Women's Age-30 Transition:
An Opportunity for Personal Transformation

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Abstract

Nine women participated in a study investigating their recent age-30 transition, which had ended positively. Past research has shown that this is the most significant transition in women's lives. However, this research is based in a social-cultural time when women's lives were considerably different from those of today. In addition, no study to date has specifically examined how this transition was traversed so that it ended well. Thus, the research question for this study was: *What is women's experience of the age-30 transition that is ultimately deemed positive?*

The use of a phenomenological methodology provided a comprehensive description of the lived experience of the transition. The participants gave open-ended accounts of how the transition unfolded, their meaning-making around it, and how they developed a more integrated, authentic, sense of self and fulfilled existence by its conclusion. The analysis of these accounts yielded seven main themes: Descent into Hell, Contention with Outside Forces, The Experience of Being Helped and Supported, Development of the Self, Generation of Self-Determination and Life Direction, Creating New Relationships with Others, and Reflections Upon the Invaluable Experience.

This study shows that as a result of the women's positive conclusion of this transition, they became personally transformed and were able to move into individuation at a relatively young age. These findings can be useful to counsellors and therapists who work with women going through this challenging transition. Further qualitative and quantitative studies are warranted in order to substantiate these preliminary findings of women's present-day age-30 transition, as well as to update the research literature.

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Chapter I

Introduction

> The most important developmental task facing women today is the formation of identity, for it is in the realm of identity that a woman bases her sense of herself as well as her vision of the structure of her life. Identity incorporates a woman's choice for herself, her priorities, and the guiding principles by which she makes decisions. (Josselson, 1987, p. 3)

Previous research on women's adult years suggests that the most significant psychosocial transition is during young adulthood around the age of 30. This contrasts with research on men's development, which shows that the biggest transition for men is during the "mid-life crisis" around the age of 40 (Alexander, 1980; Evans, Blackburn, & Heatherington, 1981; Levinson, 1996; Reinke, Ellicott, Harris, & Hancock, 1985; Reinke, Holmes, & Harris, 1985).

However, to date all studies available on women's age-30 transition were conducted in the 1980s (such as Josselson, 1987; Mercer, Nichols, & Doyle, 1989; Reinke et al. 1985a, 1985b). For example, although Levinson's longitudinal study of women's lives was published in 1996, his work is based on interviews with women between 1980 and 1982, when the women reflected back on their age-30 transitions that occurred during 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, the experiences of those women who had undertaken careers were rather revolutionary: "the career women studied here represent the first generation in American history in which a sizable minority of women chose an anti-traditional path" (Levinson, 1996, p. 409).

The Reinke et al. studies (1985a, 1985b) were also retrospective, where women who were middle-aged and older in the 1980s recalled their age-30 transitions that had been experienced some years ago. At that time, most of the women had made

relationship-oriented goals in their early 20s that set the circumstances for their lives, and only a small minority pursued education and/or employment. Societal conditions have since changed radically, and focussing solely on the family is neither an economic or social reality for most women today.

While the 1960s and 1970s were the decades when the tides of societal change began to turn, the years since have been a time of trying out new ways living, as this tremendous social-cultural revision has been marked by the loosening of rigid, constricting norms, expectations, and conventional roles for women and men.

> In the last few centuries the forces of institutional and technological change have tended to modify and blur the traditional gender splitting . . . . We are now in the early stages of a vast historical transition. The traditional patterns are eroding but satisfactory new ones have not yet been discovered and legitimized. (Levinson,1996, p. 7)

For example, 30 years ago people were much less likely to undertake a common-law marriage, divorce, remain single, head a family as a single parent, adopt a child as a single parent, be a stay-at-home father while the mother worked, or remarry and together raise offspring from previous partnerships, either in a heterosexual or homosexual arrangement. Society was much less forgiving of women opting not to have children, postponing childbirth to around 40, and/or choosing to focus solely on career. With a new, almost dizzying array of options that are now available in this time of extensive societal metamorphosis, women's lives, and therefore transitions, are probably different at the end of the 20th century, compared to transitions experienced during the 1960s, 1970s, and even the early 1980s.

Historically, there was little possibly for women to contemplate nontraditional roles for themselves, such as being in the labour force. Erikson (1968) stated that women's sole function was to "create in each child the somatic . . . basis for his [sic] physical, cultural and individual identity. This mission, once a child is conceived, must be completed. It is woman's unique job" (p. 289). In contrast, research has shown that leading a multi-faceted life, which would include having a vocation, is often a prerequisite for the development of an autonomous identity and integrated sense of self. For instance, Reinke et al. (1985a) found that women who had successfully traversed the age-30 transition were those who worked outside the home in their 20s.

However, the already-challenging work of optimal identity development has been difficult for women in the past because

> throughout history, a woman's place has been defined by her society. Even when these definitions are more implicit than explicit, women are susceptible to cultural definitions of how they ought to be and sensitive to social guidelines that tell them whether they are doing a good job at being a woman. (Josselson, 1987, p. 2)

Thus, breaking societal dictates in order to define and fulfill oneself vocationally or through other creative means, by doing something other than being a wife and mother, was not common practice for the majority of women.

As more varied life opportunities are becoming legitimated and available to women, they can continue to grow in diverse ways, as opposed to being stunted in their personal development by the more limited range of experiences they have had in the past. Indeed, Helson and Moane (1987) noted that women's life trajectories have started to

change in recent years, and that "if a substantial number of women continue to launch careers in their 20's and have children in their 30's, the pattern of normative change may take a different form" (p. 185).

This increase in social and personal freedom, however, is a double-edged sword, because it necessitates inner awareness and cohesiveness of identity. The weakening of societal prohibitions and fewer signposts marking the path as to what is the "right" way to be, and being offered a smorgasbord of options to choose from, can make crafting a unique identity an especially bewildering and frightening challenge. The process is made even more daunting with Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986, pp. 50-51) observation that

> women who are unable to see themselves as growing, evolving, and changing
> are at a particular disadvantage in a rapidly changing technological society . . .
> [W]hen their social arrangements collapse and demands for change are
> imposed, many women must look inward for self-truths, abandoning the notion
> that they can and should rely on others for knowledge, direction, and care.

This current state of affairs requires an in-depth examination of women's identity development, and particularly of the age-30 transition, because many women feel that this is the most significant one in life, and because the literature that does exist is outdated and may not be applicable to women going through it today. Furthermore, no study has ever focussed solely on how women get through this transition well, where they have achieved a new level of personal understanding, cohesion, self-determined direction, and goals, after a time of intense self-exploration.

Women's age-30 transition has also never been investigated with a purely phenomenological methodology, an approach that yields themes that offer a substantive, detailed description of a lived experience and the meaning-making around it. Such information would be inherently valuable to better understand this process. Accordingly, this research inquiry examined the very subjective accounts of women's experience of the age-30 transition: its nature, how it unfolded, how the women themselves made sense of it, and how they developed a more intact, integrated sense of self, and a satisfying life.

Thus, the research question for this study was, *What is women's experience of the age-30 transition that is ultimately deemed positive?* This inquiry was warranted in order to bring new information to the research literature. The benefits of this endeavour would also be the gleaning of information that could be personally meaningful, and could act as a guiding light for other women trying to navigate this passage at this time in history, as well as for the therapists that work with them.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In the following literature review, I will define and delineate various factors and processes that were anticipated to emerge in some form in the research findings: how ideal identity development occurs, the nature of transitions, previous research findings on the age-30 transition for both men and women, and how crisis can lead to personal transformation by changes in meaning-making. Conversely, the difference between crisis and transition is also addressed: this occurs when a crisis is aborted prematurely so that the positive conclusion to the transition is forgone, and the opportunity for personal transformation is lost or "retrenched."

This literature review will also impart previous research findings on the lives of "integrated" women who developed a solid sense of self, and the kinds of positive differences they strive to make in the world around them, which were expected to be similar to the experiences of women today who have traversed the age-30 transition and are living fulfilled lives.

Identity

> To venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose one's self . . . . And to venture in the highest sense is precisely to become conscious of one's self.
>
> Kierkegarrd

Although transitions are usually painful, tumultuous times, they are often necessary if an individual is to become more mature, and fully adult. Psychosocial development shows healthy progression from childhood to adulthood as being an interactive process between self and the environment, where the individual moves from a

state of relative lack of differentiation between self and others to being an autonomous person with flexible, yet clear boundaries.

Transitions throughout adulthood also offer the opportunity for ongoing growth. Such experiences are often critical because otherwise the person lives with a false self-perception that is alienated from, clashes with, and is incongruent with one's authenticity, or sense of true self. The false self is usually internalized during dysfunctional family dynamics or other pejorative social experiences, starting in childhood, when a person is imbued with the belief that they are something other than their true inner nature (Adler, 1958; Rogers, 1961).

As differentiation progresses, a more complex system of personalized, authentic beliefs and expectations for life emerges, which are integrated by the person into a whole, coherent, unique, or "individuated" sense of themselves (Kegan, 1982; Levinson, 1978). Identity, then, can be defined as the stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world, which becomes a means for the person to organize and understand their experience and share their meaning system with others (Josselson, 1987). As the person becomes more highly individuated, they are also less egocentric, more independent, empathic, self-confident, and creative (Werner, 1967), which facilitates quality intimacy and caring for others.

Others who have conceptualized identity development include Erikson (1958/1968), who said that a person is most aware of their identity when they are just about to make its acquaintance. He called this state "Moratorium," or what is otherwise known as the identity crisis. This is a time of being keenly aware of choices, and of imagining or experimenting with alternative ways of being. The person realizes that they

have options in terms of how they can live, and are exploring new possibilities. Once commitment is made to a particular identity, the questioning and dilemmas fade and are replaced by personal equanimity, a sense of purposefulness, and meaning.

Marcia (1966) delineated Erikson's theory of identity formation further by showing that in order to create a differentiated identity, the person must experience some crisis in the belief system that they inherited during childhood. The issues that required reexamination were occupation and ideology, with the latter subdivided into religious and political ideology. "Moratoriums" were actively engaged in a crisis or exploratory phase but were still struggling to make commitments. Individuals who became "Identity-Achieved" were those who successfully transcended crises by testing various ideological options and then committed themselves to a particular way of being, which became the core of an integrated identity (Josselson, 1987).

In their quantitative, longitudinal investigation of personality changes across the lifespan of university-educated women, Helson and Moane (1987) found that cycles of "Moratorium-Achievement-Moratorium-Achievement" recurred throughout adulthood. Thus, breaking down an outdated, inappropriate identity structure, and reconsolidating a new one that is more refined and individuated is a possibility during transitions across the lifespan, for those who are willing to do the work.

> Identity begins to be *constructed* (italics in original) when the individual starts to make decisions about who to be, with what group to affiliate, what beliefs to adopt, what interpersonal values to espouse and what occupational direction to pursue. Most, though not all, individuals 'have' an identity; however, only some have a *self-constructed* identity. (Helson & Maone, 1987, p. 166)

<u>Transitions</u>

> Most significant transitions . . . involve a time in hell. You go down before you
> come up. And most of these journeys must be taken alone. (Bridges, 1980, p. 157)

Bridges (1980) and Levinson (1996) both described adulthood as unfolding in a

rhythm of expansion and contraction, change and stability. The times of upheaval are

usually characterized by feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-confidence, impatience,

frustration, irritability, intolerance, and disorganization (Crummette, 1975; Waechter,

1974). Transitions are the turning points where a person's life course takes a new

direction that requires adaptation or change, by restructuring behaviours and roles that are

appropriate to the new orientation. The end result is often a change in responsibilities,

goals, identity, and feelings about oneself in general (Mercer et al., 1989; Schlossberg,

1981; 1984).

The termination of a particular life structure involves exploration around basic

questions such as, "What do I want from life? What do I need to change in myself, and in

my situation, so that I can have a better life, according to my values? What are my

values? What is most important to me?" Initially, the focus is often on one particular

component, usually the most painful one. However, in order to successfully complete the

transition, all of the parts, and eventually the overall structure, must be dealt with

(Levinson, 1996).

The landmark study by Belenky et al., (1986) that delineated the development of

women's voice and sense of self, was a qualitative inquiry that used in-depth interviews

and a case study approach. It was based on the experiences of women from a wide age

range, as well as varying educational and socio-economic backgrounds. The women who

had become individuated began the process with a kind of rite of passage, where they

removed themselves psychologically and/or geographically from all they had known. During this time they asked themselves, "Who am I? What is my life to be about?" The resultant inner restructuring eventually brought a heightened consciousness and sense of choice about "how I want to think" and "how I want to be," which involved confronting and integrating the pieces of the self that had been fragmented and contradictory.

Based on his years of experience as a writer and facilitator of life-transition workshops, Bridges (1980) outlined a comprehensive, in-depth description of how transition usually unfolds. Paradoxically, the process begins when an out-dated way of life ends. The second phase is a period of confusion and withdrawal, or "fertile emptiness," akin to a rite of passage, with much internal reworking and searching for new meaning. Questions pondered include, "What is waiting in the wings of my life? What are my unlived potentialities, interests, and talents? Who is this new person that I am about to become?" In the beginning, new directions and growth are actualized.

Often it is not the beginning that accounts for confusion and pain, but rather the lack of proper closure on the old life. Endings involve disengagement, when one is separated from important activities, relationships, settings, or roles, which creates disidentification, or the loss of self-definition through the role or label that had once been possessed. Disenchantment grows with the realization that the assumptions, hopes, and beliefs embraced so far in life are no longer appropriate. This causes reflection, grieving, and the letting go of these beliefs, and eventually to a change in personal philosophies. It is a time of disorientation, and of being lost, confused, and of having no bearings.

The neutral zone is analogous to traditional rites of passage, when a person went into the woods or desert to remain for a period of time, removed from familiar

connections, the outmoded identity, and stripped of the old reality. It is a time "between dreams," an "empty space in the world and lifetime within which a new sense of self could gestate" (Bridges, 1980, p. 112). Today, people are prone to take time out from everyday activity or go into therapy to do important inner work, in order to gain rich insight, discover what they really want, and create a new direction to pursue that would provide a new sense of purpose and meaning.

Return to the world involves integration of the new identity with some elements from the old one. It is often difficult, however, to know when one has been in the neutral zone long enough, and which path represents the "true" beginning, especially because it is often untidy, subtle, and indirect, and falls upon the heels of the previous chaos. The first hints of the new beginning often come as an idea, dream, impression, or image from the lower edge of consciousness. Finally, after some time, "when we are aligned with deep longings . . . we become powerfully motivated" (Bridges, 1980, p. 138).

The Age-30 Transition

> It is bewildering to discover, at around 30, that the life we so arduously constructed over the previous decade has major imperfections. There is an old cultural assumption – largely unexamined by the human sciences – that by age 20 or so people normally establish a life pattern that in broad outline will continue unchanged throughout the adult years. We are then shocked by the realization that our initial adult life structure is problematic in some ways and that we still have some "growing up" to do. (Levinson, 1996, p. 117)

Charlotte Buhler was the first to study the age-30 transition in the 1930s, and found even then that successful and long-lasting commitments in life were not made until around the age of 30. It was only at this point that "individuals have become clear as to their definite attitude toward life" (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1968, p. 84). While the intervening years since childhood were technically adult in their roles and relationships, they were in actuality "preparatory in character" for what the person would be involved

in during the bulk of the adult years. Similarly, Christie (1977, p. 394) noted that while at

20 a person is likely to "put on a show of being someone else," eventually it becomes

rather "tiring to keep up the character you invented for yourself and so you relapse into

individuality and become more like yourself." Thus, it seems that during the 20s one's

"true self" is still hidden in the depths of the unconscious (Handel, 1987); with time it

develops a yearning to emerge.

Levinson (1978), Gould (1978), and Bridges (1980) also found that the age-30

transition was most likely to be the pivotal transition point in a lifetime, when "whatever

it was that people were doing before begins to seem not quite right" (Bridges, 1980, p.

37). While these studies do provide an understanding of what this transition looked like

in the past, they are probably antiquated as they are at least 20 years out of date. In

addition, none of the methodologies delved into the subjective lived experience of the

entire phenomenon, and a detailed telling by the participants of how they negotiated the

transition to equanimity on the other side.

Levinson's longitudinal studies. In his extensive work on adult development,

Levinson used "intensive biographical interviews" where people told their life stories.

The qualitative analysis reconstructed the story, while bringing forth the meanings and

themes. During this process Levinson found that men's (1978) and women's (1996)

development consisted of stable, coherent periods of time in the adult life structure.

Every developmental period lasted about five to seven years, began and ended at a well-

defined average age, with a range of about two years above and below the average. A

transitional period terminated the existing life structure and opened the possibility of a

new one.

Similar to Marcia's Moratorium status, the age-30 transition involved exploring and testing provisional choices and new directions. It was a time when both the opportunity and the need for greater integration and individuation were strongest, as the person was compelled to heal deep divisions in the self and in significant relationships by addressing unfinished business from the past. This was a "second chance to deal with unresolved issues of childhood and the twenties, and to form a life structure appropriate for the thirties" (Levinson, 1996, p. 118).

The ages of 17 to 33 was the time of "apprentice adulthood," and involved moving from the world of childhood into life as a "fully hatched" adult. The novice-phase tasks during the early to mid-20s included forming a life dream, a mentor relationship, an occupation, and an enduring love relationship with a special man or woman, and usually, marriage and family. During the age-30 transition (between ages 28-33), these novice tasks were brought into particularly sharp scrutiny, which often led to overt changes in marital status, occupation, locale, political, and religious commitments.

Developmental work also manifested itself psychologically in changed personal meanings to life commitments, as this was a time of moderate to severe difficulty for most women and men. After this point, the individual entered a new generation in the early 30s, moving from "novice adult" to "junior member" of the adult world, and took on greater responsibilities, made deeper commitments, and built the next life structure.

However, the people interviewed by Levinson were living in a vastly different time. Although Society has been in a state of tremendous change over the last two decades as we started to move out of the industrial age and into the information age (Beck, 1993, 1998; Foote, 1996; Popcorn, 1991; Popcorn, 1996), which has thrown the

economy, the job market, and cultural mores and norms into upheaval. Early adult development was defined in the past by conventional adult roles and predictable life markers such as the establishment of marriage, family, and career by the early 20s, followed by career advancement for males.

Today, the years of being an "apprentice adult" are characterized by much more flux in love relationships and family structures, more time spent in post-secondary education, financial instability and job impermanence, more spiritual options to choose from because of strong cross-cultural influences in our "global village," as well as increased career opportunities for women. Important life decisions are often postponed, with many taking the route of an ongoing moratorium and a kind of extended adolescence. Thus, age-30 transitions in today's world probably have a distinctly different flavour.

Gould's research on adult development. Gould's (1978) thematic findings were based on intensive, in-depth interviews, and grounded in his many years of practice as a psychiatrist. Similar to Levinson, he found that moving through life stages meant struggling with different beliefs about the world and oneself. Transformation in adulthood required challenging the false assumptions that had been instilled by one's parents. The particular belief to be challenged between ages 28 and 34 was that "life is simple and controllable. There are no significant coexisting contradictory forces within me." This required self-examination, and "opening up to what's inside."

If the person did not go through this process, they remained externally defined. Again, the choice was between the opportunity to actualize one's "true" sense of self, or to remain alienated from it. Fortunately, this opportunity comes at a time when "our adult

consciousness is developed enough so that we feel able to turn inward and reexamine ourselves for something other than the narrow limits of independence and competence that seemed so all-important a few years earlier" (pp. 153-154).

While the 20s were a time of seeking self-satisfaction, striking out for independence, and holding the hope that undesirable personal aspects would simply go away, by the end of the decade these attitudes began to ring hollow. During the subsequent period of unrest, depression, disillusionment, and questioning, the challenging and modification of the rigid rules and wishful thinking of the 20s began.

Gould (1978) identified four component assumptions of the main one outlined above. The belief that "what I know intellectually, I know emotionally," and that life can be made simple, well-ordered, and easily controlled by the mere exercise of will, no longer held true. The second assumption, "I am not like my parents in ways I don't want to be," required acknowledging parental rules and patterns that had been unwittingly adopted, and the creation of autonomous, personally-crafted values.

The third assumption was "I can see the reality of those close to me quite clearly." As life became increasingly complex, "irrational aspects" from the unconscious began to interfere with relationships, which required exploration and integration into conscious awareness and behaviour. The last assumption was "threats to my security aren't real." Because new directions being contemplated at this time threatened already-established lives, there was often a strong desire to deny these incessant pulls, but dissatisfactions with the old way of life did not recede easily, so that rationalizing them out of existence was difficult. However, the eruption of new emotional and psychological awareness often

brought forth new possibilities for life, such as a deepening of career commitments,

returning to school to enhance a career, or creating a new career trajectory.

Gould's (1978) study does offer some different information because he delineated

themes from across the lifespan. Again, the results are over two decades old and

therefore, may not be particularly useful today. More important, however, is the fact that

Gould did not differentiate between the experiences of women and men, and grouped

them together for the analysis. The assumption that they would essentially be the same is

of questionable validity.

Women's Transitions Around Age 30

> Somewhere along the line of development we discover what we really are, and
> then we make our real decision for which we are responsible. Make that
> decision primarily for yourself because you can never live anyone else's life.
> <div align="right">Eleanor Roosevelt</div>

A number of studies from the 1970s and 1980s that focussed solely on women

have also shown that the age-30 transition was very significant. However, many of these

studies are quantitative in nature, thus providing results that offered cursory, "thin

description" and generalizable summary overviews, so that in-depth, richly-detailed

accounts of the inner experience and process of meaning-making were lost. As such, it is

not clear who was defining what was meaningful in the women's lives: the participants or

the researchers? Whose assumptions, interpretations, and vocality were at the forefront?

Finally, none of the studies specifically looked at how the women got through the

transition well. Nonetheless, the following results can be used as a basis to inform the

current inquiry.

When Josselson (1987) conducted two sets of qualitative, in-depth interviews

with college-educated women that bridged 20 years, she found that the changes in the

women were greater between ages 21 and 33, than between 33 and 43. Similarly, when Mercer and her colleagues (1989) asked elderly women to recall their life histories, two-thirds of them reported having experienced a transition around 30. Many reconstructing earlier life structures such as by getting married, or else becoming separated or divorced. Notably, the opportunities and challenges that were experienced between 26 and 30, more so than at any other age, determined the life course for the majority of the women.

