

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE OF A COUNSELLOR: AN
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY

by

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Abstract

This autobiographical enquiry explores, and describes the process and impact of mystical experience on the life of a counsellor in training. What is this experience like? How does it affect a counsellor trained in mainstream academia? What can happen when the secular and the sacred converge during a counselling session? As a result of this experience, what are the conflicts and issues a counsellor might encounter regarding her role, and the counselling paradigm itself?

The recent emergence of mystical experience in psychological literature, and the burgeoning of spirituality within mainstream counselling are beginning to challenge many assumptions on which our field is precariously perched. Mystical experience itself is being reported by significant numbers of clients, and a developing theory describes it as a positive and transforming phenomenon. However, there is a notable absence of therapists' voices regarding mystical experience which needs to be addressed if we are to be accountable to our clients, our peers, and ourselves. Using my own voice, and personal anecdotes, I examine this contentious and enigmatic experience to explore its role in my life and my work, and to illuminate some of the more significant issues it has raised for me.

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Preface

Hide and Seek

How I missed you all these years,
Soul seeking with eyes clenched
While You!
Like spectacles on my head,
Mocked me
With a straight-faced wink and a sudden
BOO!
Oh God, you do play hide and seek.

Yes my darling.
Yes my darling.
Running through the scented winds of spring,
Singing low and thrilling in the dawn,
Swimming with dolphins in deep lapis seas,
Dancing on starlight in a lover's embrace.
Remember how you cried?

Lost, lost, I'm lost, where are You?

While unseen hands salved the wound,
Stuffed your famished mouth
With bread and milk
Warm and fragrant
Straight from my bosom, and
Brushed the tears away.

Ah Love! You wicked terror,
Are you here for good?

Wasn't I always?

Yes, but so I can see you, know you, feel you.

Can't you now?

Yes. Oh yes.

About the Author

Catherine Racine is a writer, educator and feminist who returned to academia as a mature student to pursue an MA in the field of counselling psychology. The author is the youngest child, and only girl in a family of four children. She was raised in a working class home by an Anglo Canadian mother, and a French Canadian father. Born in Canada, the author had the multi-cultural experience of living in France for three years as a child. As an adult she travelled extensively in Europe, and later in Asia, where she also lived in Japan for a period of two and half years teaching ESL, and studying oriental medicine. Community building, writing and music are the cornerstones of her life.

This thesis is dedicated to Lisa Turner, with love and gratitude.

Overview

This study is really a love story about a woman who discovers her own spiritual source, and who struggles with the conflict it creates for her as a counsellor. I could not say it straight like that when I began this project, probably because I did not understand and I was afraid, for reasons I will discuss later on.

The initial impetus of this study was its antithesis. Originally, I simply wanted to show that the kind of love I am referring to here as "mystical experience" was the keystone, the essence, of all healing. From personal experience and observation I knew this experience was the answer to the client's deepest needs, and that it was capable of creating the most dramatic and positive, if not transformational changes. When I shared my views with two or three professors, the come back was always "Yes, but is this the client's experience or is it yours?"

I did not know if my experience was shared, or what the implications might be if it was not. As I grappled with the complexities of this question, I could not escape the uneasy possibility that I was the primary beneficiary of this experience, and by extension, of the counselling relationship itself. Did counselling really serve the client first and best? Given my profound experience I was no longer sure, and I began worrying about my clients' welfare, and my own motives for wanting to do this work.

My experience appeared to contradict the basic assumptions of my profession, and begged some difficult questions. Who was really benefitting the most? Was it wrong to love a client? Why was this experience an issue only within the context of my work as a counsellor,

and no where else in my life? As I focussed my sights on such questions, a Pandora's box of concerns about the counselling paradigm opened before me. Concerns about client exploitation, and the basic morality of the work we do. Concerns about unavoidable boundary violation, and client abuse. Concerns about how little I was able to offer the client, how much more I wanted to give, and the bounty I actually received through the counselling transaction. A bounty that curiously, I never found clearly articulated in the literature, nor openly explored in three years of psychology and counselling courses.

Conversely, the enormity and impact of this "mystical" experience has made it impossible for me to doubt the simply fantastic knowledge, love, and impetus to service it embodies. In simple terms, the experience informs me beyond the shadow of a doubt that I do indeed love my client, personally even intimately, and with a passion rarely felt even for those closest to me in my own life. This study is my attempt to bridge the gap between these two polarities - the personal and the professional.

