic character also highlights the novelty and significance of both the changes they experienced through their process of drawing on spirituality for healing, and of their experiences of spirituality and healing in general. This basic literary analysis of participants' narratives not only supports and reinforces the findings of previous analyses, but also adds to our understanding of the meaning and significance of participants' experiences of drawing on spirituality for healing.



**Appendix B****Study Flyer**

## **Appendix C**

### **Consent Form**

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Guide**

## **Using Spirituality to Construct Experiences of Wellness and Healing Interview Guide**

Dear Participant:

Narrative research is designed to give you the space to tell your story of spirituality, healing and wellness in your way. During the first part of the interview, (approximately thirty to forty-five minutes), I'll focus on listening to your experience. In particular, I'll ask you to share your experience in two areas:

- 1) How have you drawn on spirituality to respond to the life challenges that you have faced? This is the main focus of the interview.
- 2) How have you drawn on counselling to respond to the life challenges that you've faced?

Some people have found it helpful to think back to major events in their development of spirituality over their life, and mark important moments related to their development and healing on a timeline. It might be helpful to pose yourself some questions in preparation for the interview. Some possible questions are: When did you first start drawing on spirituality for healing? How did that happen? How have things changed for you? How do you draw on spirituality for healing or wellness now? How about counselling? What role has it played in your life? These questions are just a few examples, don't feel that you have to respond to these specific questions. Perhaps there are others that you feel are more relevant to your experience on the topic. Your approach to spirituality and healing is a topic you are the best expert on, so there is no wrong way to approach it. My focus is on listening to and learning about your experience, thoughts and feelings about spirituality, healing and wellness in your own life.

In the second thirty to forty-five minutes of the interview (for an hour and a half maximum), I'll invite us to reflect on the story you've shared and what it means to you.

## **Appendix E**

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

# THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology,  
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## USING SPIRITUALITY TO CONSTRUCT EXPERIENCES OF WELLNESS AND HEALING

### Demographic Questionnaire

1. What age group are you in?

- Under 19 \_\_\_\_\_  
20-29 \_\_\_\_\_  
30-39 \_\_\_\_\_  
40-54 \_\_\_\_\_  
55+ \_\_\_\_\_

2. How would you identify your racial/ethnic origin? (Tick all that apply)

- Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_  
Black/African/ \_\_\_\_\_  
Caribbean \_\_\_\_\_  
South Asian \_\_\_\_\_  
North Asian \_\_\_\_\_  
Latin American \_\_\_\_\_  
First Nations \_\_\_\_\_  
Middle Eastern \_\_\_\_\_  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. Would you describe yourself as (choose one):

- spiritual \_\_\_\_\_ or religious \_\_\_\_\_  
both \_\_\_\_\_ or neither \_\_\_\_\_

4. Are you a member of an organized religion: yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, which religion:

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- High school \_\_\_\_\_  
College/Vocational \_\_\_\_\_  
University \_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Degree \_\_\_\_\_

6. What kinds of psychological challenges have you experienced in the last two years? (Please tick all that apply).

- Anxiety \_\_\_\_\_  
Depression \_\_\_\_\_  
Panic attacks \_\_\_\_\_  
Trauma \_\_\_\_\_  
Grief and loss \_\_\_\_\_  
Loneliness \_\_\_\_\_  
Relationship \_\_\_\_\_  
Issues \_\_\_\_\_  
Work Issues \_\_\_\_\_  
Life stage \_\_\_\_\_  
Changes \_\_\_\_\_  
Adjusting to/addressing: \_\_\_\_\_  
Physical illness \_\_\_\_\_  
Chronic pain \_\_\_\_\_  
Stress \_\_\_\_\_  
Another mental health \_\_\_\_\_  
Issue \_\_\_\_\_

7. What kinds of spiritual practices do you engage in to support your health and well-being (Please tick all that apply):

attend church \_\_\_\_\_  
 pray \_\_\_\_\_  
 meditate \_\_\_\_\_  
 yoga \_\_\_\_\_  
 ti chi \_\_\_\_\_  
 journal \_\_\_\_\_  
 visualization \_\_\_\_\_  
 be in nature \_\_\_\_\_  
 read inspirational books \_\_\_\_\_  
 special diet \_\_\_\_\_  
 rituals/ceremonies \_\_\_\_\_  
 discuss spiritual issues \_\_\_\_\_  
 play music \_\_\_\_\_  
 sing \_\_\_\_\_  
 do art \_\_\_\_\_  
 set intentions \_\_\_\_\_  
 affirmations \_\_\_\_\_  
 pray with others \_\_\_\_\_  
 volunteer \_\_\_\_\_  
 attend self-development classes/workshops \_\_\_\_\_  
 express gratitude \_\_\_\_\_  
 donate money \_\_\_\_\_  
 others: (please describe below) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

8. If you seek support from professionals to enhance your wellness or facilitate healing, please indicate the kinds of services you've accessed in the last two years (tick all that apply):

Reiki \_\_\_\_\_  
 Massage \_\_\_\_\_  
 Aromatherapy \_\_\_\_\_  
 Naturopathy \_\_\_\_\_  
 Elder \_\_\_\_\_  
 Energy work \_\_\_\_\_  
 Tarot \_\_\_\_\_

Medium/ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Psychic \_\_\_\_\_  
 Astrologer \_\_\_\_\_  
 Minister \_\_\_\_\_  
 Chiropractor \_\_\_\_\_  
 Homeopath \_\_\_\_\_  
 Counsellor/ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Psychologist \_\_\_\_\_  
 Coach \_\_\_\_\_  
 Spiritual \_\_\_\_\_  
 Counsellor \_\_\_\_\_  
 Medical Dr. \_\_\_\_\_  
 Psychiatrist \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

9. Is it important to you to seek help from people who incorporate spirituality into their practice?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

10. What kinds of services did you find most helpful?

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

11. What sector of the economy do you work in?

Education \_\_\_\_\_  
 Medical/Health \_\_\_\_\_  
 Financial/Legal \_\_\_\_\_  
 Service/Tourism \_\_\_\_\_  
 Social Service/Psychological \_\_\_\_\_  
 Manufacturing/Industrial \_\_\_\_\_  
 Government \_\_\_\_\_  
 Homemaker/ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Not in the paid workforce \_\_\_\_\_

12. Which category currently reflects your yearly family income?

Under \$25,000	_____
\$25,001-\$50,000	_____
\$50,001-\$80,000	_____
\$80,001-\$100,000	_____
\$100,001 plus	_____

13. What is your current relationship status?

Married	_____
Single	_____
Divorced	_____
Common-law	_____
Widowed	_____



**Appendix F**  
**Ethics Approval Form**