Similarly, in Reinke et al.'s quantitative studies (1985a; 1985b), 78% of middle-class women from across four different age cohorts reported undergoing a major psychosocial transition between the ages of 27 and 30, that lasted up to age 35. This shift in life was similar to the momentous midlife change that men had been found to experience around age 40, supporting the idea that the age-30 transition is the most prominent transitional period for women. While experiences were highly individualized, involving a variety of issues and changes, there was a consistency in the pattern that the transition took.

The first phase, between ages 26 and 30, was characterized by personal disruption and reassessment of one's life. The middle phase lasted from approximately 28 to 31, and involved an increased focus on the self, and a search for, and commitment to new, internally-generated educational and occupational goals. The last phase, between 30 and 35, provided closure on the previous turmoil, and an end to the introspection and ongoing intrapersonal change, which led to a new sense of well-being, competence, self-confidence, and life satisfaction.

Gould (1978), Rienke et al., (1985a & 1985b), and Roberts and Newton (1987) all found that the priorities that had been established during the 20s around either career or

family were often reversed at this time. Women who had stressed marriage and motherhood tended to develop individualistic work goals for the 30s, while those who had focused on occupation became oriented toward marriage and family. In a somewhat different vein, Furst (1983) and Alexander (1980) found that rather than reversing the priority of either career or marriage and family, women added the component that had been neglected in the previous decade, thus integrating the life structure more fully by finding a more equitable arrangement between work and intimacy.

The career-oriented women in the Levinson (1996) and Josselson (1987) studies also experienced the age-30 transition as a time of crisis, upheaval, reevaluation, and major changes in occupational goals and direction. The relative value of career was often balanced against family and other aspects of life. The decision to get married, or to have a child and start a family, involved questioning and struggle around the challenge of making marriage, motherhood, vocation, and other aspects of life coexist in a reasonably satisfactory balance.

Levinson's "Homemakers." The women who worked solely in the home during the 1970s were forced to ask not only, "What shall I do about my marriage?" around age 30, but more significantly, "What shall I do with my life?" This was a time of considerable personal turmoil as many women began to reappraise their traditional marriage arrangement; more than half experienced severe marital problems during this time. Many chose to limit their domestic involvement and enter the work force, which created a sense of liberation. As the transition ended, a different life structure was formed from that of the 20s. However, despite the powerful internal impetus for reappraisal and

change, and the considerable external changes that some of these women did make in their lives, Levinson found that overall, there was very little personal individuation.

Levinson's "Career Women." For the women who had been career-oriented in their 20s, a distinct career path did not usually emerge until the age-30 transition. The new life structure that emerged was markedly different, and involved the "Dream" for life that was personified by what Levinson called the symbolic "Anti-Traditional Figure." This was an internal image of an independent, competent woman who was taken seriously by herself and others, who was not mindless and selfless, and who had a reasonable balance of work and love, marriage, and/or family in her life.

However, for these women pursuing careers in the 1970s, the opposing "Traditional Homemaker Figure" represented strong societal prohibitions about involvement in a career, which created guilt and inner conflict. Neither internal figure ever won out, with partial victory or compromise being the most common outcomes. Many women created a new life structure that involved both family and career, foregoing their initial assumption that they would leave the workforce to raise their children. For the first time in history, many women decided that they would not give up their greater identity, which included a sense of occupational competence.

Differences between women's and men's experiences. Significant disparities have been found between men and women's experience of the age-30 transition in past studies. This can be partly attributed to the fact that women's developmental trajectories are unlike those described for men because of different societal expectations, circumstances, restrictions, and social-cultural values for the genders throughout history (Josselson, 1987; Mercer et al., 1989).

Psychological theories of healthy development have also favoured the traditional male qualities of separation and autonomy, rather than connection and relationship (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976; Surrey, 1984), which puts an unfavourable slant on women's experiences. Another factor is that in the past men have been found to resolve Erikson's (1963) Identity issues in the Early Adult Transition (between 17 and 22) through establishing an occupation, while women have sought a balance between vocation and intimacy, so that identity formation can go on throughout early adulthood up to age 40 (Levinson, 1996).

Women and men have also had different experiences around career. Men have traditionally benefited from mentor relationships with professors or senior business associates that facilitated their advancement in the occupational world (Levinson, 1978). Conversely, women described older female relatives, friends, and neighbors as role models, rarely reporting the type of mentors described by men that helped define their career trajectories (Josselson, 1987; Reinke et al., 1985a; Reinke et al., 1985b). These findings may account for Stewart's (1977) and Hancock's (1985) observations that in the past women have had difficulty negotiating career development in early adulthood.

Men's life dreams have traditionally focused on the establishment and maintenance of a career and the self-image of being an independent achiever, placing relational issues on a low priority (Roberts & Newton, 1987). This is fundamentally different from the kind of dream that has been most reported by women, which has been expressed as self in relation to others, finding a special partner and maintaining a relationship (Gilligan, 1982; Hancock, 1985; Josselson, 1987; Roberts & Newton, 1987; Stewart, 1977). For women, intimate connections with family, partner, children,

colleagues, and friends provided the anchor for identity formation and a basic sense of self, which was then followed by change and growth into new directions and the establishment of an occupational identity (Ryff & Migdall, 1984).

The key difference between women and men's experiences has been around the nature of the closure of the age-30 transition. While men have described the years from 33 to 40 as a period of stability and "Settling Down" (Levinson, 1978), others have found that for women "it was difficult until the late 30s to demarcate where the age-30 transition left off and a stable period began. For women, the term Settling Down did not accurately describe years that were, in most instances, highly unsettled" (Roberts & Newton, 1987, p. 161). Helson and Moane (1987) reported as well that the early 30s were a turbulent time, and that women felt they finally became more their own persons toward the later 30s. Levinson noted (1996) that at the end of the age-30 transition, while many women had not yet made an overt change, they had set themselves new goals that they planned to act upon over the next few years. Although these women had an "intended structure" in mind, it could not be quickly incorporated, as time was needed to form the necessary relationships and to integrate the various choices into a new life.

These studies indicate that in the past women's early adult years were often packaged into either marriage and family, or career, with one usually following the other in a linear progression, so that a consolidated identity was not achieved until the middle or late 30s when both aspects could be integrated. This process was also hindered considerably by guilt and social censure about being too nontraditional, which contrasts with a much less rigid division between male and female roles today. As a result, identity development could be quite different for women in young adulthood now, because of the

necessity for almost all women to begin working at an early age, and because of much more societal flexibility around the decision to marry and/or have children.

These modern social conditions raise a number of interesting questions. Do these new options and freedom give women the opportunity to begin to define themselves more substantively at a younger age, and provide the possibility of augmenting individuation earlier in life? How is the balance between work, family, and other aspects of life achieved and integrated now? Is it easier, or in turn, more difficult? In either case, the cost for actively creating one's unique path in life and being fully engaged in living usually comes with the considerable price of personal turmoil. For some people, the cost can be more than they are willing or able to endure, so they circumvent the difficulty and the challenge that the transition presents.

Retrenchment

> In the short run these people seem to gain by avoiding the time-consuming shifts and inner reorientations that others experience around thirty. But in the long run they lose – becoming the brittle beauties of the suburbs and the company yes-men who rejoin them at the end of the day. (Bridges, 1980, p. 40)

Transformations in adulthood are very susceptible to cultural influences, situational constraints, and ultimately, the individual's choice of whether or not to grow (Waters, 1993). Some people essentially decide to repress inner promptings to change, and turn away from opportunities for development provided by transition. Instead, they choose to deal with these experiences as temporary and accidental disruptions in an otherwise stable life. When in the midst of turmoil, one often feels a strong compulsion to resist change: "Just at this point in life when you feel drawn to new beginnings, there are powerful inner and outer forces blocking the way" (Bridges, 1980, p. 106).

The inherent human tendency is to use repression, and defend against allowing change in one's life and sense of self (May, 1983). In the face of significant personal transformation, one is often compelled to hold on to old and outlived ways of being in the world, a characteristic which is found in Bradley's Conventional and Stagnant Generativity Statuses (Bradley & Marcia, 1998). However, with time, the ways of living that were appropriate in one particular phase of life may begin to erode and destroy that existence.

How a person handles a transition can determine the course of their life for years to come (Bridges, 1980), and the decision to avoid the painful work can have deadening, if not devastating, consequences. Gould (1978) found that if the inner vision of oneself was not actualized during the age-30 transition, it continued to "represent itself with ever-increasing intensity until we either pay it heed or must ruthlessly repress it, whether by becoming extremely rigid on this point or by trying to blot it out with alcohol, frantic activity or drugs" (p. 164).

Levinson (1996) noted that the women who individuated only minimally during the age-30 transition led lives in the later 30s that were narrow and externally-scripted, to the point where they had little substantive involvement or fulfillment in any aspect of living.

> Each woman saw her life as a series of disparate situations in which she coped or "got by" as best she could. She was not engaged in a search for meaning. She had little sense of a self that gave a distinctive character to her life at a given time and to her life course as a whole. (p. 157)

Conversely, Helson and Moane (1987) found that while the ideal pattern of change was not confined to women on any particular life path, individuation was most pronounced in those who were actively engaged in a project that was personally relevant. The women who undertook neither career nor family endeavours showed little personality change.

Josselson (1987) stated the reason why some women in her study did not become identity-achieved was that

> because of their personality structure, [they] were not much able to make use . . . . of the opportunity for psychosocial growth. Either they became overwhelmed by the options, lost in the sea of choice after having severed their moorings, or else they swam to a safe shore to avoid drowning. (p. 167)

Growth invariably requires taking on some degree of risk. The successful negotiation of such frightening and unfamiliar territory necessitates an openness to change and the tolerance of uncertainty, which play crucial roles in identity formation (Josselson, 1987). Waters noted that one "must be flexible enough to grow and change as situations and life changes, yet be stable and strong enough to endure as a solid foundation on which to build one's life" (1993, p. 221). This enables a person to not only more adeptly manage the periods of crisis and turmoil that are life's inevitability, but to also evolve as a result of the experience.

Crisis as a Facilitator of Personal Transformation

> Crisis, in its basic sense means a *turning point*, a place in a sequence where the subject's condition is likely to alter for better or worse. It is a time of danger but also of opportunity. (Levinson, 1996, p. 301)

The stress that accompanies personal crisis can push a person into enhanced

personal growth through the development of deeper self-knowledge and the requisite

skills to deal with life's ongoing difficulties, when it becomes clear that old and

established ways are inadequate or limited. Indeed, it has been suggested that "stress may

be a necessary condition in order for individuals to grow as human beings" (Aldwin,

1994, p. 242). However, a crucial factor in handling a crisis successfully is the awareness

that one has the freedom to make a choice, that there may be different ways to perceive

situations, and to make changes to live life differently, according to one's desires

(Aldwin, 1994; May, 1953). Levinson (1996) found that life transitions are a time when

> the present structure is not working well, but the possibilities for improvement
>
> seem limited or nil. It is hard to move forward yet virtually impossible to go back
>
> or to stay still. A transitional period is likely to be a time of crisis because the
>
> flaws in the existing structure become more evident but the options for change are
>
> not yet at hand. (p. 301)

Accordingly, the age-30 transition has been found to be a uniquely difficult period

for women, as many had the growing realization that life had somehow gone wrong

(Levinson, 1996). The fundamental, pressing question became, "How do I want to live,

and how can I move in that direction?" Ninety percent of the career women reported

having a moderate to severe crisis during this time, with more women getting divorced

during this time than in any other period. Issues centered around lack of career

fulfillment, hurtful love relationships, devastating break-ups or severe marital conflict,

wanting to marry if single, and difficulties related to having a child or not having a child.

Half of the career women and a minority of the homemakers started psychotherapy that lasted from several months to several years during this time, a higher number than in any other life period. In retrospect, many women realized that they had gone through the 20s with minimal awareness of themselves, their relationships, and of what the future could offer to them. They realized that they had lived according to what was expected and required of them, without making conscious, personally-determined choices from real alternatives.

Furst (1983) also discovered that significant life change for women around the age of 30 was precipitated by attending to the components of the life dream that were internally motivated, self-generated, and according to one's personal values, rather than in response to social-cultural dictates. Similar to Bridges' (1980) prescription for ending a transition, this movement toward individuation was facilitated by drawing fantasies and goals out of the subconscious, in conjunction with one's desire to find a meaningful place in the world. Thus, a crucial factor in coping with change is the extent to which one's internal world is acknowledged, and reconfigured (Parkes, 1971).

Meaning-Making During the Transformative Process

Change is endurable if it means something. (Bridges, 1980)

Wisdom and growth come from suffering.   Aeschylus

Searching for new meaning in one's life is a crucial ingredient for the capacity to grow and develop (Droege, 1982; Ryff, 1986). O'Connor and Wolfe (1987; 1991) found that personal integration during a life transition necessitated a cognitive and emotional "paradigm shift," which involved the confrontation, deeply questioning, and modification of underlying beliefs, values, priorities, and purposes, that ultimately changed one's ways

of personal meaning-making. This subsequently led to the building of more flexible, complex, and self-determined life structures, and a more authentic and integrated self (Wolfe, O'Connor, & Crary, 1990).

This process is consistent with Frankl's (1959) tenet that loss and painful experiences can lead to the creation of deeper meaning in life. Through the shedding of outdated and inappropriate ideals, hopes, and self-images, there is the growing awareness of the potential, freedom, and responsibility to change for the better, and to become more than who one once was. Consequently, a turbulent experience like a transformative crisis, can evolve adaptively into something sublime and constructive.

In her phenomenological inquiry, Waters (1993) found that while the emotions in the midst of a transformative process were usually intense and negative, the long-term aftereffects were largely positive. The participants, who were university students from a range of ages and backgrounds, reported having new self-understanding, independence, maturity, self-esteem, an enhanced ability to trust and relate to others, as well as a (personally-defined) healthier perception of life, values, and goals. Many had a deepened sense of their lives, more emotional expression and empathy, new spiritual values, as well as the ongoing need for meaning in their lives. Relatedly, during the age-30 transition people have been found to become more spiritually aware, to have a new receptivity to mystical or universal psychological truths, and a new appreciation of the complexity of reality (Gould, 1978).

In a similar vein, through the course of her qualitative review of women's published writings about their lives, Keshet (1997) defined moments of "personal knowing." These striking intuitive experiences were a combination of thought and

feeling, that provided important insight and sudden awareness, where the women were suddenly able to put pieces of themselves together in a new way. These moments explained the women's motivations and actions, commitment to life choices and personal goals, and perseverance in the face of obstacles. They were crucial in creating a personal meaning system that embraced the women's sense of values, their place in the world, and a way of understanding the universe. These personal epiphanies

form a bridge between individual and universal meanings. When women integrate these insights into their lives, they feel that they are on the right course. They feel connected to themselves, other people, nature and what Mirikitani (1995) describes as 'something greater, a larger spirit.' (Keshet, 1997, p. 163)

Integrated Women

The end result of enduring inner angst, crafting a new understanding of life, and making self-determined choices for oneself has also been found in the positive culmination of the age-30 transition. Josselson (1987) interviewed women at 34 who had just gone through a period of intense self-reflection, and in the end, had become Identity-Achieved. These "were women who choose lives after sifting through options, amalgamating aspects of who they were with whom they wish to become, and, in so doing, have a sense of following a life plan they can claim as their own" (p. 72).

This growth led to an ability to stand alone, a new awareness of personal competence, commitment to how they wanted to experience the world, and to the values and goals that they wanted to put into action. Their capacity to have an effect on the

world became an important part of their self-definition, as they realized they had something of value to offer.

Belenky et al.'s (1986) "Constructivist Women" had also undergone thorough self-examination and the personalized construction of their own world view. They were articulate and reflective, with strong self-awareness that helped them set the ground rules for their interactions with others. At the same time they strove to advance the boundaries of their inner experiences by making unconscious processes conscious, consulting and listening to the self, voicing the unsaid, by listening to others, and staying alert to all aspects of life around them. They had also developed a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life's complexity.

The women in both of these studies wanted to embrace all aspects of the self: friend, mother, wife, daughter, coworker, and wanted to avoid the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other. Instead, they strove for a balance among work, relationships, and interests, and defined themselves by their capacities, personal achievements, as well as significant relationships.

These women recognized the inevitability of conflict and stress in life, and no longer wanted to suppress or deny aspects of themselves in order to avoid conflict or to simplify their lives. Similar to Loevinger's (1976) most advanced "Integrated" stage of ego development, these women had a complex, flexible, cognitive style, a high tolerance for internal contradiction, ambiguity, and complexity, were more open to experience, more firmly rooted in an internal sense of themselves, and were concerned with authenticity, ongoing individuation, and about their relationships with others.

<u>Caring For Others</u>

Through individuation, the person is in the most optimal position to relate to, care for, and facilitate the growth of others, in the family, at work, and in other circles of affiliation. This is Erikson's (1950/1963) mid-life task of Generativity, which involves raising and guiding the next generation once the personal task of identity formation has been completed. As a person moves toward an enhanced ability to appreciate another's needs and opinions, as well as the larger group's or society's goals, they are able to contribute to their world with greater flexibility and objectivity (Werner, 1967). Thus, emotional maturity provides a more developed capacity for emotional understanding and complexity, and openness to empathy, compassion, care, or "sorge" (May, 1969).

Both work and love are dependent on interpersonal relationships and could be considered just different names for similar processes (Smelser, 1980). For example, the women in Josselson's (1987) study often defined sources of enjoyment at work as opportunities to interact with colleagues and the public, and to care for others. These connections, in addition to their mastery of technical skills, led to a sense of competence. The women did not disengage their "relating" selves at work. Instead, because they tended to incorporate qualities of concern for, and affiliation with others into their sense of themselves, these aspects were integrated into their aspirations for their jobs (Gilligan, 1982).

Belenky et al.'s (1986) Constructivist Women had an ambitious desire to express what they knew and cared about, in order to make a difference to other people and in the world. For these women, a "good opinion is a humanistic one, one that shows an immense respect for the world and the people in it and for those you are going to affect"

(p. 149). Most had actively reflected on how their values, judgments, and behaviour were morally consistent, and were preoccupied with the spiritual dimension of their lives. They strove to translate their commitments into action, both from a sense of responsibility to their larger community, and out of a conviction that "one must act."

This mix of drive and affiliation is consistent with Jung's (1931/1971) depiction of personality change between early and middle adulthood, which involved a movement away from stereotypical sex-role behaviour. Jung found that while men become more "feminine," women become more "masculine" by demonstrating a significant increase in "masculine" confidence, independence, dominance, assertiveness, and coping skills between the late 20s and early 30s, and into the early 40s. This was accompanied by increased nurturance of others, feelings of improved relationships, as well as an expanded and less defensive personality. One woman referred to this new impetus in life as the determination of

> heroic tasks, and how we can find things important to us and other people, and by doing these tasks, we gain our own self-importance, self-meaning. And I think, "What is my heroic task?" If I don't have one, I don't really have anything to center my life around. (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 151)

Conclusion

This literature review suggests that for women, the age-30 transition is a time of significant personal crisis, which provides an opportunity to mine one's inner depths to extract new values and meaning-making that are consistent with one's authentic desires and reason for being. This differentiation of self and personal transformation facilitates the identification of one's inherent value, and the construction of ways to make a

substantive contribution to the world. That is, the process of individuation pulls a person out of the social collective so that one can discover their gift, so that they can then return to the collective to share it with others (J. Hollis, personal communication, May 15, 1999).

With the shedding of traditional ways of life, it is possible that women today may begin to seriously individuate at a younger age, compared to in the past when women "came into their own" and experienced more individuation and autonomy later in life, during middle age (Dowling, 1996; Halliday, 1998; Levinson, 1996; Mercer et al., 1989). The age-30 transition has always been important for women; perhaps it is even more significant at this point in history.

A qualitative, phenomenological investigation was warranted, because as this literature review indicates, the transition is a complex and multi-faceted process. Accordingly, this approach invited the women to provide open-ended, detailed accounts of their lived experience of their recent age-30 transition, in order to capture a sense of their inner landscapes. It was anticipated that the women's words would convey their perceptions and processes, how the change unfolded for them, how they dealt with it, made sense of it, and how the women felt it ended well in terms of their sense of self and their place in the world.

Chapter III

Methodology

The goal of this study was to explore the research question, *What is women's experience of the age-30 transition that is ultimately deemed positive?* This was facilitated through the use of the in-depth phenomenological approach, that delves into the meanings of common experiences, in order to attain a more comprehensive, thorough understanding of a process. The phenomenological interview is also particularly useful for more fully understanding what participants mean by what they say in response to our questions (Mishler, 1986).

Phenomenology

> If I wish to know what a particular psychological phenomenon is, I cannot begin with or rely entirely upon the definitions provided by traditional psychology because . . . its operational definitions eliminate the phenomenon's experiential aspects. As a phenomenologist, I must begin by contacting that phenomenon as people experience it. (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 57).

At this point in psychology's history, we have both an insufficient and outdated understanding of women's age-30 transition. This requires examining this process from its very roots, or the core of the experience of this time in life. Phenomenology is an excellent tool for such an endeavour because it examines whole phenomena rather than various details, parts, and piecemeal episodes, and asks participants to describe their experience in great detail (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1991). As Giorgi noted, "psychology does not adequately cope with wholes, frames-of-reference, or syntheses . . . [nor is it] sufficiently receptive to . . . every-day-living problems . . . as they exist in everyday life" (1970, pp. 84-86). The phenomenological approach does not infringe upon the phenomenon, but lets it speak for itself (Colaizzi, 1978), so that

meaning can be derived from the individual's subjective experiences, feelings, thoughts, and views of the world and self, from their personal context.

Phenomenology affirms subjective experience and proceeds by critically examining it, in order to authentically describe its character, essence, and meaning structure (Karlsson, 1993). This is attained through "eidetic reduction" by analyzing data describing facts, events, thoughts, and feelings through "imaginative variation," which is the process of varying interpretive possibilities freely until reaching the limit (or penultimate) case, thereby clarifying the essential structure (Husserl, 1913/1976).