Much of my process has hinged on language itself, and the power of words to hide, to reveal, to create, to express, to include, and ultimately to empower or dis-empower. Language, I discovered, is a chameleon and is still up for debate even as I put this thesis to bed. For example, what I am now calling "mystical experience" I originally called "community." This word seemed more benign, less enigmatic, although it contained the seed of the experience itself. I recognised that the "spirit" found in communion with others was the answer to my own loneliness, and to the astonishing sense of isolation expressed to me by friends, by peers in the counselling

program, and by almost every client I counselled through my clinic and practicum. Moreover, I could use the word without censure. However, the word "community" eventually outlived its usefulness because it did not evoke the power or the enigma of this rich experience. I took the next step, and began calling my experience the "Third Thing."

Doing so was a leap because this term seemed so self-revealing. I had used it for years but only privately. I was not sure I wanted to publicly admit having experienced some kind of a spiritual presence, some ultimate reality I felt but could not see. Such an admission in the context of my work as a counsellor was particularly intimidating but also exhilarating, because I was finally being honest about my experience. I also appreciated the Third Thing's oblique reference to the Trinity. Despite my ambivalence towards Christianity and to God the Father and the Son, I was intrigued to discover the Holy Spirit is associated with the sacred feminine (Pagels, 1979). "If you were Christian, you might call this experience the Holy Spirit," I was saying two years ago, to explain what I meant by the Third Thing. But eventually I decided not to use this term in the title of my thesis; it seemed too private, too radical.

After reading William Stace's (1960) book on mysticism, my problem was solved. Here I found my experience described accurately and in detail. This "thing" actually had a name: extrovertive mystical experience. As a result I began to use the term "mystical," and was further encouraged to do so by the extensive and influential work of Ralph Hood, who based his work on Stace's theory. Hood had even created a Mysticism scale (see Appendix A) which added further lustre to my own experience, and gave

it - or so I thought - a final stamp of academic approval as a credible research subject. Finally I had an identifier that matched my experience, *and* was accepted, albeit conservatively, in mainstream psychological literature.

However, in the process of writing the stories related to mystical experience, my interest in this term also waned because I did not want to separate this event, this consciousness, from daily living. I have known this experience in the most mundane circumstances; singing with loved ones around the dinner table, talking with strangers on buses, alone during my travels to Asia, listening to music, dancing, making love, looking at art, writing, gazing out a window at sunset, holding a baby. Consequently, I have moved away from the "mystical" and started to focus on the meaning of the intense and boundless love this experience offers.

This study is arranged in two parts: Experience and Background. The Experience section contains chapters one through five, which are the substance of this autobiographical work. Chapter One is based largely on a document I wrote approximately 2 years ago in what was my first attempt to capture mystical experience on paper. My views on the source and meaning of the experience have changed in some ways since then. For example, I no longer focus this experience exclusively outside myself, but recognise it also as something that comes from within. Still, the description captures my experience. The document was written before I had read any literature related specifically to mystical experience. As soon as I finished writing this description I found my experience perfectly and beautifully rendered in Buber's (1970) *I and Thou*, and then again in

Stace's (1960) work on mysticism. Chapter One represents the first concrete step in a process that has led to this study in its present form.

Chapter Two charts the role mystical experience has played in my own life, from childhood to my mid-twenties. Using six stories, I track the emergence and development of my spiritual awareness through my early exposure to Christianity, and through my relationship to nature, music, and the visual arts.

Terror is the title of Chapter Three. I would have preferred to avoid the fear this chapter inspired, but could not deny its pervasiveness in my process. Many of the stories that asked to be written - demanded to be written - frightened me, which was a surprise. This chapter describes some of the connections I made between terror and mystical experience, and illustrates just how closely the two work together in a world where oppression is still the norm.

Chapter Four, Taboo, focusses on the passionate love found at the heart of mystical experience, and explores the conflict and doubt this experience has created for me as a counsellor in training. In this chapter, I use the filter of such love to consider the more troubling issues, and to explore how mystical experience exposes the substantial and irreconcilable problem of the power imbalance within the therapeutic relationship.