This is a reflective activity that brings to light that which was concealed in the actual living: "Reflection is the opposite of speculation, since it dwells upon and stays with the experience. Reflection brings that which was only lived to the level of the known" (Karlsson, 1993, p. 52), thus illuminating the meaning-structure that was there before the reflection, that the person was typically not aware of when they were immersed in the phenomenon in day-to-day life. As a result,

> the researcher is capable of giving an extended signification to the situation depicted by the subject, in that (s)he is mainly interested in the meaning-structure (the eidetic dimension) of all those concrete, ostensibly referred circumstances. The researcher goes "beyond" the situation described by the subject in order to disclose the meaningful world. (Karlsson, 1993, p. 86)

The goal of this study was that the reflection, interpretation, and thematization of the eidetic dimensions of women's experience of the age-30 transition, would provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. In addition, another potential benefit is that the taking of a "critical perspective to deconstruct or make visible that which has become

invisible by training and custom, [may] emancipate or free people through . . . new

understandings that are transformative" (Hoshmand, 1994, p. 93). It was my hope that

this study would not only normalize people's upheaval at this time in life, but also offer

an opportunity for ongoing meaning-making that can further their personal individuation.

Bracketing

During the research process, the social-cultural backgrounds and identities of both

the inquirer and the participant influence the kind of interaction and meanings attributed

to the communication, because both parties are embedded in their own world-views,

values, assumptions, and biases, as well as their personal needs (Hoshmand, 1994).

The phenomenological process necessitates bracketing such world-views, and

breaking from one's "natural attitude." It is crucial to wipe the slate clean of biases as

much as possible, and set them aside prior to investigation, so that the phenomenon can

be examined in an open, untainted fashion. This includes both phenomenological

psychological reduction, which brackets the described, external world of the participant,

as well as the phenomenological transcendental reduction, which brackets the theories,

opinions, hypotheses, and beliefs of the researcher (Karlsson, 1993). The

phenomenologist attempts to describe the experience such as it is given by the

participant, and not something outside that which is experienced.

Because it is impossible to deny one's experience, one must affirm one's stance to

the subject at hand, in order to be in a better position to identify possible biases that

would interfere with phenomenological interpretation. It is incumbent upon the

researcher to describe "where the author is coming from" in order to provide a form of

"truth in advertising" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 490).

Accordingly, my own biases and ideology are based on a progressive, humanistic, developmental, existential perspective on the nature of humankind. I believe that the inevitable painful and trying experiences of life can lead to positive growth through the creation of deeper meaning (Frankl, 1959), and to personal individuation (Jung, 1931). My perspective on humankind is also informed by the indelible influence of the developmental theories that I have been immersed in for more than 10 years, which include Kohlberg's moral development, Gilligan's care and justice orientations, Erikson's life-span development, and Loevinger's ego development.

My lens on the world is invariably tainted by the life experience of being a white, middle-class, liberal, university-educated, 35 year-old woman raised by Eastern European immigrants, who imbued me with the belief that one must strive to overcome obstacles and create a better existence for oneself. Based on numerous conversations with women friends ranging in age from the late 20s to the late 40s, and based on my own prodigious personal upheaval over the last seven years of my life, I anticipate that many other women have struggled with similar powerful needs to change around the age of 30. I expect that other women have also worked to strip away layers of false conditioning, in order to discover who they genuinely are, move on to do whatever they feel that they are meant to do in life, and "follow their bliss" (Campbell, 1990).

Participants

In phenomenological research, the participants are often called co-researchers, because they are seen to be the experts on their own experience, and because this label reflects the interactive nature of the interview (Halliday, 1998). Indeed, while people who have lived with certain experiences are often the best source of expert knowledge about those experiences (Morse, 1989b in Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997), not

everyone will make an ideal research participant (Morse, 1989a in Thorne et al., 1997). Thus, the sampling was purposive so that participants were articulate, thoughtful, eager to share their abstractions, and gave complete and sensitive accounts, in the anticipation that their experiences would reveal elements that were to some degree shared by others (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985; Thorne et al., 1997).

The selection criterion for the study was to interview six to eight women who (a) were in their mid to late 30s; (b) who identified themselves as having gone through a significant transition between the ages of 26 and 33, and (c) who felt that they completed it with a positive outcome. The interviews were therefore retrospective, so that the women had gained some perspective and understanding on that life period, but so that memories were not faded or altered to a great degree. It was anticipated that six to eight participants would be enough to illuminate the transition, as being sufficient and necessary to elicit and satiate themes, as well as to reveal the diversity and commonality of the women's experiences (Halliday, 1998).

I interviewed nine women, in the event that one of them might decide to drop out of the study. The women ranged in age from 35 to 38, with a mean age of 36. All of the women had post-secondary education, which ranged from some college to completion of Master's degrees. They were all from the middle or upper-middle socio-economic classes. All were born and raised in Canada, with the exception of one who had emigrated from Australia. Eight of the women were Caucasian, while one was of Chinese ethnicity. All of the women were heterosexual. Five were married or were living with a long-term partner, and none of the women had children.

Procedure

Participants were solicited by "word of mouth" through friendship chains, and ads posted at community recreation centres (See Appendix A for the flyer). Interested women were screened over the phone to ensure that they had an accurate and complete understanding of the purpose of the study, and that the interview was not perceived as a possible substitute for personal therapy (see Appendix B for the screening interview). At that time the women received further information about the study, determined if they met the necessary criteria for participation, and had an opportunity to ask questions.

The interview was set at a time and place that was private and mutually convenient. After initial rapport was established, confidentiality and voluntary participation was addressed, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants signed two copies of the ethics consent form acknowledging the conditions of the study and their agreement to participate in it. One copy was given to the participants for their own records (see Appendix C). In addition, they were invited to offer an appropriate pseudonym for ensuring confidentiality in any oral or written accounts of the material (Halliday, 1998).

The participants were also told that their written consent to having their interview tape-recorded included the assurance that only the researcher and the thesis committee members would have access to the transcripts, and that the tapes would be erased once the study was completed. The women were also given the option of keeping the taped recording of their interview after the study was completed.

During the interview, the Rogerian (1967) techniques of empathic listening, reflecting, clarifying, and open questions and probes were used to facilitate rapport, safety, as well as further elaboration, which enabled the participant to delve into the

experience in rich detail. Thus, an approach of "disciplined subjectivity" (Erikson, 1964), or of systematically empathizing with the participants (Wilson, 1977) was undertaken.

The interview was minimally structured in order to allow the participants to speak for themselves, without the researcher interjecting or impinging any preconceived ideas onto the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985). An open approach to the descriptions of the women's experiences, or the "deliberate conscious naiveté on the part of the interviewer" (Kvale, 1983, p. 178), facilitated being open to new and unexpected information, and helped to avoid premature hypotheses and interpretations.

At the beginning of each interview, the women were presented the orienting statement (as per Halliday, 1998) to help focus them in a general way (see Appendix D). While Osborne stated that participants in phenomenological research are "usually informed of the nature of the research," he added that the researcher aims for genuine accounts of the participant's experience, "rather than cognitive constructions of experience based upon [the participant's] assumptions of what was intended" (1990, p. 82). Thus, conditions were such that the women described the phenomenon freely and in as much detail as possible. As Karlsson (1993) noted, a good interview is a naïve, spontaneous account of experience, that does not include any theoretical or rationalized overlays. On occasion, questions were asked to ensure that all relevant areas were covered (see Appendix E).

In addition, a sensitive stance was taken to not only what was said, but also to the different nonverbal nuances during the interview. To this end, process notes were taken to help capture the full range of the participants' experiences (Richardson, 1994). For example, attention was paid to the nature of the interview relationship, the setting, body

language, vocal changes in emotional tenor, and to tacit information, or "the largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 492).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on Karlsson's (1993) five-step Empirical Phenomenological Psychological (EPP) approach. The first step involved reading through the transcript several times to gain a full understanding, while being pre-suppositionless and open to the text. Next, the entire transcript was divided into smaller meaning units. Points of division depended upon shifts in topic, or in the meaning of the text.

During the third step the analysis proper took place and interpretation began, where the meaning unit in the text was transformed into a psychological meaning, paraphrased in my own language, while staying with the essence or structure of what the participant had said. The focus was on tracing out the implicit and explicit psychological meaning that the woman had lived through. This process necessitated going back and forth several times between the specific meaning unit and the whole transcript. The final level of abstraction involved the application of the appropriate label, or theme, to the paraphrasing and the meaning unit.

Initially, the themes were formed based on intuitive sense and plausibility, and clustered by conceptual meaning. Contrasts and comparisons were made, and the themes that had been prematurely grouped were rearranged to represent the overall conceptual coherence, and the lived experience, more validly. This also helped bolster the text's claims for truth, or its "verisimilitude" (Denzin, 1994; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991).

The fourth step involved synthesizing the transformed meaning units into a "situated structure" for each participant in the form of a summary (found in Appendix F),

that was arranged in a phenomenologically significant way, which was based upon the research question. The analysis ended with the condensing of each participants' synopses into a "brief situated structure" (in Appendix G), which shows the common experience of the phenomenon across all of the participants.

<u>Trustworthiness of the Analysis</u>

Phenomenological research recognizes that multiple perspectives are likely. Nonetheless, it has been maintained (Osborne, 1990, p. 87) that reliability akin to "intersubjective agreement" is attainable, and that a "unified description of a shared phenomenon [and] a stable meaning can transcend variable facts." According to Osborne, this is the essence of phenonemological reliability. This can also be bolstered by attending to issues of validity.

Karlsson (1993) outlined a check for validity that included the horizontal consistency of interpretations, or determining if an interpretation is consistent with the rest of the transcript. Horizontal consistency presupposes that the various parts of the text fit together in a unitary meaning, and consequently, there is no room for interpreting the different parts in a contradictory way. This process was addressed during the data analysis. Another validity check is the vertical consistency of interpretations. Here, a particular interpretation must be shown to be the most plausible one through argumentative reasoning: "the researcher should, as much as possible, try to explicate his/her reasons for making a specific interpretation, so the reasons can be challenged by other researchers" (Karlsson, 1993, p. 132). Such considerations are addressed below.

In a similar vein, Polkinghorne (1988) stated that the conclusions reached in the qualitative interpretation of data can be defended by informal reasoning, and that the argument should center around one of likelihood, not certainty or statistical probability.

The test then, is "whether the reader, adopting the same viewpoint as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he [or she] agrees with it" (Giorgi, 1975, p. 48). Such agreement was sought by writing the results "in a language that aims to elicit empathy and participation in the reader" (Todres, 1998, p. 124).

Indeed, qualitative descriptions of human experience can produce feelings of understanding in the reader by addressing issues of not only truth (or validity), but also those of beauty, or aesthetics. For example, Heidegger did not see a distinction between truth and beauty in poetic discourse. Todres made the inherent connection to qualitative, and phenomenological inquiry, when she stated that "poetic language with regard to experience is "truthful" in that it attempts to retain the prereflective qualities of experiential structures" (1998, p. 125). While I embraced the data and the methodology, I tried to inspire an emotional identification and illumination of the women's experiences in the reader through the creative use of the written word.

Ongoing notes were taken on ideas, the development of interpretations, emerging themes, and discussions with my first supervisor, all of which show how the final conclusions were reached (Denzin, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1991). This created an audit trail, or the careful documentation of the conceptual evolution of the project. This provides the evidence for the reconstruction of the process, and consequently, supports the veracity of the results (Morse, 1994).

The trustworthiness of the analysis was also addressed by three types of external checks. The participants reviewed the developed themes to determine if they were a valid interpretation of their experience. An objective, third-party checker who is a graduate from Counselling Psychology, who also did a phenomenological study for her M.A.

thesis, analyzed a portion of the data. Finally, there were ongoing consultations with my first supervisor throughout the course of the data analysis. All of these efforts were checks for the "goodness of fit" (Osborne, 1990) of the interpretations with the raw data.

In sum, the trustworthiness of qualitative research can be supported by three general methods: credibility, dependability, and transferability (Denzin, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Credibility asks if the study's results are believable; if the match between the researcher's constructions and the participants' is a good one. This was established by the substantive engagement during the in-depth interviews with articulate, well-informed participants, the follow-up checks with the participants, the third-party checker's review, regular debriefings with my first supervisor, as well as by the audit trail.

Dependability asks if the measuring instrument is consistent over time. While this is not always possible or desirable in qualitative inquiry, any changes in the research process are "trackable" through the audit trail, which explains why the method evolves, if it does. However, this study's methodology and analysis unfolded exactly as planned and described, as there was no need to deviate from the predetermined format.

Transferability asks to whom the information is applicable. It is expected that the themes will enable readers to grasp some meaning that they can identify with, that reflects and resonates with their own personal life experiences. This was the endeavoured outcome of the employment of the descriptively-rich interviews, Karlsson's (1993) painstaking analysis of the meaning units, the horizontal and vertical consistency of interpretations, and the aesthetic use of words in the creation of the themes.

Values and Biases

According to Kvale, involvement in a research study can be a positive experience: "while two people talk about a theme of interest to both, the interview may be a rare and

enriching experience for the interviewee" (1983, p. 178). Thus, one of my hoped-for

goals in this project was to further the women's personal evolution by their participation

in the interview, and by their examination and contemplation of the resulting themes.

This also provided me with an opportunity to thank them for sharing with me

some of the intrinsic facets of themselves, which are the invaluable pieces in the puzzle

of this research study. Through our discussions and meaning-making about their personal

experiences, I hoped that in some way, the women experienced James Joyce-like

epiphanies, "those interactional moments that leave marks on people's lives [and] have

the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person" (Denzin, 1989, p.

15).

Checks for the Trustworthiness of the Analysis

Review by the third-party checker. The third-party checker thoughtfully went

over the following information at least twice: the interviews, summaries, and data

analysis for three randomly-chosen participants, the brief situated structure, and the

compilation of themes that are presented in the Results section. Then, based on her

understanding of all of the material, she was asked to determine if she agreed with the

themes that I had derived. In the qualitative spirit, she was asked to look for

"reasonableness" of fit, as opposed to "exactitude," as well as to note anything that I had

missed in the analytical process.

From the total of 438 meaning units across the three sets of analysis, the checker

agreed with 428, for an agreement rate of 98%. Four of these 10 items were those which

she felt were a blend of two themes, whereas I had only indicated one. She did not find

that anything had been overlooked.

Review by the participants. The testing of the trustworthiness of the analysis began before the data analysis was even completed. Because Ginger was leaving the country for a period of time, she reviewed her summary, the themes that were generated in the second-to-last cycle in the analytical process, and a sampling of quotes from her interview that supported the themes. She agreed with the themes, stating that I had captured what she had said "really well," and that she "felt well-represented."

After the data analysis was complete, the eight remaining participants were sent a copy of the brief situated structure, their individual summaries, and a sampling of quotes from their interview that fleshed out the themes that were pertinent to them. All of the women said that they enjoyed reading the material and found it interesting. They were in agreement with the brief situated structure and the themes, and felt that it all resonated with their experience. For example, Margaret said the body of work "definitely rang true," and Naomi said that she was "blown away" by it. Marie commented that the material was well-written, and was somewhat surprised that it was so clear and made sense, because in her past experience of reading academic psychological material she was sometimes bewildered as to what was being said and what it really meant.

Small changes were made to two of the individual summaries to better capture the nuances of the women's experience. Naomi asked that an adjective be taken out, and Carmen had a phrase added. Two women changed their pseudonyms. Jane suggested that the word "growing" that preceded the theme *awareness of wanting more* in the original brief situated structure should be made part of the theme itself, as it would then more comprehensively describe her experience around this issue. This was in fact a dilemma

that I had struggled with during the distillation of this theme, and so I then made this change.

Hope felt that the following quote fit not only into *Conscientiously Taking Charge of One's Life*, but also fell equally into *New Sense of Self: Positive, Adult and Empowered.*

> I needed to prove that I was grown up. I needed to prove that I didn't just go running back to my parents the minute anything bad happened in my life. This was one of the first times for me of feeling very much adult, and very alone.
>
> And I wanted to know that I could do that. I felt it was kind of a test. (p. 3)

Stacey thought that the material was "really right on," and that the steps in the brief situated structure accurately depicted how her process had developed over time. She also felt during the first reading that the theme *Emotional Volatility* was "way too dramatic and exaggerated," and did not resonate with her at all. The tone of her interview had indeed been more pragmatic and cognitive than emotional. However, as she thought about it, "dug deeper" and really reflected upon her experience, she realized that the theme was truthful and accurate, and that it had been quite a dramatic transition.

Jane found the material "really fascinating," and had an emotional, "oh wow," reaction when reading the themes. It also conjured up an image based on the Biblical quote of hiding "a light under the bushel." She felt that when a person is in their 20s, they are prone to hide their true nature and their magnificence, because they think their "light" is not as strong as they would like it to be, or they not sure that others would really appreciate it. After the age-30 transition, when they have identified their abilities, talents, and their sense of self has unfolded, peoples' light comes on strong.

In her role as an employment counsellor, Naomi said that she sees a lot of women in their late 20s who are struggling with who they are, and what they are to do with their lives. Since participating in this study, she has been able to normalize their experiences by telling them that their turmoil and questioning are typical at this time in life, and asked for a copy of the Results and Discussion to use as a resource. She also believes that the age-30 transition is largely overlooked, and that we need to focus on it more.

Chris said that "everything fits in beautifully," and that I had "encapsulated my life better than I have in the last two years of trying to explain what this was like to other people." She found that the material had "a nice order to it, like the order in chaos." She also thought it was neat to know that others had gone through something like her own experience, and that "I learned a lot about the process of transition, and myself."

Chapter IV

Results

Seven "umbrella" themes (which are underlined) were developed during the course of the data analysis. Six of these seven main themes are comprised of a number of "subthemes" (in italics), which illustrate the nuances and inherent variations within the main themes. The first main theme is <u>Descent into Hell</u>, which encompassed the subthemes *Taking Flight, Growing Awareness of Wanting More, Emotional Volatility, Alone in the Journey, Reaching Ground Zero,* and *In the Black Hole of Pain.* The second main theme, <u>Contention with Outside Forces,</u> was comprised of *Struggling with the Negative Influence of Others,* and *Feeling the Pressure of Impending Age Markers.*

The third main theme was <u>The Experience of Being Helped and Supported</u>. The <u>Development of the Self</u> consisted of *Construction of Identity, Discovering Inner Knowing and Self-Expression, Shifting from Extremes to Equilibrium, Inner Acceptance and Equanimity*, and *Coming into Spirituality.* <u>The Generation of Self-Determination and Life Direction</u> was facilitated by *Conscientiously Taking Charge of One's Life*, a *New Sense of Self: Positive, Adult and Empowered*, and *Living Out Personal Meaning and Purpose.* <u>Creating New Relationships With Others</u> involved *Establishing Boundaries, Letting Go,* and *Belonging With Others.* The final main theme was <u>Reflections Upon the Invaluable Experience</u>, which addressed *The Process of Personal Evolution* and *Gratitude for the Experience: An Opening Up to Life.*

The umbrella themes and subthemes have been integrated into a summarizing narrative that is the brief situated structure, found in Appendix G. The brief situated structure is also found interspersed throughout the following results, so that sections of it

are used to introduce each umbrella theme, as well as the subthemes. The brief situated structure outlines the thematic process of how the women moved through the transition. That is, although the themes are presented in a linear fashion for the sake of clarity, it is to be understood that the women's experience was much more fluid and variable.

None of the women experienced all 22 subthemes. Instead, the subthemes are drawn from across all nine women's accounts, and integrated into a comprehensive whole. Finally, any words that are italicized and/or in bold within the women's quotes are meant to denote emotional emphasis and vocal intensity, and are not to be confused with the italicized subthemes.

Descent into Hell

The age-30 transition began with inner rumblings of discontentment and personal dissatisfaction that signified that the women had outgrown the lives they had led until the late 20s. At times life circumstances became untenable, so that they had to leave or *take flight* from a challenging environment, people that were causing them pain and no longer fit into their lives, or a tumultuous feeling state that they had endured for some time. There was also a *growing awareness of wanting more* out of life, as the existing conditions had become wanting and there was a new desire to seek better things for themselves than what they had experienced so far.

Some women went through intense *emotional volatility* that was an eruption of unpleasant, negative emotions, or experienced a wide range of emotions in a new raw way. This was either related to the disorder they were feeling in their lives, and/or related to a psychological unraveling as various issues arose from within where they had been stuffed down. Many also felt very much *alone in the journey*, so that they had to deal

with their difficulty on their own, as there did not seem to be anyone who could help them. As the momentum continued to build, negative life circumstances would compound so that the women would become completely overwhelmed, and they would *reach ground zero*. Some time was spent in a *black hole of pain* where they lived through their personal suffering, before they could begin to move out of it.

Taking flight. At the beginning of their transitions, some of the women found themselves in difficult, emotionally-charged situations, which they felt urgently compelled to get away from. Their escape usually marked an ending to an established condition, or status quo quality in their lives. For example, after Carmen ended a long-term relationship with her boyfriend, she

> just knew that if I hung around it would be really difficult. So yeah; I just left. And looking back, it's like wow; that's quite a big thing, because I was on sessional contracts at the college, so I wasn't tied to a job, and I just thought "God, I've got to get out of here." I wanted to go see my sister who was living in Singapore, and I called her and she said, "I'm leaving Singapore and getting married, and moving to Indonesia." So I didn't go all the way to Asia, I stopped in Vancouver, and I've been here ever since. And that was six years ago. So yeah; it was just a *huge huge* move for me. (pp. 4-5)

Jane came to realize the necessity to make a career change away from an industry that was becoming increasingly onerous, stressful, and harmful to her health: "I had been starting to [think], 'well I need to get out of that radio station, that needs to be the thing that I do.' I felt like I really needed to get out of that environment" (p. 31).

Naomi, on the other hand, was using alcohol to try to escape from an extremely painful, constant, feeling state:

> It's around containment, it was just about not wanting to accept my reality, wanting to get out of my reality, and just being so full of, um, shame. That alcohol just gave me some release. Yeah, totally repress [my feelings]. Yeah it was really great! (Laughing.) No, it was effective. (p. 7)

After Ginger had taken a stand for the first time in her life, and fundamentally challenged her emotionally-abusive relationship with her father by hanging up on him,

> I remember, I sat there, and I thought, *Ohhhh, noooo,* he's going to call back, how am I going to deal with it, and I left. I left my house and I instructed my roommates just to tell my father if he called back that I had gone out. (p. 12)

Growing awareness of wanting more. Many of the women also began to experience strong dissatisfaction with their life circumstances. While their current conditions were growing increasingly inadequate and frustrating, a new, clear, suitable, direction was nowhere in sight. "I was bitchy, and I was very dissatisfied . . . . I was very restless, irritable, and discontent with my life. That just about summed it up. I was *so* all those things. And that was 28 to 30" (Margaret, p. 6). "I would say that time in particular was a time of [being] discontent and really searching, and not really quite sure how to do it, and sort of fumbling your way through it" (Stacey, p. 3).

While the dissatisfaction was very much internal and subjective, it also manifested itself in the women's external worlds in the areas of career and relationships with others:

> [By] my late 20s I had been teaching for several years. I moved to Ottawa with
>
> my partner and our lifestyles really changed. We got really settled in there.
>
> After I finished my Master's I thought I would go back into teaching and I did.
>
> I started teaching in college, but I just sort of felt that I wasn't sure, if that was
>
> what I wanted to do forever, because there was something really tiny, tiny, tiny
>
> in the back of my mind -- there was something missing. (Carmen, p. 1)

However, this discontented feeling state also created the first inkling of awareness that one could indeed seek out new directions and qualities that would provide more positive personal value and fulfillment: "I was having such negative experiences, [and] I was thinking well there's got to be more to life than this" (Jane, p. 7).

Emotional volatility. As the women's unhappiness with their lives grew, their worlds started to disintegrate around them and the descent into personal hell began to gather speed. Some of the women experienced intense emotionality where they felt that they were on the verge of losing control, or they were moving through a wide array of negative emotions: "I guess what came out for me was feeling like everything was out of control, and spinning around, and a feeling of desperation" (Chris, p. 1).

For Chris and Hope, this experience was also significantly overlaid with vehement anger and hurt about injustices that they had gone through earlier in life, which now boiled forth from repression:

> I can see it when people talk about going to the top of a building and shooting,
>
> that's what I felt like. And that just felt strange, because I felt like I was losing
>
> grasp of reality or something; you know, that's not me, I'm not a person who

wants to hurt people, so why am I feeling this way. And I felt very not violent

or volatile, but incredibly angry, confused and out of control! (Chris, pp. 4-5)

Things like suicide, they were never really an option. Yeah; it was sort of

ironic. I had more thoughts of murdering my ex-boyfriend than suicide itself.

(Laughing.) That was more likely than killing myself, was to kill him. Or

really seriously maim him. And that actually was funny, because I came to

terms with a side of myself that I'd never thought even existed, which was the

side of me that was potentially violent. I never even allowed that into any

realm of possibility. (Hope, p. 30)

While doing overseas volunteer work, Jane lived through a wild range of feelings:

During that month that I was there, I don't even know how to describe it, but

by the time I left, I mean I was scared, I got sick, I was worried, I didn't know

what was going to happen, and yet it was exhilarating, and it was amazing,

fascinating. And by the time I left, I literally couldn't stop crying, because I

didn't want to go. (pp. 3-4)

Conversely, Naomi relied on alcohol to try to gain a measure of control over the

emotional turmoil that she was existing in:

I think really what my drinking was about was I really drank to contain myself.

I think a lot of people drink to express themselves, to loosen up, or to become

uninhibited, and I think to a degree I did, naturally, but I think in many ways I

drank to feel in control, especially at that time in my life. Like I just felt I was,

that all of these parts of myself that I had repressed in modeling to be like my

mom, were just oozing out everywhere, and I just didn't feel that I had control

of them. (pp. 3-4)

Alone in the journey. The descent downwards was a trip that was taken on one's

own. Many of the women found themselves feeling acutely isolated, and that there was

nobody to turn to: "[I was] without any of my normal support systems in place. Without

family, close friends nearby. Truly on my own for really the first time in my life. I turned

30 that year" (Hope, p. 3). "There really wasn't anybody around that knew that I was

doing this, that I was going through this . . . . And there was nobody I could really trust to

tell, or feel comfortable telling with regard to what I was experiencing" (Chris, p. 3).

Even when I was at work it was totally alone, and night shifts were really

lonely . . . . Not as many people even call so you're not even dealing with

listeners as much. The news room, there's no news so you don't have another

person coming to do newcasts, so your connection is, you and a few phone

calls. Yeah; pretty bleak really. (Jane, p. 17)

For some, this exacerbated the sense of becoming completely overwhelmed:

I wouldn't want anybody to go through such an experience. You're in a place

where you don't think anybody can help you. You're to the point where there's

nobody that can help you, you can't see how they can actually help you.

(Marie, pp. 7-8)

Reaching ground zero. After a certain point either something sudden and

traumatic happened so that the women fell through a trap door into their personal hell, or

life conditions would finally become unbearable after a long decline and they would

crash emotionally. Together with the impetus that began with the *growing awareness of*

wanting more outlined above, this crash forced the women to acknowledge that they had to take on the challenge of their personal difficulties, to seek help outside of themselves, and to eventually begin to work to improve their life circumstances.

Naomi, like some of the other women, "hit ground zero" twice during her age-30 transition. During the first episode at age 27, she went through a

> marriage break-up, and I'm the first-ever divorce in the history of my family. So I had that, and I had this whole sexual abuse thing going on, and then alcoholism, and I remember saying to [my friend] "I can't handle another thing, I can't handle another thing." (p. 7)

She then emigrated to Canada and at the age of 29 found herself

> unemployed, I had no income, and was living on my girlfriend's couch. It was terrible. And I went to live on another girlfriend's couch, in a room for a month, and I went to go to her place and she had failed to leave the key out for me. So I left all my bags of my clothes on her back porch, in the East End and I went out to get something. I came back and all my clothes were stolen. So pushing 30 I was jobless, moniless, alone, homeless. I had nothing. (pp. 18-19)

The break-up of Carmen's five-year relationship left her in an extremely painful state that was quite foreign to her:

> I was really devastated and that was the first time in my life I was *crushed* in a relationship, like *totally crushed* and I haven't gone through anything to quite that level since, either . . . . I remember that I was sort of, zombie-like for almost two weeks. Not that I was totally dysfunctional, but I remember not

eating for a couple days, but it was a very weird experience to feel so down

and so sad about something. (pp. 23-24)

Chris was confronted with the realization that she could no longer try to escape

from the pain of her traumatic childhood and adolescence, and that she had to take active

measures to heal emotionally and physically:

When I was about 28, the world felt like it was closing in on me and I was

flying off in all directions without any purpose or direction, like a bumblebee

in a jar . . . . I guess I was desperate, so I was prepared to try anything, and I

kind of just went out there and did things, and I think back, I think of some of

things that I did and go "Oh God," I never told anybody I was going to this

shaman's basement where he would shake rattles over me. I didn't know who

this person was; I think I was just in such a state of desperation that I really

wanted things to change *so badly*, in my life, and in my health, and everything,

that I was prepared to do anything and everything. So I really did do anything

and everything . . . . Every week I had something different lined up. (p. 23)

Marie's emotional health was seriously compromised around the age of 28.

Following a long time of being burnt-out at her job and various volunteer activities, she

was diagnosed with clinical depression. While she is by nature extremely independent,

proud, and personally resourceful, she was forced to look for help from others: "I could

identify that there was something wrong, and that I couldn't deal with it myself" (p. 5).

This recognition led her to begin taking anti-depressants from her doctor, and to seek out

a psychologist.

For Margaret, her "relationship was kind of falling apart, and I hit a bottom, I hit an emotional and spiritual bottom in my life. I had crashed. My partner was having an affair with another woman, and that was pretty ugly" (pp. 1-2). However, she now sees this devastating situation as being an important catalyst for personal change:

> It drove me to my knees and it really made me see that I needed some outside help. I needed something. I couldn't do this by myself anymore. I couldn't figure out my relationship, or why I was so screwed up in it. (pp. 7-8)

She is also aware of the significance and value of such intense turmoil, as it would take nothing less than such extremes to move her forward:

> If I hadn't been in such pain I don't think I would have made any kind of -- to really search for help. For me, anyway, I think that I had to be in a lot of pain. I have a very strong will and I can keep going for a long time, you know. But it was too much. (p. 9)

In the black hole of pain. After *reaching ground zero*, the women lived for a time in a private world that was a black pit of deep despair. "That whole period in my life feels kind of fuzzy; it's sort of like a black hole" (Ginger, p. 32). "[It was] emotionally demanding to the point where it feels like, I've blacked out four months of my life" (Ginger, p. 34). After Margaret discovered her partner's infidelity, "it was *so painful*. It was *sooo painful*. I really understand what it means when your heart is breaking . . . . I really thought my heart was breaking, I really could feel it break in two, you know." (p. 7) This suffering was heightened by the sense of abject *aloneness* and isolation that the women were already immersed in.

For some of the women, it was a time of intense grieving. For example, Naomi dealt with the childhood sexual abuse perpetrated upon her by her brother:

> I think that I finally reached the bottom because I haven't been down that far since, ever. It was blackness, a despair where I would just cry and think, "I am just going to die, I cannot contain this absolute betrayal of trust." (p. 45)

When Marie was struggling with her clinical depression,

> You're in such despair that it doesn't seem realistic that someone can help you. And life is not worth going on because--why would you want to live in that despair. You wake up to it; you go to bed to it. Your whole life is around that. (p. 8)

It was necessary for the women to spend some time in this suspended state of incubation, when important inner reworkings were taking place. It was only when that process began to abate, that they were able to inch out of the darkness toward some light, and the accompanying diminishment of their pain. Chris, for example, found that "the years between 28 and 30, and 32 were the dark years--the dark ages," that eventually led to a personal "Renaissance" (p. 1).

At the time, however, living in such all-encompassing darkness was a test of one's courage and patience, as well as having fundamental trust that there is inherent meaning and value in going through such a grueling process, and that one will not be lost forever in the abyss of pain:

> it was really hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel at the time. But something kept me going; I guess it was just like a pin-prick about a hundred metres away, but it was light, it was very very small, but I guess I knew on

some level that it was there. I don't know whether it was faith or what it was, but it was there, but every so often it wasn't always as bright as I would have liked it . . . . And every once in a while a bird flew past and the light was in the shadow where it wasn't even there, and then I looked again and it was there again. (pp. 21-22)

There's still that feeling that you don't understand light until you've been in dark. And I think that's really true. I have such a profound appreciation, having come through a depression, for what not being depressed is like . . . . And understanding how, when you're depressed you really lose sight of who you are and what you're about, and what you're doing and why is it important, and it becomes all very muddy and meaningless, and pointless. (Hope, p. 46)

Contention with Outside Forces

While the women were grappling with their internal strife, they were also simultaneously confronted with the necessity to address external forces that challenged them in their desire to make sense of themselves and their place in the world. Specifically, the women were *struggling with the negative influence of others* such as parents, authority figures, and societal directives on the "right" ways that they should look, behave, and lead their lives. Another source of distress came from *feeling the pressure of impending age markers,* so that when the women were approaching the age of 30, they were comparing their lives against societal expectations of what they should have accomplished by now.

<u>Struggling with the negative influence of others.</u> In their late 20s, some of the women were still dealing with painful experiences from their childhoods that had left them with poor self-perceptions and low self-confidence. They went through considerable internal conflict as they identified that these were externally-prescribed labels, and as such, were not intrinsically true. This subsequently allowed the women to free themselves from these deprecatory and unfair descriptions, and led to the process of defining themselves from within.

> There were a couple times when I remember I was trying to be warm and supportive with my father who's gone through a depression for years and years while I was growing up, and I'd said something like "I love you Dad," and he would say "no you don't, you only love yourself." And it made me sad because I felt like I was the selfish bad girl all my life and I can never do enough to please my family, especially my father . . . . So the whole idea of being a selfish daughter was something that was engrained . . . . Until I was 26 I always felt like somehow I just wasn't good enough, supportive enough, loving enough. And that was reinforced by my father's comments. (Ginger, pp. 2-4).

Naomi had to work to extricate herself from a multitude of powerful sources in her early life that had molded her to "be" a particular kind of person, that was completely inconsistent with who she truly is. This experience was even more disconcerting because these different authorities would pull at her from different angles, causing her to have a patchwork, disjointed sense of self, as she tried to please them all:

> I think a lot of it comes from Catholicism and having to be part of rules, and a lot of it comes from being sexually abused because a lot of abusers work very

very hard at grooming their victims to be how they want them to be. So you

grow up with this fragmented sense of self, this false self, because you're so

busy being who somebody wants you to be. I've gone through that with so

many things, education, career, marriage, friends, looks. (p. 51)

Marie bridled under the traditional tenant that somehow a woman cannot be

fulfilled, or in fact has something wrong with her, if she is single, has no children, or

even worse, decides against having children:

I don't think people should put pressure on you if you're a certain age that you

have to have a child, you have to be married . . . . A good friend of mine has

two children and she stated to me just recently "you don't have to have a child

to feel like a woman." (p. 25)

Others began to question conventional societal beliefs about women's place at

work, that however outdated, still persist. Over time, these attitudes simply became

intolerable, and some women resolved that they would no longer adhere to the

sycophantic rules prescribed by certain work cultures:

I'm going to sound like I have a problem with authority or something, it's the

third boss that I had a problem with. They're all men, they're all in the same

age group, actually, yeah. They all got into the industry when there were no

women or very few women, and the expectation in Vancouver in broadcasting,

it's the number two market in the country, so it's a pretty high expectation of

your level of performance, but also your willingness to *just grovel, do

anything*, just to be on the air is an honour. And that had really worn thin for

me. (Jane, p. 16)

As the women began to step back and examine the messages from significant people in their lives, many also identified that the omnipresent, mainstream, social-cultural imperatives about how a woman should look, conveyed not only an extremely narrow definition of attractiveness, but were also impossible to live up to. With this new awareness, the women began to disregard these unforgiving standards and slowly started to appreciate and define themselves on their own terms. Some expressed anger at not only how they had compromised themselves in the past, but also that such ridiculous social expectations continue, and are still going strong.

> I always kind of felt that at some level as far as my appearance went, that it was very much about well how do *you* want me to look, or how does society want me to look, or go and start looking in a magazine or go and look at the tv, and all that bullshit. And feeling like such enormous pressure around that. (Naomi, p. 41)

> What a complete lie women have been sold on this stuff, and that somehow you're yesterday's news if you're over 30. That no guy's going to find you attractive or desirable if you're in your 30s. I don't know who's billing this stuff and I don't know why women are buying it because it's so not true. (Hope, pp. 22-23)

Feeling the pressure of impending age markers. The age of 30 was significant for many of the women because it represented a time in life when they were expected to have accrued all of the stereotypical accomplishments, namely, career, marriage, and children. As 30 loomed on the horizon, the women felt anxious, stressed, and sometimes angry as they found themselves falling short on society's idealistic yardstick of achievements.

Just knowing that the 30s were coming, I guess there's a certain expectation

there, and sort of trying to get it all together, and I hadn't really done anything

that I was really proud of, so I guess there was a little anxiety surrounding the

future. Here comes the future, just around the corner, and . . . . I felt like I just

had nothing to show for my life up to this point. (Chris, p. 21)

Somehow I was failing if I wasn't married with children by the time I was 30 . .

. . When I was in my 20s I thought, if you haven't got it sorted out by the time

you're 30, that's *it*. Because, no second chances in terms of even if you have

kids or not. All these decisions need to be made, and if they're not sorted out

by the time you're 30, that was it. (Hope, p. 22)

With the changing social demographics as more people are marrying and having

children later in life, the expectations of the age marker can now drag into the mid-30s:

There's always that pressure when you hit 30, that you should be married by

now, and have children. So when I hit the 30 mark it's like, you have to decide

within the next couple years what you're going to do. (Marie, p. 23)

The age of 35--I think of as a marker, for a lot of women. And with more

women being single longer and getting married later it becomes more of an

issue, I think. So for me at 33 and 35, there were these markers. (Stacey, p. 29)

<u>The Experience of Being Helped and Supported</u>

The women actively sought out assistance from a variety of different sources that

helped them deal with the difficulties that they struggled with. As this was a time of

serious crisis, often the most significant one experienced so far in life, virtually all of

them went into counselling, therapy, or got involved in some kind of personal

development program.

In conjunction with their own hard work and commitment to the process, the

experience of receiving this help was a critical factor in the women moving out of *the*

black hole of pain, and soothing their *emotional volatility*. It also helped the women to

separate themselves out from *the negative influence of others*, and seriously work on the

construction of their own identities, thus ultimately leading to the positive conclusion of

the transition.

> So what [the difficulty with my family] did for me, was caused a huge amount
>
> of counselling sessions. This counsellor, I give him a lot of credit, because he
>
> taught me how to deal with situations with humour. And he taught me not to
>
> fight and get into defensive mode when my parents accused me of something.
>
> (Ginger, p. 16)
>
> When I went in for counselling, it was probably a critical time, it was the right
>
> time . . . . I don't know that if I had gone in any earlier, that it would have made
>
> any sense. And if I waited any later I might not have recovered . . . . So, a
>
> combination of forces came together to just sort of bring me in that direction.
>
> (Chris, pp. 5-6)

Some women found that various group experiences provided them with valuable

guidance and new tools that ultimately helped them open up to, and create a new life.

> I took a series of personal development courses . . . . The Pursuit of
>
> Excellence. And I really needed guidance. I don't think I could have done it on
>
> my own. So I really needed a structure to provide me with the time where

"you're going to do it." Because I don't think that I was driven enough or understood the importance of it. All I knew was that I was discontent, and that's all. (Stacey, p. 18)

I went to the 12-step program [Al Anon] . . . . It's for people who've been affected, for family and friends who've been affected by the disease of alcoholism . . . . And I eventually got a sponsor, which is something that they recommend in the program, this is like a one-to-one peer thing, and she's been amazing. (Margaret, p. 10)

Other women found that such collective endeavours gave them insight and perspective on their life circumstances that precipitated a paradigm shift, which freed them from the pain and confusion that they had been mired in:

I did this [personal development] course, and it had a lot to do with taking a look at your life and cleaning up your past crap so you don't carry it forward. And someone told me a lot of counselling can be like you're a cruise ship, and you're steaming along, and you're towing this barge. And the barge is full of crap. And a lot of counselling is polishing the crap in the barge. And I realized that for two years, I had been polishing the crap in the barge, rather than just cutting the barge free. So I decided to cut the barge free. (Hope, p. 14)

The women also found acknowledgement and support during this difficult time from various people in their lives such as friends and partners, as well as by reading other peoples' stories of how they had overcome their challenges. As a result, many of the women started to feel that they were not quite so *alone in the journey.*

> [I did] a lot of reading of self-help books, talking to counsellors, talking to
> friends who could be supportive about their family relationships, and just sort
> of comparing notes. (Ginger, p. 33)

> I work in a medical field, so I did a lot of research on my own, I bought books
> on depression, I have a huge library on depression. I watched a lot of
> Knowledge Network shows on TV that were on depression. Anything and
> everything that I saw. Brochures, pamphlets on depression, I read it, and I read
> other peoples' stories of what they've gone through, and it helped validate what
> I went through, and by them stating that they got out of it. (Marie, pp. 8-9)

The experience of being deeply cared for provided the women with a safe foundation that they worked from as they sought their place in the greater world. This also led them to reconnect with people in a new way, and *belong with others.*

> My partner's been actually just a phenomenal influence in my life in terms of
> really believing in me and helping me believe in myself, constantly. He was
> very supportive and offered all kinds of assistance. And the main thing that he
> did was to tell me to do what I needed to do, not to tell me what to do. He
> never has told me what to do, ever. (Jane, pp. 26-27)

> I became roommates with my sister's ex-partner, M. for three years . . . . We
> developed such a close relationship, and I almost feel we're soulmates on many
> levels. And he was just *so there* for me, he helped me through all these
> emotional times and he still does, like all the time, he's just always there for
> me. Just having someone like that in my life, who held my hand, held me up,
> and just took me through life at that point was just incredible. (Carmen, p. 25)

Development of the Self

After having the identities of their 20s questioned and assailed from within and from external sources, the women drew on the supportive factors in their lives and started to piece together who they were to become, thus beginning the *construction of identity*. Over time they developed a solid and personally-defined sense of self. There was also a *discovery of inner knowing and self-expression*, where the women began to value and heed their intuition and inner wisdom, as well as to articulate to others what they truly thought and felt.

As the raw emotions of the past began to subside, some of the women *shifted from extremes to equilibrium*, where they no longer experienced themselves or their lives from the opposing ends of the emotional continuum, and the pendulum of life remained in the tranquil middle. In addition, they developed much more *inner acceptance and equanimity*, as they gained compassion for themselves and serenity in their lives. Some of the women also *came into spirituality*, where they became acquainted with, and immersed in a very individualized and intimate experience of spirituality, that was different from the more traditional religions that they had been raised in.

Construction of identity. The women went through a process of lengthy and careful self-definition, which involved personal withdrawal and thoughtful questioning of what aspects of themselves were no longer appropriate or harmful and were to be shed, as well as what existing positive qualities were to be kept and integrated. There was also an identification of what new attributes were to be brought forth from the depths within, where they had been hidden away up until this point in life. The women were seeking out

and unearthing the lost fragments of their true selves so that they came into full

awareness and actualization.