Chapter Five, Convergence, is the concluding chapter and represents a synthesis and elaboration of the major elements of my story. These are related to gender and women's oppression, the process of finding one's voice, and the ultimate experience of a mysterious and ecstatic communion with life that transcends both fear and death.

Part Two: Background, includes After Words which offers a few closing remarks on mystical experience. This is followed by the literature review which provides an overview of the work available on the subject of mystical experience, and explores some of the issues involved. These include problems of language and definition, the lack of qualitative research available on the subject - especially counsellors' experience - and the reticence we feel in describing this experience to others. Also included are brief summaries on some recent quantitative research, and on current trends in the field of psychology, which indicate a growing interest in spirituality, and a recognition of its importance in therapy. The literature review is followed by the methods section, and then by a questionnaire for individuals interested in considering their own mystical experience more closely.

That so little qualitative work is available on the mystical experience of therapists within mainstream research, no longer surprises me. This experience is a controversial and emotional one. As an academic and a counsellor, I have learned to doubt my own subjectivity, and to keep my feelings to myself, particularly within my research. I have also learned to maintain a professional distance with my clients, to worry when I love them, and to pretend an authority I do not always feel. We must be willing to reveal ourselves, our extraordinary perceptions, and deeply felt emotions related to this powerful experience, if we are to be accountable to our clients and our peers, and honest with ourselves.

This inquiry is relevant to counsellors who dismiss, fear, or pathologize their own, or their clients' mystical perceptions. It is relevant to a secular

academic system that leaves its counsellors unprepared for the spiritual experiences encountered in counselling practice. It is relevant to those mystically inclined therapists who hide behind a veneer of professional authority lest they be thought crazy or incompetent. Finally, it is relevant to those counsellors who are interested in questioning why mystical experience may be such a difficult issue for us to deal with in our professional roles. For those less inclined towards the mystical, this study offers a personal perspective that may provoke a closer examination of mainstream conservatism, and its tendency to pathologize mystical experience. The candor I bring to this study may also help to further weaken the wall of our professionalism. It is a wall that continues to protect us, hide us, isolate us, and keep our authority in tact.

The complex and elusive nature of this mysterious phenomenon is pivotal to this study insofar as it has influenced and informed my own process. It is beyond my capacity, or the interests of this study, to attempt answers to questions that have historically plagued the study of mystical experience. I do not know what this experience is, where it comes from, why it lasts for such brief periods, or exactly what to call it. This experience has many names according to its values ranging from the sinister to the sublime, from the esoteric to the everyday, and from the pathological to the peak of human experience and development.

In total, this thesis represents a journey of self discovery that continues to unfold. The greatest transformation has been the shift from fear to confidence in my own perceptions and feelings, and an increased ability to open myself to an experience that has seemed elusive, sporadic, and too

intimate to share. Concurrently, my faith in the counselling paradigm has declined as I have gained a better understanding of the dissonance between my own lived truth, and my professional role.

Bringing personal voices to our scholarship, and questioning the immense nourishment to be found in our counselling sessions, may not reflect well on us as mainstream academics or as counsellors. Doing so has certainly challenged my own notion of professional expertise and entitlement, and left me feeling over-exposed and vulnerable. But if we remain mute on this subject, if we continue to behave as though there is a clear line between the personal and professional, despite what our experience tells us, then how can we "serve" anyone who comes to us for help? More importantly, how can we mobilise our passion to make changes in the world beyond the confines of our therapeutic relationships? Changes that first of all require us to confront the forces which continue to hurt our clients and silence us.

Part One: The Experience

Chapter One: The Third Thing

With Thy Sweet Soul, this soul of mine
 Hath mixed as Water doth with Wine.
 Who can the Wine and Water part,
 Or me and Thee when we combine?
 Thou art become my greater self:
 Small bounds no more can me confine.
 Thou hast my being taken on,
 And shall not I now take on Thine?
 Me Thou for ever hast affirmed,
 That I may ever know Thee mine.
 Thy love has pierced me through and through,
 Its thrill with Bone and Nerve entwine.
 I rest a Flute laid on Thy lips;
 A lute, I on Thy breast recline.
 Breath deep in me that I may sigh;
 Yet strike my strings, and tears shall shine.