> I just came back into myself, all the petals went in on the flower, I needed to
>
> close up from all the stimulation. I came in; and I just realized that I had a lot
>
> of information, and I needed to process it, I needed to find out what was going
>
> to work for me, and what action did I need to take to make it work for me.
>
> (Chris, p. 25)
>
> I started to examine who I was and what I really wanted, and that process of
>
> recovery started at around 30. And I started to mature . . . . I really had to let go
>
> of my need to control everything. You know growing up in an alcoholic home,
>
> there's so many things you can't control, so what you can control you really
>
> grab on to. And the only thing that I could really control is myself. But I
>
> wanted to control all those other extremities as well, right. And I really had to
>
> really look at that. You know, why did I want to do that. And um; who was
>
> really benefiting? (Margaret, p. 11)

For some women this construction of a new self was a significant turning point as

they left behind an old, inappropriate reality, and moved into a brand new world:

> I felt like I had jumped off a cliff, and I really had a chance to see who I was . .
>
> . . And really coming to terms with, "what am I doing, what does it mean to
>
> me, why do I want to do this." (Hope, pp. 25-26)
>
> In my late 20s I think I really started discovering more who I was, as a person.
>
> Back then I was a little bit of an activist, I had always done some work with
>
> my students outside of classes, and started doing environmental stuff after

school. I used to do a little bit of that, and I was involved in various volunteer

things, but it was always a small part of me, and now I feel that I would define

myself as an activist, whereas before I would just define myself as a teacher.

(Carmen, p. 6)

Some women felt that they were returning to a sense of self that they had been

separated from at an early age, or that they were finally becoming aligned with their true

nature. "I feel as though I kind of gave up on who I was when I was about, between 10

and 15. And then I feel that I finally reconnected with that part of myself" (Naomi, p. 48).

[I began] pulling into a relationship and focussing on that, and my health and

my purpose, which are my three top things. Which is what I wanted all along.

If I thought back to when I was a kid, it was all I wanted, and it kind of got lost

everywhere, and then as an adult it all came together. And it felt right. (Chris,

p. 35)

[I now have] a willingness to show my family, and my brothers, who I am.

And yeah, my brothers will tease me about being a flake, and living on the

West Coast, and eat granola and all that stuff. It's been great, because it feels

much more in line with who I really am . . . . I feel that there's been this huge

growth in understanding, and a real shift back to sort of a sense of who I am,

which I never really had before. And you know, it's your sense of self. (Hope,

p. 28)

As the arduous process of the construction of identity came to completion, there

were a number of positive ways that the women identified and felt about themselves,

such as a new ability to empathize with other people's difficulties and suffering:

I think I've learned to become *way* more empathetic with friends who, because up until 30, I never had my heart broken, I had never gone through a break-up that was so painful for me. So when other friends go through periods like that, I can totally relate and understand and be there, whereas before that I just *didn't get it.* You know, just get on with it, ok. So I was such totally nonsympathetic and I couldn't empathize, I just couldn't relate . . . . Despite how painful it was it was a very positive outcome because it's made me understand how people can feel such pain. (Carmen, pp. 23-24)

It was finally at this point in life that many women saw themselves as having solid self-esteem and full maturity, and expressed relief to leave the 20s behind, which were perceived as being somewhat of an extended adolescence. "I've always been fairly self-confident growing up in my 20s, but God, I wouldn't want to be back in my 20s again. Even though there was a lot going on in my 30s, things just become more clear" (Carmen, p. 21).

When I look at my 20s I just think it's an extension of puberty. (Laughing.) You know, it's confusion, and there's still hormonal things, and with guys, what are they all about, and being totally confused, and feeling like my tail between my legs, not being totally sure of myself. So I think in my 30s, there's a lot more ease with that. (Stacey, p. 15)

The significantly enhanced self-esteem and solid sense of self also led to the development of personal congruity, grounding, and power, which also helped the women identify and eventually move towards their *personal meaning and purpose in life.*

I think I have a lot more integrity in my life, a lot more resonance between who

I am inside and how I present myself outside. There used to be quite a bit of

dissonance there. And now there's a lot more wholeness, and there's not as

much façade or pretending. (Hope, p. 50)

[After the "dark ages" of the late 20s and early 30s] I kind of came out into the

Renaissance. With new information and new understanding of myself that set

the foundation for who I am now and the successes I've had subsequent to that.

(Chris, p. 1)

Discovering inner knowing and self-expression. An integral element of the

development of the self was the women learning to pay attention to, and honouring their

inner voices, gut feelings, and intuitive wisdom. The women recognized that these

messages conveyed valuable information about what was intrinsically important for

them, so that they could heal and move into a better life.

I made a decision that I knew that I needed to leave him. I just knew it; I just

knew that I had to do it . . . . Every day I would close my eyes and meditate

and the voice would say to me "you must leave this relationship." And I had

had that message first when I had been with him for four months. You know

I'd close my eyes and there it was, "this is not the right place so you need to

leave." (Naomi, pp. 16-17)

I was spending a lot of time alone with my thoughts, whereas before I would

eat them away or drink them away or whatever. Whereas now I had to really

listen to them and try to understand them. I was moving through them. Before

it was denying them or getting angry at them, or just pressing them down or

ignoring them or drowning them out. (Chris, p. 14)

Some of the women tapped into their inner states through a physical conduit, and

expressed what they found there through visceral means:

[I had] the realization that I needed some kind of way to vent, because I don't

really express anger that well . . . . So having a physical outlet [karate] for that.

So it's something that I've learned about myself, and it's something that's very

important for me. (Stacey, pp. 6-7)

The process of learning to trust oneself and one's intuition was gradual and not

easy. The price of ignoring it, in retrospect, was exacted in pain:

For me, it was going inside to what I really knew and what was already there.

Because I didn't really need any more information, I needed to trust the

information I had already sought out. The information I needed was already

there, I just needed to trust it. (Chris, p. 29)

There were a lot of signs, that something was going on and I just chose not to, I

didn't want to see it. So I had a really big lesson in trusting my intuition. And I

sort of made a promise to myself that I would never forsake that again. So that

was really important. A very important lesson. (Hope, p. 31)

After the trust of oneself and one's intuition was in place, the women were able to

harness this flow of information to assist in dealing with life's difficulties. They became

much more internally-resourced and self-directed, as opposed to being left open to the

vicissitudes of external forces. "It's more of a checking in with my own sense of self, and

my own perspective, and what I want . . . and making decisions based on my own internal

moral compass" (Ginger, p. 29).

Through enhanced self-confidence and knowing who they were, the women

began to express to others, often for the first time, what was important to them. "I feel

that my opinion is *valid*, and I'm not shy in voicing it in any situation" (Ginger, p. 19). "I

learned that if I did speak up and say that something was not good, that it would be ok."

(Jane, p. 33)

> I used to be very shy, very laid back, and not very assertive at all, and now I
>
> speak up more and I'm more confident -- a lot more. I ask more questions,
>
> before I would be afraid to ask the wrong question. So that's been a learning
>
> process too in my late 20s . . . . So I talk to my boyfriend about it, and if it
>
> bothered me I tell him. And I talk about emotions a lot more than I did . . . .
>
> We come to a conclusion, not just sweep it under the mat, I want to have
>
> answers and figure out what the disagreement was, or where we didn't see eye
>
> to eye and then move on. I don't want to jump over it. (Marie, pp. 36-37)

Shifting from extremes to equilibrium. Some of the women found that they

moved from intense subjective experiences where they would swing from one end of the

emotional continuum to the other, to having more centeredness and balance in their lives.

This dichotomous existence was extremely taxing in its relentless chase, as it rarely

rested in neutral, and was usually fueled by a forsaken, base sense of self.

> I was trying to be a good Catholic girl, and I think a lot of the whole thing with
>
> the abuse, was that I had completely fallen from grace. And I think that I said,
>
> "well basically fuck it, I've fallen from grace. I've completely failed in being a

good Christian-Catholic woman, so I might as well just be what you don't want

me to be, which is a whore," right. (Naomi, p. 11)

I had had some relationships with women, but I really felt fallen from grace,

like I really felt like that village outcast as far as women went. I did have some

friendships but I just felt not respectable enough to be with other women. I

really had myself slot into that whole Mary Magdalene kind of role. That

whole Jungian thing is totally reflective of how split my feminine is. Not so

much now, but definitely back then. (Naomi, pp. 24-25)

Eventually, as the women cast off the outdated, deprecating self-identifications,

they gained more inner peace, as well as much more psychological integration of their

personality structure.

There is always that duality inside of me . . . . [I was] caught between that sort

of inner conflict of right and wrong, good-bad, good versus evil, just always

feeling that everything was so extreme. And always giving a judgment to it.

And creating conflict for myself and punishing myself . . . . And when we can

come to peace with two sides of ourselves, then they don't need to be in

conflict, and that there are parts of ourselves that see things one way, and there

are parts of ourselves that see ourselves another way. And that's a paradox of

life and of being human. So that created two halves of a circle, with this huge

black line down the middle. I just took away the middle line, and I was still a

whole circle, with two sides. Just they weren't in conflict. (Chris, pp. 31-32)

Inner Acceptance and Equanimity. As the women were developing their unique

sense of self, and their inner turbulence was abating so that they experienced more

quietude, they came into much more acceptance of themselves. This new appreciation

occurred in terms of their physical qualities, as well as who they were as an individual.

The harsh internal critic finally lessened its grip, and the women were no longer nearly as

judgmental of themselves for not living up to unattainable social-cultural standards of

appearances.

> I guess in a way I'm kinder to myself. I understand that I'm a human being and
>
> there are certain things that I do just because of who I am, that's my
>
> personality, and I don't put a lot of effort into changing it, as much as I used to.
>
> So in that way I think I'm more at peace with who I am. One of the areas is
>
> body image, and that is not a struggle that's over. I mean it has improved
>
> dramatically but, you know, it's a constant struggle, really, with the way that
>
> we're raised and the images in the media, and everything else, it's quite
>
> challenging. But there is a huge difference between me now and me at 27 or 28
>
> in terms of how I look at myself physically. (Jane, p. 41)
>
> You become more comfortable in yourself than when you're in your 20s . . . .
>
> [A]nd that's part of my transition too, is trying to, your self-esteem is torn and
>
> everything else, to say hey, "I'm comfortable in this, and I want my hair like
>
> this," and acceptance of who you are. (Marie, pp. 35-36)

Some also developed a new understanding, softening, and perspective of the

hardships that they had gone through earlier in life, and stopped blaming and holding

themselves responsible for the difficulties that they had endured.

> I think the PTSD for me, and probably for most people, was that I didn't get
>
> any comforting or nurturing around the trauma so I had never been soothed

with all of that pain . . . . I would sleep nights in the hammock on the back

porch and did everything that I needed to do to soothe and comfort myself . . . .

I know what it was--I had finally developed compassion for myself, that's what

had happened. (Naomi, p. 35)

As the women were nearing the completion of their painful personal work and

were finishing their tenure in hell, they started to have a sense of harmony in their lives.

This was a brand-new quality that some women experienced for the first time: "I guess

it's just being more centered, more at peace. Feeling all the joy I guess that I just never

knew how to feel before" (Chris, p. 18).

I have a lot more joy in my life than I used to, I have a lot more serenity, I feel

like I'm able to meet life's challenges on a more sane level . . . . I'm not so

afraid of life's challenges, let's put it that way. I've gained a measure of serenity

and maturity over the years. I feel a lot more stable. (Margaret, pp. 14-15)

Coming into spirituality. The women's crafting of an autonomous identity, the

discovering of inner knowing and intuition, and the enjoyment of newly-discovered

serenity, were also related to the development of a very profound, personal, form of

spirituality that they also integrated into their lives.

To be in the mountains is a very spiritual thing for me, so I think it's finding

the spiritual part of me as well. So spirituality for me is just sort of discovering

some sort of inner peace and some way of rejuvenating your inner energy. So I

have to be in the mountains on a very regular basis. And I've never had that

before, and I'm just wondering, *what did I do before*? (Carmen, pp. 12-13)

These new spiritual experiences were usually quite different from the more conventional forms of worship that the women had been exposed to as children. Many of the women expressed joy, as well as a sense of relief, for having found a form of spirituality that was so personally poignant and in alignment with who they had become.

> When I hit about 29 - 30, that was a big spiritual awakening, having a spiritual community based in women. Just an identification with a godhead that was feminine. So it was really reclaiming my spirituality I felt, that was what it was about. (Naomi, p. 26)

> For me, spirituality is a belief in a life force, I guess, whether it be my own life force or my life force interacting with other people. So through karate I got more in touch with my life force, and realized how much potential there was in that life force. I think I needed the experience of that -- that physical experience to recognize that. So for me, growing up a Roman Catholic and following the religion and books and ritual and all that stuff, it didn't work for me. And I didn't get it. So for me, I needed a different form, a different medium to get this idea. (Stacey, pp. 12-13)

This process was very much augmented by an openness and willingness to cast off the influences of the past, and embrace new, relatively unknown possibilities:

> I grew up in a very conservative family and upbringing, that talking about energy, or psychic stuff, or spirituality is just not done, and you're looked at as a flake if you did. So, that allowed that side of me to be developed and to be admitted into reality . . . . I had to learn a lot about grace, and a lot about trust,

and trusting in the wisdom of what was happening in my life. (Hope, pp. 43-

44)

Together with the other more extroverted *experiences of being helped and supported* described above, these new forms of spirituality helped the women develop the inner fortitude and some kind of meaningfulness for their suffering, that helped them get through the transition.

I was really connected to the [Hindi] Goddess Kali, because she's so intense

about transformation and death and rebirth, that's her whole trip, is death and

rebirth. And I was very connected with her and I was doing a lot of praying

and meditation with her, and I was just basically saying, "I just don't feel that I

have whatever, the gusto that it takes, so you just let me know when the time is

right, and I'll just speak your words and whatever comes out, I'll do it. I'm

totally willing for you to take me where-ever it is that I'm supposed to go."

And I had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do with my life.

(Naomi, p. 17)

The [Al Anon] program is based on spiritual principles, not necessarily

religious ones, and that really helped me to get to a place of, gave me some

kind of ground to find a more spiritual center in my life, within myself, I think.

It was lacking before, yeah. I had no idea, I was searching but I had no idea

where to look. I can really understand why people go to church today. And 15

years ago I couldn't have said that. I thought they were crazy. (Margaret, p. 21)

For some, these new spiritual experiences coincided with the growth of intuition, as well as the sense that greater forces were contributing to the construction of their lives:

> Being alone, I had a really strong sense of, uh, guides or angels, of feeling that
>
> somebody, something was looking out for me . . . . And *knowing* somehow,
>
> that I had the strength and that I'd come through ok. (Hope, p. 29)

Generation of Self-Determination and Life Direction

As their sense of self was being consolidated, the women also came to the

decision that they had to *conscientiously take charge of their lives*, as they realized that

they alone were responsible for themselves, and could no longer lean on others. This led

to the examination of choices, and the crafting of carefully thought-out plans for what

they wanted to do with their lives. As the women started to experience positive results

from the movement into such self-determination, they also began to develop a *new sense*

of self that was positive, adult and empowered. For some women this subsequently laid

the foundation to *live out one's personal meaning and purpose*, as they recognized they

were meant to contribute to the well-being of the world through the use of their unique

talents and abilities.

Conscientiously taking charge of one's life. A crucial factor in the women getting

out of their personal hells was their realization that if they really were to leave behind the

unhappiness that they were experiencing and move into a more fulfilling existence, they

needed to take charge of themselves and take full ownership of their circumstances. "I

was just getting more behind the reins and taking more control of my own life, and really

embracing that these were the choices that I made" (Stacey, p. 14).

> I have a lot of privileges in my life in terms of my education, my background,
>
> and upbringing . . . . I've had opportunities in my life that very few people have
>
> had. And also there was sort of this idea that I had been given a lot, and had so

much offered to me on a silver platter. And things were easy for me, that I

needed to then do something with those gifts, rather than just assume that they

were there for everybody. That was a real eye-opener for me. (Hope, pp. 6-7)

This awareness also led to committing to make whatever personal, internal

changes were necessary, no matter how humbling, painful, or frightening. There was an

understanding that this was an imperative and essential step for the successful conclusion

of the transformational process:

> When I hit that wall, it had a lot to do with my relationship with my partner,
>
> obviously. I knew something was wrong, and I knew something was terribly
>
> wrong with our relationship, and I began to realize that there was something
>
> wrong with how I conducted myself within that relationship. (Margaret, p. 5)
>
> I started to get into intellectualizing all this great information, so I had this
>
> great awareness, but things weren't *really* shifting the way they should, I wasn't
>
> really getting the results I thought I should be getting. And then I realized that I
>
> wasn't necessarily taking the action. So I was very *aware* of myself, but not
>
> necessarily taking really positive, committed action towards it. I really shifted
>
> to think, "ok, I've got to *do* something. I can't just think about it, I can't just
>
> read about, I can't just go to people and have them wave wands over me, I have
>
> to do something with myself, or I'm not going to, this pattern is not going to
>
> change, and I'm not going to physically heal." (Chris, pp. 26-27)

This was also very much a maturing process, that necessitated stripping away any

residual attitudes of dependence or attachment to parental influence, as well as letting go

of any lingering childlike self-perceptions: "I took myself out of that rebellious daughter and just became an adult responsible for my own decisions" (Ginger, p. 17).

> Several times [I ran] into really scary situations where I totally had to rely on myself, there was no one who was going to help me. There was no one I could call, there was nothing I could do. I can lose this airline ticket, and I can still be all right, and nobody else is going to take care of me, and I can do it for myself. So that was, even though it was late 20s, I still was fairly close to my family, and had relied on people for a lot of things. So I felt like I could do it after that year. (Jane, p. 5)

> I needed to prove that I was a grown-up. I needed to prove that I didn't just go running back to my parents the minute anything bad happened in my life. This was one of the first times for me of feeling very much adult, and very alone. And I wanted to know that I could do that. I felt like it was kind of a test. (Hope, p. 3)

Part of the women's process of taking responsibility for themselves meant that they began to make conscientious decisions about what qualities, factors, and conditions they wanted in their lives, as well as identifying how they were to go about achieving their goals: "I got more self-centered. So my decisions were more thoughtful, more clear. And I was better able to deal with the consequences, whatever they may be" (Chris, p. 10). "Now I'm a lot more selective of the people I spend time with, and how I spend time with them" (Stacey, p. 15).

> I had done a lot of work around trying to make that decision to move into counselling. Because I didn't really want to be one of these recovering

alcoholics who wants to go and save all the other drug addicts. And I thought

I'm not going to get into this, until I was about three or four years sober. I

needed to be really clear about what I'm doing here. And I did a lot of career

exploration around how is it going to look, what do I want to do, and how can I

map it out. (Naomi, p. 31)

I decided that it was time for me to take stock of this problem [of a series of

unhealthy romantic relationships], because I couldn't live that way anymore.

Plus this [overseas] trip had built up so much of my self-esteem that it was

like, *"why am I doing this? It doesn't make any sense."* I just was able to step

back and look at it logically. So I started to see a therapist and talk it through.

(Jane, p. 37)

As the women were contemplating and constructing the next chapter of their

lives, many once again engaged in a critical examination of conventionalized societal

prescriptions of what was "appropriate" for women, and compared those expectations

against what they had identified that they truly wanted for themselves. Thus, decision-

making was much more autonomous and internally-derived, and came from a place of

established individuality and positive self-regard. It was not unusual for the women to

reject traditional beliefs of what women "should" do.

I felt that if you're not thinking about it [having a child] day in day out, that it's

selfish for me to just have a child, for the sake of having a child with your

name and your blood. And if you're not thinking of it all the time, for other

reasons, it's not something to go through just because society thinks at a

certain age you should be having a child. (Marie, p. 24)

> The interesting shift for me is I don't go "oh, gosh he [a guy] asked me out, great, I have to go out with him." What does he have to offer me? Ok, why should I date him . . . . it's like, what can you do for me, rather than, "oh, I don't want to hurt your feelings, ok, I'll go out with you," or gee, he noticed me. (Hope, p. 23)

Another significant factor in the women's transformation was a dramatic paradigm shift in their view of the world, and what was possible for them personally within their own lives. Their existences began to markedly improve when the women embraced the existential belief that

> You can focus a lot of your life on being miserable and you can focus a lot of your life on being happy, and it really is a choice, and I didn't get that before. I didn't get that you could choose happiness . . . . I feel like now I'm choosing happiness, and it's really powerful. (Hope, p. 51)

New sense of self: Positive, adult and empowered. As the women gained a solid sense of self and began to activate their ability to make positive choices, they also developed a new sense of themselves as competent and cogent individuals: "I see myself as an adult, as very capable, and assertive and confident. So it feels like, *I don't think that anything can really shake me anymore, you know.* Yeah! Very solid grounding" (Ginger, p. 19). "I'm stronger than I thought was. I have a profound inner strength and resiliency, that I never before knew existed" (Hope, p. 44).

> [I also feel] emotionally capable. And I don't think I would have felt emotionally capable and in control if I hadn't gone through that transition

because I was still very vulnerable, up until that year, of having somebody

push my emotional buttons. (Ginger, p. 22)

Not only did the women realize that they could choose joy or misery, many

became aware for the first time that they actually deserved good things in life, because

they had become solidly grounded in the knowledge of their own inherent goodness. "I

think I really made a shift in my core sense of worth, and really having a fundamental

shift in realization that not only what I was doing was worthwhile, but who I was, was

worthwhile." (Hope, p. 26) "Nowadays I *really* seek to avoid those kinds of [negative]

situations. I look for the best for myself, I expect people to treat me with respect and

when they don't, I really respond strongly now." (Jane, p. 48)

I really remember being very adamant when I left [an unhealthy relationship

with a drug user] that day. I remember standing outside, waiting for the bus,

and it was at night-time, and *really* putting out there to the universe that this

part of my life is over, and being in these unhappy relationships that stifled me,

and that I wasn't going to be small for anybody ever again. (Naomi, p. 18)

Some of the women learned to use their new sense of inner power to develop the

means to manifest goodness in their lives.

I found that every time I made steps to make a change, I'd get positive results:

cause and effect. At that point, I flipped it totally around, and realized, well if I

can do all these negative things and have all these *really incredibly negative

results*, well hey, if I do positive things I'll have positive results. And that was

my experience, and that keeps growing, evolving, as I experiment with it.

(Chris, p. 10)

The women's empowerment and inner authority also gave them the strength to no longer be swayed by conventional societal or familial proprieties. They were not afraid to draw on some audaciousness, demonstrate their chutzpah, and direct their lives according to their own values and standards.