(Jalalu' d Din, cited in Underhill, 1911, p. 426)

The story I am about to tell may help you understand why this experience captured me so completely, and how effectively it leaped the boundaries of my not so cool professionalism. This particular event occurred in the summer of 1993, during a counselling session between myself and a student from one of my classes in the Counselling Psychology program. The session was part of a larger project requiring class members to briefly interview a classmate to determine which tests would be best suited to the stated concerns of a client. My "client", whom I shall call Chris, was an unobtrusive man I had spoken to only briefly in a course we had taken together 18 months earlier. In our second class together, we briefly exchanged our views on community and its central importance in our lives during what was ostensibly a 10 minute counselling session. I was interested to discover he had considerable experience living and

working in a spiritual community and was keen to hear more. Other than these brief encounters I knew little of the man, although I was aware he was a reserved individual who expressed himself reticently in class, and towards whom I felt a small collegial bond.

To break the monotony of the day, Chris and I had decided to conduct the interview outside at the Nitobe Gardens after our morning class. Because the day was overcast and rainy, we ended up sitting in a rain shelter overlooking the pond. The interview, which was to last 15 to 20 minutes, went on for an hour and a half during which time I experienced a profound encounter with this client, as the following story describes.

The Third Thing

You're talking, I see your lips move and hear the sound, but my mind is running. For what? For shelter, for validation, for a reason, for joy. I feel my mind turning over like a car with a dead battery, stalled, while an unseen driver intently turns the key, turns the key, turns the key. I am struggling to remember the name of your sister, your brother, the details of what happened. I want to hang on to the details, I'm supposed to have them in mind, but I can't. There is only You, only You and this dawning ecstasy.

Some part of me races down the corridors of memory, opening doors, checking contents, searching, rifling through files looking for the match to this experience. But I know what's happening, of course I know. I know what's happening and I don't dare believe it. I'm so afraid my hope will kill this, that the moment will dissolve like a mirage before my thirsty soul, and abandon me like a broken promise. This can not be happening,

I'll try to ignore it, pretend it isn't there. But it is. Holy God it is.

Gazing down at my arms I see my skin spiked with gooseflesh, I feel the hairs standing at attention, tuned to this impossible moment. The moment endures past my fear, I dare breath, I can trust it, can't I? This feeling is everywhere around us, but mostly here, the source is here, in this rain shelter, where he speaks while I listen. Where the rain falls in a mist around us, smudging the edges and filling all the in between with something that loves me, all of me, and that I love in return with an inundating gratitude that longs to express itself in great wracking sobs.

Does he know what's happening? How can he not? He offers no clue but the words keep coming, and the story opens like a rose, petal by petal. I yearn towards its centre as a flower leans towards the light. With each word, each poetic pause, each gesture, he becomes more naked, more precious, the wounds and scars more clearly defined and dear. I wonder if he will undress down to his bones. The parade unreels like a film behind my eyes. I see the people he describes, meet his family members, walk through their home, stroll around his town. I endure the indignities, the penury, the loss, the unbearable loss.

What can I offer him for his pain? What? Empathy? Guidance? For what? For his gift? For the joy? The sight? For his sacred story? What can I offer? Nothing. Nothing.

My body riots behind a seamless composure. I clench my teeth to keep them from chattering. A fist expands in my throat and aches with a need to cry. No, no, no, no. Finally tears break through the barrier and sit on my eyes blinding and burning me. I tip my head back to keep them from

the afternoon to end. Later on driving home with my husband, I struggled for words to describe my extraordinary experience. Finally I used the only ones I could. "Paul, I fell in love with a client today, do you think that's okay?" There was a long pause and my husband took his eyes off the road briefly to look at me. "I don't know" he said with a small edge in his voice. Neither did I.

The Experience

The description of this experience in the pages to follow, was written roughly 2 months after my session with Chris. I wrote this description for a professor whom I had approached for assistance with my thesis. "I want to write a thesis about community." I told him. When I realised the professor did not understand my meaning, I described my counselling experience with Chris, but in guarded terms. The professor looked intrigued and suggested I write a detailed account as a point of departure.

I approached the task with what I assumed was beginner's mind, and discredited the significant amount of reading I had done on mystical consciousness, and spirituality, from puberty onwards. Somehow my years of reading and thinking about this issue were worthless because these activities had been done in isolation, without any spiritual or religious practice, direction, or support, to help me understand or embrace this experience as a way of life. My reading was self-directed, informal, and unrelated to mainstream client-centered counselling, or in my view "unscholarly", so I assumed an ignorance I can no longer claim, nor wish to.