> The wedding. I think that was a statement, how do I want this to look? The first time I got married it was very traditional. The second marriage was the beginning of me saying my statement out in the world, and wearing a red dress . . . . I think that that was a lot about what that was about, was just the letting it go. It was like this rebellious statement, I know what's traditional, I know what's appropriate, I know what you prefer, not just my mom but the world. But this is what *I* like and this is what *I* want, and I'm going to do it. Totally glad that I did, I have no regrets at all. (Naomi, pp. 49-50)

> So when I was 32 I really, I kind of came to place of "I'm not taking any b.s., and this is who I am, and the world can live with this, and I'm not going to compromise my values anymore." And I got really comfortable with that. And accepted it. (Chris, p. 35)

The women also recognized that they were in full possession of the personal and professional tools to do in the world whatever they set their minds to, as well as having an appreciation of their ability to influence other people to do the same:

> Just having gone through life, from a mainstream school, and hanging out with fairly mainstream people who don't push the envelope, not pushing the boundaries of society, and through this work I'm doing, that's all I'm doing, it's just pushing more, can I change things more. Now I'm the Executive Director

for the past two years. Being the Executive Director is just, as someone said to me the other day, you have one of the *best jobs* in the city, and I thought, "Yeah, I do!" I manage eight staff, we have almost a half million dollar budget, and I do the project planning, I work with staff, we do the visioning, I work with government, with the public, I do media stuff, I'm always learning. (Carmen, p. 12)

It's only recently that I've been thinking, 'I can do anything I want to do. I can do it.' If I have an interest, I can do it. So I've got that feeling the last few months, that I can conquer. I've been stating this to people, "you can do whatever you want to do if you have the interest and you want to go do it. It may take you a while, depending, but keep going after it." So that's where I'm at today. (Marie, p. 15)

Living out personal meaning and purpose. As the women's unique identities were being brought forth and their personal power was consolidating, many also identified what their particular aptitudes, gifts, and vocational purposes were. Their callings in life, which had thus far been latent, finally rose to the surface and became intelligible. Many of the women finally established a serious career path that was consistent with their personal philosophies, and what they felt were their reasons for being.

What I do for a living--I never looked at it as being a purpose, I never looked at what I do as being anything deeper than having a talent to perform at a certain level, and getting that sort of very superficial acceptance. That used to be what was enough for me, although it wasn't enough for very long. (Laughing.) Pretty quick into the [broadcasting] career I realized that wasn't

enough. That's probably the most major shift, is that I don't look at working as something that's good if I can achieve at it, instead it's something that has to fulfill something fairly deep in me, a need, [which is] helping people. (Jane, p. 46)

Not that I wasn't passionate about teaching, *I love* teaching; I love working with high school kids. But I feel very much that I'm *meant* to do something like this . . . . I was quite surprised that I only taught for seven years all together and changed, and I've never looked back. So I knew that I was meant to change to work on environmental issues, which is more meaningful. (Carmen, p. 11)

I think that I have a gift to help them [older people] through the later years of their life, whether it be adding quality through purposeful activity, or be someone there to validate their feelings as they near the later years of their life. And um; I actually believe I have a gift; it comes from within. (Marie, p. 17)

The women were also quietly passionate about how they were going to make a positive difference in the world through the actualization of their particular talents, in a conscious, generous way:

So I think purpose was a big part for me, finding purpose, finding my own truth. And that's coming together as part of this transition, to inspire and empower people to make positive changes in their lives -- to make them aware that they can do *anything*. And make a change in the world through words, to touch people with words . . . . And to give them the information; I want them to access their own information, but we need to have someone doing that. So if I can create that inspiration somehow, just to make some shift in their sense of

self to make the changes, that would be my purpose. Even if it's a little one.

(Chris, p. 19)

My realization is that, when you are fully who you are, as expressed as you

possibly can be, it's an inspiration to others, and it calls others into their full

being. And what a gift that is. So, focussing on that, was really really important

for me . . . . I have meaning and purpose, that there's work to be done, [which

is] making a difference in the lives of other people. And being a part or an aide

in their transformation, of their coming to the realization of who they are.

(Hope, p. 42)

Some of the women developed a clear understanding of what it means to be

generative, at an age that is quite a bit younger than the norm:

I think as I get older I wonder about the younger generation, and what's to

become of the world, and I think, as an adult, our position is to educate the

people who are following us. And not being selfish, once I reach older

adulthood, how much of a world will it be if you're not helping the people who

follow you, to maintain or to make the world a better place. I just think I've

gained so much more knowledge over the years, that that helped me be aware

of the importance of that. (Marie, p. 27)

<u>Creating New Relationships With Others</u>

The new calm, inner resourcefulness, and solid sense of self helped the women

define healthier relationships by *establishing boundaries* in long-term relationships, or to

create new, better ones. This process was aided by the *letting go* of past hurts, and

forgiving others. Just as they were now more accepting of themselves, they were also

able to accept others' limitations. Together with the newly-discovered sense of their inner worth, the women developed a richer appreciation of *belonging with others* that was fundamentally deeper and more caring.

Establishing boundaries. While the women were becoming more centered and clear about themselves, this newly-garnered awareness and strength was usually put to the test in their relationships. Oftentimes the women would find themselves in challenging situations where they had to assert themselves, articulate what their needs were, or set limits so that they would no longer be treated badly. This was a significant change from the typical sort of relationships that the women had in earlier years. "In my 20s, I think I would be a lot more swayed by other people and more focussed on their needs, rather than what I needed and what I wanted" (Stacey, p. 15).

> I know I have high expectations about myself, and that I want to please everybody and anybody, and to do the best that I can do. And the insight around that is, that that's not realistic, to be able to live up to everybody's expectations. Therefore, I've become more assertive. I never used to say no . . . . I've actually been able to be more assertive and to determine what I'm able to do, at my own pace. So that's been quite a learning experience. (Marie, p. 13)

A dialectic tension of self in relation to others was played out, typically within the family, with authority figures at work, and in love relationships. This was usually the first time that the women had dared to stand up for themselves in such high-stakes circumstances, which held the strong possibility that others would respond with anger and rejection. These experiences were extremely nerve-wracking, as the women felt an imminent danger that they would lose something important in their lives.

It started out with my counsellor coaching me in telephone conversations, he said "if your dad starts accusing you of being a rotten daughter, an unloving daughter, tell him that this is inappropriate, you can't talk to me this way" and hang up the phone. Now in my family, there's this Eastern European philosophy of you cannot possibly be rude to your parents, so to hang up on your parents is like the worst thing you can do . . . . And I said, "Listen, I don't like your tone of voice, I don't like the way you're dealing with me. If you keep dealing with me this way I'm going to hang up the phone." And he said "*You hang up on your own father*?!" The classic line! (Laughing.) And I said "Yes." He said "what are you talking about, what kind of a daughter --" And I went **Click**. And if there's one thing in my life, like moving out, *the click was **such** a significant moment*. Like I hung up the phone *and my heart was **just** pounding, because I thought, I had **never** done that*. (Ginger, pp. 11-12)

Going to my boss and asking for [a shift change] was one of the hardest things that I've ever done, which now amazes me. But at the time, I know that I was just so unhappy there. I wasn't able to assert myself very well . . . . It's about being able to say "No. No, this isn't acceptable for me," and taking the risk of him saying "well then you're fired, because I need someone to work nights," which he almost did. (Laughing.) Close to it, he threatened me right away, as the initial response was "well, you realize this could mean you'll be right off the schedule," and I said "yes, I do realize that, but my health is more important and it's come to the point now where it's affecting my health, and I

can't take any chances with that." And he slowly kind of backed down and softened. (Jane, pp. 18-19)

An integral aspect of establishing boundaries was the women's growth in self-confidence, and the realization that they deserved to be in a healthy, loving relationship. Many of the women had to work to incorporate the understanding that this meant being in a situation where they were treated well, with respect and appreciation, and that they were significant and mattered to the other person.

> It was my first relationship being sober . . . . It was incredibly intense. When we met, in retrospect when I look back at it when we met, today I would have not gone out with him, but then I still didn't have any boundaries and I still didn't know how to say no . . . . It was a disaster. And I think a lot of what was going on in those two years was really about his chaos and his drama, and I didn't really look at my life at all. (Naomi, pp. 13-14)

> [My counsellor] asked me a question once which was a really good one, she said "what are your criteria for who you go out with." And I said "my criteria are that they asked me out." And I realized that I was being very passive in relationships, and my criteria was that they showed interest in me and I didn't want to hurt their feelings and not date them, even though I knew they were really wrong for me. And so it started a shift for me in terms of what are my criteria for who I go out with. And also, realizing that I had compromised a lot. That I down-played a lot of who I was for the sake of their comfort. (Hope, pp. 5-6)

Letting Go. The women's new level of maturity and peace within themselves enabled them to see others with more compassion and understanding, and to forgive others their past transgressions: "I think I've learned to just accept people for who they are and not to make any further interpretations of them . . . . People change and people should be forgiven" (Marie, p. 33).

> I think the hardest part of this whole process was to acknowledge the fact, and I worked with this with my counsellor, that my parents were not going to see it through my eyes. I could scream and shout and try to tell them how I was feeling, but they weren't going to understand that the way my father was dealing with me was inappropriate. (Ginger, p. 13)

> I wrote to him [my brother] that summer, and I basically said "I can never forget what happened but I want you to know that I forgive you." I don't know where it came from but I just knew, I just have to write this. (Naomi, p. 45)

This internal shift was an enormous change from the previous rage and intense hurt that the women had been embroiled in:

> I had a conversation with this guy that dumped me. I had been making him into the biggest, baddest guy, and he became sort of symbolic of the evils of all men in the world. And he was just scared. He was just doing what he wanted to do, and he needed to do, and he was doing what he thought was right for his life. There's nothing wrong with that . . . . And for me to let that go, the amount of mental energy that had driving the hamster wheels in my head, for how he was wrong, and how he was going to prove he was wrong, and *he can come groveling back to me and wouldn't it be great, and when he knocks on my door*

and I'm going to spit on him or something! That was stupid. It was just like, cut

him free, cut him loose. (Hope, p. 41)

A letting go also occurred in the sense that some of the women shed the limiting

ways that their lives had been structured, and developed personal freedom out of the

restrictions that they had formerly been bound up in.

My big thing in this last year, coming back to 35, has been about autonomy

and freedom. It's all about how do I want my life to look. And really letting go

. . . . It might take me a long time, but my big thing is about flexibility. How do

I get the most say over my life. (Naomi, p. 38)

The letting go was another significant factor in the women moving through the

transition and completing their personal transformation, so that they could move on to the

next, finer, chapter of their lives.

The aspect of forgiving, has been very liberating. Of having conversations with

people who I had been just making them into the biggest demons. I was fairly

judgemental, and I think I've tried to drop a lot of the judgement. Because now

I'm not kind of dragging around that much of my past with me, it's complete.

(Hope, p. 49)

Belonging with others. The women's fundamental internal changes were mirrored

in their relations with others, as they developed stronger, more trustworthy, and

meaningful relationships with the people around them, as well as with the new people

that entered their lives. Thus, another positive outcome of the women doing their

personal inner work and with regards to boundaries, was the ability to heal long-standing

relationships that had been strained and difficult in the past.

> It's made my relationship with my parents a relationship of equals, and adults, instead of the child . . . . I visit them because they're my parents but they also have some valid points of view, and they know me well, so they were able to say "this is what we saw and this is what we didn't like about him [ex-boyfriend]." And I recognized at that point that they did have something to offer me, more than just being the emotional ties of parents, but their views, and wisdom and experience, had something to offer. (Ginger, pp. 24-25)

> It is important for me to have a good relationship with my partner, it really is important to me. And to have a good relationship with my family, I really strive for that as well. And it's become important for me to reach out to my extended family more than I used to. (Margaret, pp. 15-16)

Some of the women were able to break old, self-defeating patterns of disappointment and heartbreak, and finally developed a healthy, fulfilling, love relationship:

> Back then [before the transition] it was important to be in a relationship. Even though I wasn't, and I would seek out real typically unavailable types of men. But now, this relationship's extremely important to me, but it's not *being* in a relationship, it's this *person*. It's what is there in that relationship that's important to me, which is respect and trust and caring, and equality, teamwork. Which were things that, for whatever reason before, although they're really important to me, I can't imagine, but I--I sacrificed them hugely. (Jane, p. 47)

Many of the women commented on how the friendships in their 30s had improved as well, so that they were now engaged with others in a more supportive, caring, and deeper way:

> I have a really amazing group of close friends that I've developed over the past few years and, there's probably a group of eight who are really close . . . . They see me go through *everything,* ups and downs, and they're always always there for me. And we play together, it's just a really great group of friends. I don't think I've ever had such close friends. (Carmen, p. 20)

> Around about 30-ish, I really started to connect with women. And that was a whole new world for me . . . . It's actually having a community where I felt accepted and respected. So that's been a really big part of my life, and still is today. (Naomi, p. 26)

As the women accepted that they had a fundamental place in the world, they also became aware of their interconnectedness and mutuality with other people in their communities, so that they were linked through a kind of spiritual unity:

> I [used to think] that everybody was cool and could handle anything in the world. And then I got out to different groups and realized ok, I'm not really so bad! (Laughing.) I got a point of reference; I never had one before. It gave me sort of a point of reference as to where people come from. And I guess that I wasn't alone; I didn't really connect with a *person,* but I connected with *people,* and heard other people's stories and their experience. (Chris, pp. 14-15)

> The karate had a bit of, sort of a church element to it. There was a community of people who had a belief . . . . For me church isn't so much the building and

the ritual, but more the people and the interactions or the relationships. (Stacey,

p. 19)

[I realized] that people want to be part of my life, and that I do have a lot to

offer them. And I really got a real sense of that, of um, if I were asking people,

friends and family, if I were to leave this community in three months what

would be missing from your life, the answers to that question were huge for me

in terms of realizing, having a real sense of the contribution I was making to

other people, which I didn't really have a sense of that before. That if I left, I

sort of figured no one would really miss me. And that, of hearing some of the

answers to that, was profound. (Hope, p. 27)

<u>Reflections Upon the Invaluable Experience</u>

In retrospect, the women were able to identify various facets of their *process of*

personal evolution. Many commented on its ponderous length. All of the women felt that

there was an inherent change in their sense of self, or an internal transformation. They

also found that while the transition was a significant juncture in the course of their lives,

it was very much a part of a larger, life-long, evolutionary process. Finally, the women

found that although the transition was painful and difficult, they felt that it was extremely

important, and were *grateful for the experience as they opened up to life* in a new and

vivid way.

<u>The process of personal evolution.</u> There were various qualitative aspects of the

transitional process that were evident to the women in retrospect. Many stated that getting

through the transition from beginning to end was a lengthy endeavour: "[It was] seven

years hard labour or however long I've been working on the bloody thing!" (Naomi, p.

46). "[It was] catastrophic in a slow kind of way, it happened over a period of time.

Those changes didn't happen right away" (Margaret, p. 23).

> It was slow, and I kept kind of going three steps forward, two steps back in that
>
> process, but it was what I needed to do, to experiment with trying to make
>
> these changes. Like I guess if everything changed really quick overnight it
>
> wouldn't have seemed real. (Chris, p. 9)

Others found that the central problem that they were grappling with eventually

manifested itself into another form, so that the painful dilemma was camouflaged, and

then echoed thematically into another area of their lives. It was as if the women's

learning around a particular issue was being tested to see how well it was integrated, and

if they were able to generalize it across different situations.

> At the same time that I was going through this with my family I realized that
>
> my supervisor, my grad supervisor was very much like my father, and I went
>
> through a bit of that process with him, of trying to assert myself and not feeling
>
> guilty for being a bad grad student. So I think it's funny how issues in
>
> relationships kind of match your family patterns, and until you recognize
>
> what's going on in your family, that's when you break the cycle, so that year
>
> was when I broke the cycle. (Ginger, p. 18)
>
> My last job was a little bit of chaos; it was just such a chaotic place to work. It
>
> was very intense. And a lot of the story was just about getting out of there,
>
> which I really realize too, that that was a little bit of my own myth, because as
>
> a child I was really held hostage, and what would happen is I would get into
>
> these shitty relationships and I would be held hostage in them. And then that

last relationship where the guy died it was like, "that's it, I'm not going to be held hostage anymore in relationship," well I didn't, but I found I ended up in a job where I was holding myself hostage, or where I felt that I was being held hostage. So I left that job with that awareness, ok so it's not happening in my love-life but I still do it, so I have to be very careful with that. (Naomi, p. 37)

There was an acknowledgement of the draw to circumvent the hard work that the transition demanded. At times it was tempting for some of the women to play it safe, to forgo the difficulties, fear, and uncertainty that they knew were inevitable, and simply retrench to their original, safer circumstances, despite the pallid quality of the old way of life:

I have a real survival instinct, my thing is to get work right away and do it, and be ok again, and not to go through this, difficult transition phase, and so it was a struggle not to just put my energy back into finding a job in the old industry and then just do that just to survive. (Jane, p. 32)

Some of the women felt that they had gone through a fundamental change when the transition was completed. It was as if they had shed an old persona, made an inherent shift in their sense of self, and metamorphosed into a new individual: "It just seems like another life-time, another person; and I think it was another person. The person before that whole year, and now there's a different one" (Ginger, p. 31).

I'm the same person, so I'm sort of connected by this very very thin cord, but it seems like that person's floating out there like an astronaut. I have to kind of go, "well there's evidence that it happened," because I know now when I'm moving I find bits and pieces of stuff and, so I know that these things occurred,

but if I was to tell someone my life story from A to B, they'd probably think I'd made it up because it all sounds so unreal--and it seems so surreal to me now. (Chris, p. 8)

The women did see the time between the late 20s and early 30s as a distinct, significant time in their lives, and appreciated the importance of having gone through this experience. "I just really considered that period of time [the age-30 transition] as um, almost as a rite of passage to the rest of my life" (Naomi, p. 8). Some described the particular tasks that they were engaged with in the external world, which acted as a vehicle that helped move them through the transitional process. For Hope, the task was finishing her Master's thesis:

> The thesis had almost become like a baby, that needed to be born, but I didn't want to necessarily give it up and give it away. And there's a lot of metaphors in there for me -- it also became the excuse for me in terms of not really getting on with my life. Of sort of having this convenient societally-acceptable pause button. Where people seem to give you a lot of credit "oh, you're working on your thesis, that's great." Well the truth was I wasn't working on my thesis. So I had this break from life, for about two or three years where I was financially supported, I was societally supported, and what I really was doing was mourning and feeling and working on my own stuff, you know, to come out the other side . . . . And of getting a clearer view of my future, and of realizing just how important it was, that I emerge from this period of sort of isolation and mourning, and um, healing, and to come out the other side and actually do something with it. (Hope, p. 20)

Others were aware of the particular trajectory of their personal development:

> I identify with the [Jungian] archetypes, and I sort of literally, went through the
> stages: the innocent, martyr, warrior, and magician. I sort of went through the
> rebel stage for a very long time, the warrior, for a very long time. Before that I
> was the martyr. Innocent for a little while, not for very long, and now I feel
> like I'm coming out of the warrior stage into the magician stage. (Chris, p. 17)

Some of the women felt that the notion of a "transition" was somewhat arbitrary and artificial, and that change was ongoing and more seamless in how it unfolded:

> I think there definitely was a change, but I also think that for myself, change is
> still occurring. I don't think that's going to stop, with my willingness to always
> see that there may be something that there is that I can do different. So I think
> that it is a continual process, for me anyway, I don't think that it just stops, I
> don't think there's an end to that. (Margaret, p. 20)

Others became aware of a fluid, intertwining quality of perpetual motion in their lived experience. In addition, some of the women saw the positive conclusion of this particular early-life transition, as being fundamental in enabling them to embrace the subsequent, predictable vicissitudes that they will encounter:

> Life is a series of these transitions, and it's not just one, and you go through it
> and come out nicely to the other side, it's like spiraling around, where
> sometimes it feels you're going backwards but actually you're on a whole new
> level, you're higher up, but you're come a long way, when you look at it.
> (Hope, p. 22)

[Drawing a spiral] I was moving [in my 20s], but I wasn't really getting

anywhere, and in that I was sort of making a treadmill, going round in circles.

Now I feel like I'm doing this -- so I'm moving and I'm going around and

around, but I'm going forward, which is a cycle, where that's a circle. I didn't

embrace the cycles before, and I just really saw them as really abrupt endings

and abrupt beginnings. Now I realize that as I'm moving to go forward into the

next stage, that's where I'm going to experience my transition. And I'm ok with

that now. So I'm welcoming turning 40. And I'm welcoming turning 45 and 50.

I don't know that I did welcome it before, I just got anxious about it because

there's all these expectations associated with it. But now I don't have those. I

have hopes, goals, visions, a certain sense of expectation that goes with that,

but not a judgement. So this feels flowing; this has a sense of, to me, of flow,

and of natural rhythm and natural transition. (Chris, pp. 37-39)

<u>Gratitude for the experience: An opening up to life.</u> All of the women found that

the onerous and grueling transition was inherently valuable and meaningful in the end,

and many felt thankful that they had gone through it.

[The transition was] hard, painful, but *extremely* important, like valuable. I

think some people don't make a transition like that in their lives at all; they

never learn how to stand up for themselves, and maybe some people do in their

60s but I feel very fortunate, to have gone through it when I was 26. Now it's

like I recognize that nobody has a perfect childhood and you just have to deal

with your demons as you grow up, and the sooner you deal with them the

better you are as an adult. (Ginger, p. 27)

It feels just so much more precious. My life. The gifts I've been given . . . .

And I'm at a point now where I really feel like I understand what the point of it

all is, and that I wouldn't have that understanding unless I'd come through the

heartbreaks and the depression, and the things that I've come through. (Hope,

p. 46)

The qualitative changes in the women's lives ranged from quite a bit of

improvement, to a monumental difference. For some of the women, it was only after the

positive completion of the age-30 transition that their lives truly began:

I just want so much out of life now . . . . I went from wanting to die, to this

existence is ok, to yeah, I wouldn't mind living I guess, to now it's like, oh my

God, it's the last thing, *I just don't want to die*! No, because there's just so

much that I have to do. (Naomi, p. 42)

I didn't embrace life before; I didn't respect it. Not that I hurt people. I guess

for me the transition was a little death, or a near-death experience. People sort

of go along in their life and then they have a cardiac arrest and then they come

out of it a whole new person, and then they do things totally differently and

they embrace every little flower or bird that goes by . . . . I now live with that

sense of renewed appeciation for life. I mean, everything's just so much

brighter and more vivid now. And I love life now. Whereas before I don't

know that I could have said that. I could never have said "love life" in the same

sentence. That's what's different. My love of life, in all it's forms, right down to

my little pussy cats, and my husband, and the trees and the birds at the

window. I don't know that I got excited about life that way before. I got

excited, but this goes far beyond that, to a different level. (Chris, pp. 43-44)

Chapter V

Discussion

The research question posed in this study was: *What is women's experience of the age-30 transition that is ultimately deemed positive?* This chapter will address the significance of the research findings, and compare these results to the literature presented in Chapter Two. The limitations of this research, my personal reflections upon the study, the implications for future research, and the implications for counselling and therapy, will also be discussed.

Summary of Findings

> Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?
> Mary Oliver

> Adulthood is the continual process of cultivating one's humanity.
> Confucius

The women's experience of a positive age-30 transition in this study parallels the five thousand year-old myth of the Sumerian goddess Inanna (Bolen, 1996). The relevance of this myth is that it demonstrates the universality of transitional experiences, both across a vast historical span, and cross-culturally. In addition, it provides further support for the thematic results of this study, as it portrays a similar progression through the transition, and highlights many of the same important aspects that assist in getting through it well, so that the transition is positively transformative and inherently valuable in the end.

Inanna was the Queen of Heaven and Earth. When she heard that her sister goddess Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld, was suffering and in pain, Inanna decided to visit her. Although Inanna thought that she would be able to enter the underworld with

ease, she found that in order to pass through the seven gates, she had to take off her headdress, then her jewelry, and her royal robe, so that finally she was stripped naked. This progression is analogous to the women's <u>Descent into Hell</u>, where they began to withdraw into themselves, felt isolated, and experienced considerable negative emotions as their identity and life structure of the 20s began to break down.

By the time Inanna entered the underworld, she was bowed low and entirely stripped of her psychological defenses, her old identity, and her authority in the outer world. This is similar to the women's experience of their lives finally falling apart, and *reaching ground zero*. When Inanna came into Erishkegal's presence, the goddess of the underworld was not happy to see her. She gazed at Inanna with wrath, and with baleful judgement struck her dead.

Inanna's body was hung on a hook, where after three days, it began to decompose and turned into a slab of green meat. Metaphorically this is about moving below the level of daily consciousness in order to find out what aspect of the self is suffering, and to delve deeply into the grief and pain that lies in one's unconscious. This is analogous to the women's experience of residing for a time *in the black hole of pain*.

Erishkegal represents the inner, rejected, or repressed aspects of Inanna, and of women in general. Hidden in the underworld, she is wounded, angry, and depressed. She is not a "nice woman," and consequently, is devalued by society. "Nice women" learn to repress their anger, because from an early age parents and society teach them to feel shame for having such feelings. This subsequently leads to the devaluing of the self, and a sense of worthlessness. In order to overcome these feelings, women learn to get societal approval by performing and looking a certain way in the outer world.

However, the pain and rage at not being loved and valued for who one really is, in one's entirety, is repressed from consciousness, along with the other qualities, talents, ambitions, and dreams that are deemed unacceptable. Similarly, when the women in this study came face-to-face with their inner Erishkegal, they were also *struggling with the negative influences* that they had absorbed so far in life, during the <u>Contention with Outside Forces</u>.

When Inanna was stripped naked she was able to reach psychological depths within herself that would have otherwise been impossible to reach. There she found the pieces of herself that were abandoned or forgotten, which were embodied by Erishkegal. Inanna's death also symbolized the death of her personality, the beliefs and illusions that she had held up to this point in her life.

The tenure in the underworld is a deeply introspective time about what really matters, where one examines how one is living one's life, and chooses to make a fundamental shift in personal meaning and priorities. This was also the time when the women worked on the <u>Development of the Self</u>, as they shed worn-out or harmful inner aspects and pieced together new, desirable qualities in the *construction of their identity*.

This process also necessitates listening to one's inner wisdom, which is represented by Erishkegal, who communicates through intuition, *gnosis,* or felt-knowledge. Erishkegal knows what is personally meaningful, and how to construct an identity and a life that is valuable, authentic, and that allows self-expression. As the women started to acknowledge and incorporate their Erishkegal qualities into their lives, they developed their *inner knowing and self-expression*, as well as *inner acceptance.* It marked the beginning of trusting oneself, healing, and integration.

Before Inanna left for the underworld, she asked her loyal friend Ninshubur to look for her if she did not return after three days and nights. Ninshubur was Inanna's faithful servant and trustworthy advisor, and is symbolically a helpful interior figure, an aspect of oneself that seeks help on one's behalf. Ninshubur is also represented by close friends, a spouse, a support group, or therapist. Ninshubur was evident in the women's transition when they realized that they needed outside help and sought some kind of counselling, as well as getting support from caring people in their lives. This was their Experience of Being Helped and Supported.

After three days when Inanna did not return, Ninshubur began to lament her loudly, beat her drum, and beseeched the gods for assistance. One god created two helpful creatures who flew through the cracks of the seven gates, looking for Erishkegal and carrying food and water for Inanna. When the helpful creatures found Erishkegal groaning and awash in her pain, they echoed her complaints, empathically sighing with her, witnessing her suffering, until finally it was gone.

When her pain was heard and acknowledged, she was fundamentally changed, and responded with compassion. Erishkegal was no longer an angry, wrathful goddess, and instead became grateful and generous. She asked the creatures what they would like in return, so that she could show her thanks and appreciation. As she bestowed the gifts, she became decisive, powerful, and acted on her own behalf. This is much like the women's newly-developed ability to *conscientiously take charge of their lives* with a *new sense of self that is positive, adult and empowered*, and to give to others in a way that is *purposeful and personally meaningful.*

Upon the creatures' request, she gave them Inanna. After they gave her food and water, Inanna rose from the dead. Metaphorically, the sisters Inanna and Erishkegal are the two sides of a woman's psyche that need to be brought together, made peace with, and shown compassion for. The acceptance and integration of Erishkegal into consciousness is fundamental for rebirth, individuation, and transformation. Erishkegal's new-found joy also parallels the women's *gratitude for the transitional experience*, and their *new opening up to life*.

When Inanna returned to the outer world, she was accompanied by demons who were ready to claim whomever she designated to return with them to the underworld in her place. She would not allow them to take Ninshubur, who had faithfully helped her. They next met Inanna's sons, who had been mourning her loss. Again Inanna would not let the demons take them. When they came upon her husband Dumazi and found him complacently enjoying a good life, completely unconcerned about her absence, Inanna commanded the demons to take him away.

With her new ability to discern how others feel about her and with the new knowledge of what others meant to her, Inanna took action. She wielded the power she had gained in the underworld and banished from her life those who she realized no longer belonged there, and thus, *established boundaries*. At the same time, she chose whom she wanted to *belong with*, and create deeper, meaningful relationships. Similarly, the women in this study found that becoming a whole person meant living with a range and depth of feelings, having the ability to sense and choose, to express their thoughts and feelings, and to have the freedom and the right to act upon them.

Findings in Relation to Past Research and Theoretical Literature

The results of this study illustrate much of the qualitative and quantitative

research that was cited in the literature review, and illuminate it further through present-

day, richly-detailed description. For example, the process of identity development

described here is similar to findings by Helson and Moane (1987), and Stephen, Fraser,

and Marcia (1992), who found that people go through cycles of Moratorium-

Achievement Moratorium-Achievement (MAMA) in adulthood, where one identity

structure is broken down and another is subsequently created. Consequently, identity can

be an evolving configuration throughout adulthood:

> Eventually [an] initial identity will be disequilibrated: once meaningful
>
> commitments become unsatisfactory, one's self image and definition no longer
>
> fit with newly emerging thoughts, feelings and values; external life events
>
> propel a challenging of old ways. Providing that the individual is receptive, he
>
> or she is likely to re-enter Moratorium and begin the cycle again. Thus, the
>
> identity process may be better described as spiral rather than as linear.
>
> Movement is between the two poles of consolidation and disequilibration, of
>
> structure and revision, of commitment and exploration. (Stephen et al., 1992, p.
>
> 296)

The process is aided by the individual's willingness to explore and engage in new

meaning-making, in "an evolving relationship of the self to the world" (Stephen et al.,

1992, p. 297). Such a person is open to new information that contradicts the already-

existing personality, but also possesses an internal organizing structure that is flexible

and elaborate enough to make sense of it, which then enables the person to formulate and

commit to a new identity. Thus, the crucial factors that the women in this study possessed were a determination and a resiliency that pulled them through their personal crises, as well as a sufficiently sophisticated psychological make-up. The positive resolution of a transition necessitates ego strength as well as ego complexity.

In addition to the women's evolving relationship with the external world, a very significant factor that augmented the women's identity development was their personal Descent into Hell, and that they allowed themselves to be "hung on a hook" and left to decompose. Somehow, through their inner strength and appreciation of something larger than themselves, they accepted the importance of enduring the brutal process. The time spent in this liminal space enabled them to be reborn with a new, differentiated, sense of self that was fundamentally changed.

These are the main factors that distinguish people who traverse a life transition so that it ends positively, and those who retrench. The latter individuals do not allow themselves to *reach ground zero*, extract themselves from the *black hole of pain* before any substantive inner reworkings even begin, pull themselves out of the process prematurely before all of the important work is completed, or simply shut down and stagnate (Bridges, 1980; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1996; Marcia, 1966).

The typical course of the transitional process found by Belenky et al. (1986), Bridges (1980), and Levinson (1996) was also illuminated by these findings. The women described the age-30 transition as being a very significant rite of passage, which marked the ending to one chapter in life and the beginning of another, quite different one. For many of the women it began by leaving their circumstances, either physically by *taking flight*, or psychologically and emotionally as they withdrew into themselves.

These results also resemble previous findings (Buhler, 1968; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1996) that the 20s were a time of filling one's life and sense of self with examples and directives from external influences, which became increasingly irritating, constricting, and untenable, and consequently demanded attention. It was only after the women heeded the incessant pull towards individuation, purged themselves of the negative imprints that they had incorporated from others, healed the pain left over from childhood, learned to trust themselves, and made fundamental changes to personal beliefs and life commitments, that they "grew themselves up" (Halliday, 1998; Levinson, 1996; Marcia, 1966).

This study is a current-day follow-up to the Reinke et al. (1985a) finding that in previous decades, many young women made relationships their life goals. For the women in this study, the actualization of *meaningful purpose* through career was a very big focus. The women's Generation of Self-Determination and Life Direction gave them a tremendous sense of not only personal power, but also the justification and belief in themselves to pursue their dreams.

These new results indicate a very important societal change and opportunity for personal evolution for women, because most have to work today. This is bolstered by the Reinke et al. (1985a) finding that the women who did individuate in previous decades were those who had worked outside the home in their 20s. However, similar to Levinson's (1996) research, most of the women in this study did not commit to a self-defined, solid career path until after the age-30 transition.

The results of this study fail to illustrate those by Gould (1978), Reinke et al., (1985a & 1985b), and Roberts and Newton (1987), who found that the priorities of

women in their 20s, whether career or family, were reversed after the age of 30. In addition, the current results are dissimilar to older findings that showed that women first defined themselves through relationships with others (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987), which then allowed them to establish an occupational identity (Ryff & Migdall, 1984). These results are more similar to a study by Scheidel and Marcia (1985), who found that women addressed issues of identity and intimacy at the same time. In addition, the women in this study worked on issues around careers and committed relationships simultaneously, throughout the 20s and during the age-30 transition.

These current results do not resemble Erikson's (1968) theory of life-span development, where the tasks of Identity versus Identity Diffusion and Intimacy versus Isolation were dealt with separately, with one following the other. In fact, the women's experience of withdrawal and isolation led them to emerge with not only a newly *constructed identity* and *acceptance of self*, but also a stronger ability to be intimate, and *belong with others*.

Once the women emerged from isolation newly empowered and self-defined, many of them quickly became Generative, and focussed their energies on the actualization of their *meaning and purpose*, the competent employment of their skills and talents, and caring for others. According to Erikson's theory, this does not typically happen until middle adulthood. However, the current results show that these three life tasks were addressed in a condensed, overlapping, and intertwined way, and were not dealt with separately or over an extended period of time.

While all of these women were either seeking a partner or establishing a committed relationship, about one-third of them were not interested in having children.

This is perhaps a higher proportion than in the past, when being child-less typically ensured either social censure or pity. Thus, the "Traditional Homemaker Figure" (Levinson, 1996), whose oppressive weight women had to carry in the past, has much less influence and import today. The "Anti-Traditional Figure" whom women had to make an uneasy compromise with even in the 1970s, is no longer seen as a brazen renegade, but is an accepted and respected example in today's world.

The diminishment of the "Traditional Homemaker Figure" has enabled women today to more freely identify who they want to become, and to have the permission to be who they really are. Through the *construction of identity*, the women in this study were able to integrate the various aspects of themselves, such as Erishkegal and their *inner knowing*, as well as to incorporate the desirable qualities of the outer world "Anti-Traditional Figure."

These women were much less concerned with what others thought compared to when they were in their 20s, and were much less preoccupied with being "nice women" that unfailingly accommodated and indulged others at their own expense. They learned not to be afraid to articulate what was important to them, and similar to Belenky et al.'s (1986) Constructivist women, had "found their voice." Together with their *new empowered sense of self*, they were able to *establish boundaries*, assert their wants and needs, as well as create the time and space that was necessary for their personal processes.

This new way of being is contrasted to Halliday's (1998) findings on women who had recently completed a successfully mid-life transition, and who were at least a generation older than the women in this study. Many of the older women reported feeling

angry and "ripped off" for having been selfless and tirelessly giving to others for much of their lives. After a time of grieving and letting go, they were finally able to reorganize their lives and come into a new sense of self. The findings of this study also contrast previous research that found that women were more likely to become individuated and autonomous later in life, during middle age (Dowling, 1996; Levinson; 1996; Mercer et al., 1989).

The women in this study were very similar to the women described in Josselson's (1987) research who became Identity-Achieved at age 34, and Belenky et al.'s (1986) Constructivist women. All were self-defined, reflective, authentic, comfortable with themselves in an ambiguous, ever-changing world, and concerned that their words matched their actions in their day-to-day lives. These women had also become individuated in the Jungian sense because they had incorporated many traditional "male" qualities by coming into their inner power and self-assertiveness.

Although the women in this study felt that some of the issues that they dealt with during the transition were still in their awareness, they all felt that transition had ended by a certain age; the latest was age 35. This is also different from other studies that found that the transition lingered on into the late 30s (Helson & Moane, 1987; Levinson, 1996). In fact, many of the women in this study who were in their later 30s were consciously preparing themselves for the next transitional experience, and embraced the richness of their existence, welcoming their ongoing individuation.

These findings illustrate other work that shows how crisis can be a facilitator of personal transformation (Frankl, 1959). These women appreciated the existential nature of their dilemma, saw that they had a choice in how they were to deal with their eruption

of intense personal distress, and ultimately decided not to retrench, choosing instead to take on the difficult challenge. Consequently, the fact that the women *conscientiously took charge of their lives* was another significant factor in the transition ending well.

Just as in the Levinson (1996) and Reinke et al. (1985a) studies, these women sought out external sources of support such as counselling and personal development programs. Together with the qualities of ego strength and ego complexity outlined above, these experiences were of fundamental importance in helping the women reach a positive resolution to their inner reworkings and meaning-making, and in the resultant fundamental shifts in their sense of self, values, life purpose, and place in the world (Wolfe, O'Connor, & Crary, 1990). The women found it much easier to journey through the dark tunnel when someone would walk with them for a while, or hold up a light at the end it, and thus Experience Being Helped and Supported.

These research results also resemble Waters' (1993) conclusions, who found that despite the extensive turmoil and pain that accompanies trauma and other negative experiences, the long-term effects can be transformative, with people experiencing not only significant personal growth, but a thankfulness for having gone through the suffering. The women in this study unearthed depths within themselves that offered up new capacity for compassion, peace, forgiveness, and grace, which made it much easier for them to be with themselves, as well as with others.

Keshet's (1997) findings on women's development of inner knowing, and the connection between *gnosis*, spirituality, and the unity of humankind, were echoed here. In fact, this numinous quality was a thread that ran through the course of the women's age-30 transition. For many women, the awareness of an *inner knowing* began to develop

while they were *in the black hole of pain*, which also helped them during their isolated journey through the darkness. It wove itself implicitly into the Development of the Self, and more explicitly into the women's full-fledged *discovery of inner knowing* and *coming into spirituality*, at which time a channel seemed to open up to a greater collective spirit. This quality also helped the women harness their personal power, identify their reason for being, *life purpose*, and gifts, so that they were able to actualize them in the outer world, sharing them with humanity.

Limitations of the Study

Because this was a qualitative study, these findings cannot be inferred to be common to all women in their mid to late 30s. The transferability of these findings should also be done with caution because the women in this study were very unique. They were exceptionally psychologically-minded. It was their nature to explore and reflect upon their internal processes. Many of them had considerably more education than the norm.

A very significant factor is that none of them had any children, and because they were not responsible for the day-to-day caring for others, they were able to focus their free time and energy on their inner reworkings. As all of these women were heterosexual, these results may not be applicable to lesbian women.

All of these women had careers or were financially supported while in school, which enabled them to pay for some kind of counselling, therapy, or other personal work. Thus, with regards to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970), these women did not have to meet the urgency of day-to-day physical survival, and were afforded the freedom to work on their movement towards individuation and self-actualization. Because of these financial considerations, as well as the other intrinsic psychological and social-cultural factors outlined above, these findings are probably not generalizable to other cultures that

do not offer such opportunities, or even to the lower socio-economic levels in our own society.

Despite the self-interview that I did before collecting data, and the bracketing that I used during the data analysis, the possibility that my personal perspective biased the interpretation of the results nonetheless exists. This is especially true given the fact that I was going through the age-30 transition myself during the entire course of this research project. I was often aware of how certain experiences that the women described resonated with my own.

While on the one hand this very subjective perspective may have enriched the research process, on the other it may have skewed the data analysis. For example, some of the issues and themes may have been more personally salient to me, while others resonated with me less, which would have resulted in an uneven representation of the themes. I addressed any such unwarranted intrusions by having the participants and a third-party checker examine the trustworthiness of the interpretations.

There are also the possibilities that I inferred things that were not directly said, or that the participants may not have brought up some aspects of experience because they assumed that I was aware of them. In addition, because the study was retrospective, the findings may be somewhat limited by the participants' inability to remember and articulate all of the relevant aspects of their experience.

Other limitations of this study are related to the phenomenological methodology that was used. The information gleaned through the in-depth analysis offers a rich description of women's age-30 transition, which provides a deepened understanding of a lived experience that has not been researched in recent years. However, this approach

does not address the context of the research participants. This is a limitation because it appears that the women's identity development has been very much affected by significant social-cultural changes.

The phenomenological approach is also not explanatory, and does not directly identify the specific factors or triggers that augment development, or conversely, hinder growth. Relatedly, while this research endeavour explored the lived experience of a transition, it did not explicitly examine the nature of the transition itself. That is, while the descriptive findings indicate that the transition was a mixture of both process and structure, neither was clearly delineated. Finally, this study is not imbedded in theory or to be used to directly inform theory, which is something that is lacking in our understanding of the present-day development of women.

Personal Reflections

As already noted, I was in the midst of my own, very long and arduous age-30 transition throughout the entire course of this research project, which explains why it took almost five years to complete. When compiling the literature review and even when interviewing the women about their experience of the transition, I had a hard time appreciating the sense of gratitude at the end. It was all extremely abstract, theoretical, and entirely irrelevant when I was "at sea" in my own tumultuous inner process. However, recently I have been feeling that I have emerged from a long dark tunnel; the light and the equanimity are still a wonderful, daily surprise.

Despite its labour-intensiveness, working on this thesis has been a joy for me, and it is a significant reason why I consider my transition to have ended positively. I know that doing this study has indelibly influenced my sense of self, and has helped shape me

in my pursuit of authenticity, individuation, and generativity. For this I am extremely

thankful to the nine women who shared of themselves so openly and generously, and also

to my supervisory committee, who provided support and encouragement, and patiently

waited for me to grind my way through, without pressure or judgement. I can safely say

with relief, that the completion of this thesis will formally mark the end of my transition.

Implications for Counselling and Therapy

The value of this research study is that it provides a thorough, detailed, and

current understanding of how it is possible for some women to traverse the age-30

transition so that it ends well. For example, both the counsellor and the client may

identity the particular issues that are either obvious, or hovering on the brink of

awareness, that if examined and processed in more detail, may lead to positive resolution.

These findings can also be used to normalize some women's experience when

they are in the midst of it, because transitions can be turbulent and scary. It can also

challenge an assumption that the woman may be "too young" to be going through

something that looks like a mid-life crisis.

This information is particularly important because previous research shows that

this is the most significant transition in life (Bridges, 1980; Buhler, 1968; Gould, 1978;

Levinson, 1996; Reinke et al. 1985a). Thus, if the presenting issues are addressed and

dealt with thoroughly, this may diminish the turbulence of subsequent crises, because

past research also shows that if the age-30 transition is not worked through sufficiently,

life may become more difficult as it moves on. Similarly, this information may help some

people from retrenching, thereby limiting personal misery and lost opportunities for a

richer, fuller life.

Just like the five thousand year-old myth of Inanna presented at the beginning of this chapter, the results of this study may also be applicable to anyone who is going through a life transition: male or female, or at any given age. For example, if a counsellor is aware of the themes and dilemmas presented here and is working with a client who is going through similar experiences, he or she may be able to identify the experience as that of a transition, and subsequently work to resolve it.

Relatedly, while this study provides an extensive understanding of the age-30 transition, it is still important to acknowledge the diversity of the women's experiences within this general framework. Transitions are individual and complex, and an appreciation of the client's uniqueness must always be at the forefront.