Looking back over the past 25 years, there appears to have been a very

strong mystical theme and impetus throughout my entire life. I'm still not sure it would be correct to say I've been looking for the mystical experience all my life, but it is close. This experience, which I now call "The Third Thing", has happened more often in my life than I was previously aware, although not often with the depth of feeling I describe here. I perceive it as occurring on a continuum rather than as an isolated and rare event. Still, at the profound end of the continuum this experience is so arresting, so awesome I still use words like "ultimate" to describe it.

The aspects on which I focus in this description are typical of my experience to the extent they are familiar to me. There is really nothing typical, predictable or rule driven about the experience, although it always offers me the same priceless gift. This experience has a hallmark that can not be missed or mistaken.

There is something more here than you and me. The experience occurs, or I become aware of a shift in the order of things, when I sense something else has arrived. This is what I call the "Third Thing". This powerful presence does not usually announce itself obviously. I could liken it to suddenly noticing someone who had unobtrusively entered the room, and who had been there for awhile, without my knowledge. Only this "someone" is unbearably special, like an adored lover whose unexplained presence after an interminable absence confirms everything I ever longed for, and never imagined possible. So pronounced is this presence I have noticed myself casting my eyes around the room to locate its whereabouts. In my experience with Chris, the Third Thing occurred when we were sitting in a rain shelter in a Japanese garden on a rainy summer afternoon.

I also had the impression this presence was a person seated to my right, a few feet away from me. Something about about it being seated reassured me and made the experience more real.

When I became aware of the Third Thing in the rain shelter, I did not immediately believe its presence, because I did not want to be disappointed. It was as if part of me was saying, "No this isn't it. Ignore whatever you're feeling," and then realising, that indeed, my perceptions were accurate. My full recognition and acceptance of the Third Thing were followed immediately by a sense of ecstasy. Had I not been with a client I would probably have expressed my amazement in words: "Oh my God, it *is* here, it's *here!*"

This sense of a presence does not seem to happen when I am in a public place like a restaurant, although other aspects of the experience remain available to me even in busy surroundings. Further, the Third Thing can also happen when I am with a group of people. This experience can also occur with greater immediacy, as it did in a counselling lab, several months prior to my session with Chris. I was counselling a young woman from my class, and there were two other women students observing. We were jammed into the tiny counselling cell, all of us aware of the artificiality and discomfort of the set-up. We began a 10 minute session and the moment this woman looked at me and opened her mouth to speak, I knew the Third Thing was there. There was no preamble, no warm-up, the experience was instantaneous.

Following this short session, I was intrigued by the comments made about my counselling skills by the observers. They were obviously moved

by something and gave me the credit. But I do not believe they were responding to my technical skills. Although my exchange with the student client was effortless and loving, I do not know how well informed it was. At one point, for example, my professor even entered the room and corrected the direction in which I was trying to lead the client. Despite the professor's interruption, and the observers present, the Third Thing prevailed and is, I suspect, what touched the observers. Regarding my own feelings about this client, I was totally absorbed by her story, and enchanted by her shining courage and beauty. Since then we have become close friends. My experience with this woman was similar to the one I had with Chris, although less powerful, to the extent that I had a greater sense of being relaxed and in control of the process.

Transience. This experience does not last forever and I can not make it last. It appears to come and go in its own time and fashion, although I must qualify this statement. As Underhill (1911) explains, this experience can not be removed from the context of a life. It is part of the whole spiritual development of the self. Thus, for the "beginner", such an experience could appear to be completely serendipitous. For others actively pursuing this experience through any number of disciplines, this experience can be both a mainstay, and a conscious goal of the individual's life.

Gratitude. The experience evokes gratitude. I felt infinite gratitude to Chris for telling me the marvellous story of his life. The story was simple and un-selfconsciously told by a man who is struggling to make sense of it. In the recounting, however, his story was transformed into an epic of

immense complexity and depth in which he became the hero. Somehow Chris was opening up a chest of riches for me too precious to share, too exquisite to be viewed by a stranger. I was utterly confused by this generosity. Why would he want to offer all this to me? What had I done to deserve this gift? It was more than I could easily accept and I felt deeply humbled.