With life transitions, changing social conditions, expectations, and ambiguous role models that are offering up a plethora of life options to choose from, more people may continue to pursue counselling and therapy in the coming years. Journeying inward to find one's answers is usually a frightening and overwhelming ordeal. Having a trustworthy counsellor who provides unconditional support and solid knowledge and skills is a crucial factor in the client's successful navigation.

Implications for Future Research

Further research endeavours on women's age-30 transition should include both qualitative and quantitative studies; the former can inform the latter, so that a larger sample can offer generalizability of the findings to a greater population. Other qualitative approaches that would yield valuable information would include hermeneutic or narrative studies, which would incorporate the current-day context in which women live. This is of particular importance because rapidly-changing social-cultural conditions seem to be a

significant catalyst for women's changes in identity development, and the opportunity for individuation earlier in life.

Critical incident studies could identify the significant factors that help and hinder the process of personal change. Grounded theory would also be extremely valuable by building new theoretical understanding and elaboration through ongoing data collection and analysis, that identifies the links and causes of the problem under investigation. This methodological approach is descriptive as well as interpretive, and addresses a range and depth of experience. Such information is badly needed to supplement the outdated, patchwork research and theory on women's development that now exists.

Studies are also warranted on the experiences of women who are not career-oriented, those who have children, women from different cultures, as well as women from different socio-economic levels, and lesbian women. Similar studies on men may also find that recent societal changes have affected their current experience of the age-30 transition. Research on how to help people avoid retrenching, and provide assistance in the movement towards more identity consolidation and personal fulfillment, would also be valuable. Research on women in relation to their careers is also warranted, as this appears to be a significant driving force in women's development of self.

A longitudinal study would offer important information on the entire process of how people got through their life transitions well. It would be interesting to determine if similar themes recur so that there is uniformity of the transitional experience across the life-span. Conversely, if there are changes, what are they?

This study indicates that women's recent experience of the age-30 transition is shifting away from that of previous decades, as society is becoming more flexible and

now affords increased opportunity for individuation at a younger age. Levinson (1996) and Helson and Moane (1987) noted that as we are in the midst of reworking gender roles so that traditional patterns for women are being eroded, new ones are slowly being crafted. Ongoing investigation of this process is necessary in order to track the evolution as it unfolds.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this study has cast a positive and encouraging light on the frightening notion of going through a life transition. While the pain, struggle, and difficulty are intense and undeniable, a focus on the long-term outcome of positive growth that the transformative experience offers, together with the ways and means described here, may enable people to seek out and attain the gift that this opportunity provides.

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Appendix A

A Study Exploring Women's Experiences of Positive Age-30 Transition

I would like to talk to you if . . .

- You are a woman between 35 and 40

- You feel that you went through a significant personal transition at some point between the ages of 26 and 35

- You would like to talk about your experience

- You feel that the transition ended positively, and you are now satisfied with your life

Your participation would involve:

- Discussing with a mid-30's female researcher, who is a Masters student in the Department of Counselling Psychology at U.B.C., your experience of the transition.

- Two confidential, tape-recorded interviews, totaling 3 to 4 hours in length.

If you, or someone you know, would like to participate in this study or would like more information about this research, please call Sophie at the Department of Counselling Psychology at 822-4919 (please leave a message for me), or my research supervisor, Dr. Richard Young at 822-6380.

Appendix B

General Format for Screening Interview

Introduction

My name is Sophie Bartek and I'm a Masters student in Counselling Psychology at UBC. I'm doing a study to find out how women today get through the age-30 transition positively, so that other women can be helped to do the same.

Those who participate in the study will meet with me twice at a mutually agreed-upon place, for a total of 3 to 4 hours. The first meeting will be the longest, because I'd like to talk with you at length about your experience of this transition, and how it ended well for you.

I would need to audio tape the discussions to make sure that all of the information is accurate. The second interview would involve you checking over the major themes that I had drawn from our first discussion.

If you're interested in participating, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about your experience of the age-30 transition.

1. Can you tell me if you feel you have been through a transition around the age of 30? What made you feel that it was a time of change in your life?

2. After a person has been through a change or transition, they need some time away from it in order to get some perspective on their experience. Could you tell me approximately how long ago it was that you went through this transition? How old are you now?

3. How did it end?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form
Women's Age-30 Transition: An Opportunity for Personal
Transformation

Principal Investigator
Richard A. Young, Professor
Dept. of Educational and Counselling Psychology
and Special Education
Phone: 822-6380

Research Collaborator
Sophie Bartek
M.A. Candidate
Dept. of Educational and Counselling Psychology
and Special Education
Phone: 822-4919

Purpose

The purpose of this Master's thesis research study is to gain a better understanding of women's age-30 transition, when it has ended positively. The current literature on this topic is insufficient and outdated, and warrants a current-day investigation. The results would be a contribution to the psychological literature on life-span development, would benefit women who are now going through this transition, as well as the professionals who work with them.

Study Procedures

The research collaborator and participant will meet on two separate occasions. During the first meeting the participant will be interviewed about her experience of the age-30 transition, which will be audio-taped. Previous to the second meeting the collaborator will send the participant the themes that were extracted from the interview. During the second meeting the participant will give feedback on the themes. Each participant will be involved for approximately 3 to 4 hours.

Confidentiality

Any information resulting from this research will be kept strictly confidential. Participants will not be identified by name in any reports or material relating to the project. All identifying information will be deleted from the study. Names will be changed, and participants will be invited to offer a pseudonym to be used in any oral or written accounts of the material.

All documents will be identified by code number and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Transcripts of audio recordings of the interviews will be stored on computer files (disks and hard drive). Disks will be stored with transcribed data. No names will appear on stored computer data. All audio tapes will be erased after the tapes have been transcribed. At no time will any identifying information be made available to anyone other than the research committee.

Contact

If I have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, I may contact Dr. Richard Young at 822-6380 or Sophie Bartek at 822-4919.

If I have any concerns about my treatment or rights as a research participant I may contact the Director of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at 822-8598.

Consent

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

I consent to participate in this study. Pseudonym requested:_____

_____

Subject Signature   Date

_____

Signature of a Witness   Date

Appendix D

Sample List of Orienting Statement

Research literature suggests that the time around the age of 30 is one of significant change for women, or that of transition. A transition has been defined as a time when a particular way of life ends, and one needs to take stock of how to create their life anew. It is usually a time of confusion and disequillibrium, that bridges two relatively stable periods in life. Transitions are usually marked by both internal and external changes, and one may affect the other, for example, external changes in life circumstances may affect the way a person sees herself and her world, or vice versa.

Tell me about your experience of change when you were in your late 20s.

How did it begin?

Appendix E

Questions That May Be Used To Guide The Interview

1. What was happening in your life during your late 20s? Was there an event, or a particular change that you were aware of, that started the transition?

2. What were some of the issues you were struggling with when you were going through this? Were there any key events?

3. How did the change evolve for you?

4. How did you deal with it; how did you make sense of it?

5. What (or who) was significant in helping?

6. What factors or obstacles challenged you in the negotiation of this transition?

7. What did you learn about yourself; what kind of insights did you develop?

8. Looking back retrospectively, how do you understand the process now?

9. Do you see yourself differently now that you have gone through this transition? In what ways are you different?

10. Has your life changed, and if so, how?

11. What is important to you now, and is that different from what was important to you before the transition?

12. As we are wrapping up, how are you feeling now?

Appendix F

01 – Ginger's Summary

Ginger's transitional experience centered around a painful encounter with her father, which triggered her movement into becoming more her own person. Previous to this she had been co-opted by her family to always be there for them, and never question or challenge the way that the family interacted, or the denigrating, unfair way that she was treated by her father. This was achieved by her parents using various guilt-inducing means, which always left her feeling that she was being selfish and not loving enough towards them. The event with her father was the catalyst that led her to realize that this was not true, and it was only the way that Ginger was being perceived.

Shortly thereafter she confronted her father and told him that his behaviour was inappropriate and would no longer be tolerated. This was a huge risk for her because she felt that such an action would seriously jeopardize her place in the family. The following few months were a very tearful, depressing, emotionally-draining, and introverted time where Ginger redefined her sense of self and her relationship with her parents, with the help of her counsellor. Her father did acquiesce and stopped denigrating her, and her relationship with both of her parents improved markedly.

Ginger feels that they now respect her and treat her as an adult because she did challenge the status quo. She feels that she has established firm, fair boundaries with her parents. This in turn has also positively affected other relationships in her life, such as with friends and partners. She is comfortable with asserting herself, and isn't nearly as concerned with making other people happy at the expense of her own power. Ginger now feels that she knows herself, her place in the world, has a personal sense of efficacy and responsibility for herself, and feels that she has "come into my own."

02 – Naomi's Summary

Naomi's transition involved overcoming the sexual abuse that she had experienced during her childhood and adolescent years, and the drinking that resulted from it. In her early 20's Naomi had created a career-oriented "persona" for herself that had been developed by looking outward and getting cues as to what was an appropriate female role from her mother, and from general society. By 27 she reached a crisis point where she no longer felt that this persona was who she wanted to be, and moreover, she had no idea who she really was.

At that time Naomi joined AA and started intensive therapy to address the drinking, the sexual abuse, as well as issues around spirituality and what it meant to her to be a woman. The next few years were an extremely difficult, chaotic time of dealing with intense rage and suffering. She was completely stripped of her old identity by getting divorced, moving to a different country, having a very painful, unhealthy love relationship, and living in poverty.

By the time she reached 29, Naomi decided that she had to put an end to this tumultuous existence, and realized that she had to make some drastic changes. For the first time she began asking what she *herself* wanted from life, and started taking responsibility for herself. Naomi went through tremendous healing around the trauma she had endured, developed self-acceptance and compassion, and made strides in integrating her femininity and spirituality. She started to make healthier choices with her health, relationships, work, and began developing a plan for a career and further education.

Today Naomi sees herself as multi-faceted, having integrated many aspects of previously-held identities, and defines herself in her own terms. She no longer feels that she is "being held hostage" in any way, is empowered and takes charge of the way she chooses to lead her life. She is becoming reacquainted with her creativity, has joy and a sense of autonomy and freedom, and now embraces life.

03 – Chris' Summary

Chris' age-30 transition involved healing from a traumatic childhood and adolescence, and the years in her early 20s when she was still surrounded by negative people, experiences, and self-destructive habits. It was an extremely lonely, dark period where she experienced intense feelings of anger, desperation, depression, and being out of control. She was burned out physically and emotionally, and became very physically sick.

Moving out of that state involved becoming somewhat of a "healing junkie," when she committed to take responsibility for her life, and took action by delving into counselling and experimenting with an array of holistic healing experiences. Chris started becoming intimately acquainted with her feelings, living in the present moment, and acknowledging her inner authority. The dichotomous black versus white, good versus bad conflict within her began to lessen, and she started creating a life that was much more balanced and in equilibrium.

Chris describes her current life and sense of self as being in direct opposition to her lived experience before the transition. Now she has self-acceptance and positive self-worth, there is meaning in what she does, and her life is in alignment with her values and operating philosophy that are based on a positive self-fulfilling prophecy. She surrounds herself with good energy and people, rather than negativity. Chris now embraces life and all of the challenges and changes it brings, and has joy and peace. She is living out her life purpose through maintaining good health and a strong love relationship, and through her work where she inspires others to also find their meaning and make self-actualizing changes in their lives.

04 – Carmen's Summary

Carmen's transitional experience centered around changes in career and in relationship. A significant turning point occurred shortly after her 30th birthday, when a five-year relationship came to an end. This was the most painful experience of her life. It also precipitated a move back home to Vancouver, but to a different part of town. Rather than returning to the upper-middle class, conventional neighbourhood she had grown up in, she moved to an alternative, lower-class, eclectic part of town, where she found more vitality and an appreciation of different ways of life.

Carmen also became heavily involved with the outdoors, and took up back-country skiing and hiking. This was significant in terms of connecting with her spirituality, which she finds most when being out in the mountains. This love for the outdoors was also related to a change in career direction, where Carmen moved from being a teacher, to becoming an environmental activist. In this new role she finds much more meaning and fulfillment, ongoing opportunities to learn and grow, and the sense that this is what she was meant to do, by "pushing the envelope."

The one area that Carmen is still working on is that of relationship. Her experiences in this realm have made her realize that she has a variety of needs that must be met. She now wants a partner who not only meets her intellectually and challenges her to do her best, but is also there for her emotionally as well, by providing support and an openness of the heart. At the same time Carmen is in the process of identifying what she can offer to a partner. While overall she is happy with her life and the direction it is taking, this is the last piece of the puzzle that she now working on.

05 – Stacey's Summary

The late 20s were a time of discontentment, personal examination, and searching for Stacey. This ultimately brought about a career change, where she left her job as an executive secretary, went to university and completed her BA in Psychology. This gave her a sense of completion, accomplishment, and confidence. She then went on to work as an employment consultant.

Stacey found that personal development courses were helpful with the transition by giving her a new perspective on herself, how she viewed the world, and her place in it. She became more realistic, grounded, and independent, and defined her own values, as opposed to incorporating parental or societal expectations. She became more her own person by taking charge of her life, and found some ways of getting her needs met.

Stacey also took up karate, which was a personal catalyst for her, as it gave her a physical outlet for her emotions. This also helped bring about her own understanding of spirituality, which she experienced as a kind of energy or life force. She also developed the ability to push herself, to believe in herself, and to see that she is capable of doing much more than she may have initially thought.

At this point Stacey feels that she is undergoing another personal transition, where she is again taking stock of her life, thinking about what she wants, how to go about getting it, and how to give full expression to herself in this new incarnation.

06 – Margaret's Summary

Margaret's transition was precipitated by her partner having an affair with another woman. This extremely devastating situation caused her to reevaluate herself, acknowledge the irritability and discontentment she was experiencing, as well as the negative aspects of her personality, and how she interacted with the people in her life. The intense pain she was in also compelled her to look for help in a 12-step recovery program for people who have been affected by the disease of alcohol, which she found to be very beneficial.

In the program Margaret began to learn how to change personal habits and patterns. Over time she started to mature, learned how to control her temper, set boundaries, as well as identify who she is and what she wanted out of life. After a very turbulent time in her 20s Margaret created more stability in her life by developing more tolerance, acceptance, inner peace, and serenity. She also delved into her artistic side and started painting.

Over a period of some time Margaret was able to heal her relationship with her partner, so that they now have much more stability and happiness. They eventually bought a place together and got married. Margaret's experience has been that personal change is gradual and ongoing. She now feels that she is entering a new and different chapter of her life, and is about to undergo a career change.

07 – Marie's Summary

Marie's age-30 transition was marked by significant changes in a variety of areas in her life. Around the age of 29 she started a post-graduate diploma, moved up a level in her profession, had jaw surgery that altered her appearance, bought a home with her partner, and experienced a bout of clinical depression.

The depression caused Marie to seek out help from a number of different sources, as she was compelled to understand why she had become depressed. Ultimately she began to examine how she was leading her life, and realized that she had to limit the large number of activities through work, school, various sports, and volunteering that she was involved in. Over time the depression abated as Marie learned how to create a healthy balance in her life, and to bring down her stress level. This process also involved learning how to set boundaries, to develop more realistic expectations for herself, to be less concerned about other people's expectations of her, and to have more tolerance and acceptance of herself and others.

Marie is now more self-confident, assertive, and out-spoken. She also feels that she has found her true vocation, and is very fulfilled in her work in Geriatrics. Marie thrives on the positive difference that she makes in the lives of older people, and in society in general, as she believes that it is important for her to assist both the younger and older generations. She looks forward to life-long learning so that she can continue to broaden her horizons and understanding of the world, and to set more goals for personal and professional enjoyment and accomplishment.

08 – Jane's Summary

Jane's age-30 transition began when she left her job in radio, went overseas to do volunteer work, and travelled around the world. Through a number of trying and scarey experiences her self-confidence grew significantly as she developed strong self-reliance, learned that she could take care of herself, and could be fully independent.

After her return to Canada Jane also established her ability to assert herself, and to articulate her needs and personal rights. This was actualized by Jane having to stand up to intimidating, controlling employers, and expressing her dissatisfation about being relegated to limiting, arbitrary work conditions. Jane also developed self-acceptance and compassion for herself, and embraced the belief that she deserves good things in life. Through this she was able to break a painful pattern of trying to have relationships with emotionally-unavailable men, so that now Jane is in a supportive, loving, trustworthy, egalitarian, relationship.

Jane also went through a slow career change, where over the span of a few years she made a shift from the broadcast industry into career counselling. This was difficult because of financial restrictions, as well as the personal challenge of letting go of one safe and familiar work world, and moving into something completely new. The subsequent learning around this was that risk-taking is indeed ok. Now Jane works in a capacity that she finds much more personally meaningful, fulfilling, and consistent with what she feels is her life purpose, which is to help other people.

09 – Hope's Summary

When Hope was 28 she moved to Vancouver to be with the man she planned to marry. Three days before her arrival he broke off the relationship. She moved here anyway, and launched into what would become a few years of soul-searching. Over time Hope realized that she had been primarily focussed on finding a partner, getting married and having children, and that career was to follow only after a family had been established. She started to debunk the societal dictates and expectations that she had held herself to, namely that by 30, a woman must be married and have a family. Hope began to appreciate that there are many different ways that a woman's life can unfold, that can still provide the same desirable qualities and happiness in the end.

At the age of 30 she achieved a life-long dream and began a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology, where she began to actualize her innate gifts for helping people. At the same time Hope went through a period of depression as she continued with her fundamental inner reworkings, and wrestled with how she had always devalued herself. By the end of this process she had developed a strong sense of identity, and her sense of personal worth had grown dramatically. Hope also cultivated a strong spirituality, began to honour her intuitive abilities, and learned to accept and forgive others.

Hope now feels that she has found her place in the world, has a strong sense of belonging, knows that she deserves to be happy, and has made the decision to live accordingly. She is excited about life, and still very much looks forward to marriage and having children. Hope feels extremely privileged to be in a position where she can be of service to others, and make a positive contribution to humanity. She is starting to live out her personal meaning and life purpose, which is to help other people successfully move through their own personal transformations.

Appendix G

<u>Brief Situated Structure</u>

The age-30 transition began as a <u>Descent into Hell</u>, that started with inner rumblings of discontentment and personal dissatisfaction that signified that the women had outgrown the lives they had led until the late 20's. At times life circumstances became untenable, so that they had to leave or *take flight* from a challenging environment, people that were causing them pain and no longer fit into their lives, or a tumultuous feeling state that they had endured for some time. There was also a *growing awareness of wanting more* in life, as conditions had become wanting and there was a new desire to seek better things for themselves than what they had experienced so far.

Some women went through intense *emotional volatility* that was an eruption of unpleasant, negative emotions, or experienced a wide range of emotions in a new, raw way. This was either related to the disorder they were feeling in their lives, and/or related to a psychological unraveling as various issues arose from within where they had been stuffed down. Many also felt very much *alone in the journey*, so that they had to deal with their difficulty on their own, as there did not seem to be anyone who could help them. As the momentum continued to build, negative life circumstances would compound so that the women would become overwhelmed, and they would *reach ground zero*. Some time was spent in a *black hole of pain* where they lived through their personal suffering, before they could begin to move out of it.

There was also a <u>Contention with Outside Forces</u>, so that when the women were grappling with their internal strife, they were also simultaneously confronted with the necessity to address external forces that challenged them in their desire to make sense of themselves and their place in the world. Specifically, the women were *struggling with the negative influence of others* such as parents, authority figures, and societal directives on the "right" ways that they should look, behave, and lead their lives. Another source of distress came from *feeling the pressure of impending age markers,* so that when the women were approaching the age of 30, they were comparing their lives against societal expectations of what they should have accomplished by then.

<u>The Experience of Being Helped and Supported</u> was very significant, as the women sought out assistance from a variety of different sources that helped them deal with the challenges they struggled with. Virtually all of them went into counselling, therapy, or got involved in some kind of personal development program, all of which aided in the navigation of the treacherous rapids into calmer waters. They also found support and acknowledgement from various people in their lives such as friends and partners.

In the <u>Development of the Self</u>, the women drew on the supportive factors in their lives and started to piece together who they were to become, thus beginning the *construction of identity*. Over time they developed a solid and personally-defined sense of self. There was also a *discovery of inner knowing and self-expression*, where the women began to value and heed their intuition and inner wisdom, as well as to articulate to others what they truly thought and felt.

As the raw emotions of the past began to subside, some of the women *shifted from extremes to equilibrium*, where they no longer experienced themselves or their lives from the opposing ends of the emotional continuum, and the pendulum of life remained in the tranquil middle. In addition, they developed much more *inner acceptance and equanimity*, as they gained compassion for themselves and serenity in their lives. Some of the women also *came into spirituality*, where they became acquainted with, and immersed in a very individualized and intimate experience of spirituality, that was different from the more traditional religions that they had been raised in.

As their sense of self was being consolidated, the women also began the Generation of Self-Determination and Life Direction. All of them came to the decision that they had to *conscientiously take charge of their lives*, as they realized that they alone were responsible for themselves, and could no longer lean on others. This led to the examination of choices, and the crafting of carefully thought-out plans for what they wanted to do with their lives. As the women started to experience positive results from the movement into such self-determination, they also began to develop a *new sense of self that was positive, adult and empowered.* For some women this subsequently laid the foundation to *live out one's personal meaning and purpose*, as they recognized they were meant to contribute to the well-being of the world through the use of their unique talents and abilities.

The new calm, inner resourcefulness, and solid sense of self helped the women Create New Relationships with Others, and *establish boundaries* so that they could improve long-standing relationships. This process was aided by the *letting go* of past hurts, and forgiving others. Just as they were now more accepting of themselves, they were also able to accept others' limitations. Together with the newly-discovered sense of their inner worth, the women developed a richer appreciation of *belonging with others* that was fundamentally deeper and more caring.

During the course of Reflections Upon the Invaluable Experience, the women were able to identify various facets of their *process of personal evolution.* Many commented on its ponderous length. All of the women felt that there was an inherent change in their sense of self, or an internal transformation. They also found that while the transition was a significant juncture in the course of their lives, it was very much a part of a larger, life-long, evolutionary process. Finally, the women found that although the transition was painful and difficult, they felt that it was extremely important, and were *grateful for the experience as they opened up to life* in a new and vivid way.