The Other is beautiful. There is a neutral, low key quality about Chris that makes him somewhat invisible; he does not stand out in a crowd. I liked speaking to him but knew nothing of his life except for his involvement in a spiritual community. Even in the second class we shared, I rarely spoke to him; he was aloof, though not unfriendly. Despite my neutral perception of this man, my view of him altered dramatically as his story unfolded.

During my experience of the Third Thing, Chris became beautiful in all ways. His face, his hands, his gestures, the colour of his skin, all the particulars of his physical being became wonderful to look at. The sound of his voice became musical, his way of speaking lyrical. I was moved by his turn of phrase, and by his inflection which an hour earlier had not struck me at all. Even his way of taking long pauses between statements, which had initially provoked mild frustration, became another aspect of his amazing beauty. I found myself hanging on his every word and waiting with patient joy for what he would say next.

Dream time. There is a sense of timelessness in this state. Time does not matter, nor do I sense the passage of time in any clock sense. Even if the words spoken in this moment are about yesterday or tomorrow, there

is only this present moment. Not surprisingly, actual clock time seems to speed up because minutes and hours pass so quickly in this experience. Despite this sense of timelessness, there is a cadence to the experience; a slow, contemplative rhythm reminiscent of a skilled Tai-Chi practitioner going through a routine. Somehow the experience incorporates both a sense of suspended time, and an exquisite, round, slow, and infinitely measured rhythm.

Another aspect of the experience related to this dream like quality, is a subtle change in atmosphere which comprises both a mistiness, and a shift in the quality of the light. Everything is softened in this experience, as though I am looking through a soft lens. There is a snowy quality to what I see, and a sense of viscosity, as if everything was held together by some ephemeral glue. I am not sure if this is what creates the change in light, but I have noticed a wonderful diffuse quality to both natural and artificial light during this experience.

I remember once seeing this light with my practicum supervisor, a religious man who was sensitive to my experience, and with whom I frequently shared the Third Thing. We were having a case conference together in a large windowless room lit with harsh fluorescent lights. Suddenly, I became aware of that special presence and pointed it out to him. He nodded appreciatively, and invited me to explore the phenomenon with him. "Do you want to talk about the quality of the light?" he asked me. But I was seized by an overwhelming desire to change the subject, and to avoid too close a scrutiny of the experience. My reticence is still curious to me. Whatever my reasons, I did not dare to

openly discuss the issue with him. Shortly after, my vision shifted back to the hard edges of the fluorescent lit room, and the Third Thing was gone.

I am home. This experience is my Home in its truest sense; a place beyond yearning where I truly belong in the world. Despite the wonder, there is always a strong sense of familiarity and recognition, a sense that "Yes, this is *it*, this is the place." Here, answers can always be found for the troubling questions of my life, and for the life of whomever I may be listening to. Paradoxically, the wisdom is not easily decoded, nor easily articulated to the client; this knowledge is *experienced*. For example, if a client was sitting in front of me struggling over a decision to confront her alcoholic husband, I could not respond: "Third Thing," or "I see you," or "The answer to all your questions is in this moment." It would not make sense, nor solve the problem, even though it would be true.

This sense of receiving, or having, direct knowledge is sometimes referred to in mystical jargon as "noesis." It involves a feeling, a profound certainty, that I know something indescribably significant. Although this knowledge can not be easily articulated, I recognise it as absolute truth.

When we look for the meaning of pain. Emotional pain does not have to be part of the equation resulting in this experience, but I have certainly noted a strong positive correlation within the context of my counselling work. Typically, the person speaking to me is expressing sorrow that is somehow pregnant. There is no overt outpouring of grief, no high drama, but the potential is there. If there is dramatic emotion, this experience tends to occur in the more contemplative aftermath of the outburst, and almost invariably, a hurtful story is involved. With the story comes a

sense of grief going to the core of the individual, and containing a wholehearted desire for resolution. Simultaneously, the client seems to hover somewhere between acceptance and despair. Somehow space is created by this tentative searching quality, and the genuine lack of certainty on the part of the client. I can even facilitate this attitude in the Other, but not always.

The paradox of it all. Despite the phenomenal losses often expressed in this sacred experience, the person before me with this horrific story, this pain, this struggle, becomes whole. Nothing is missing. There is a perfection, a unity, a completeness about the individual that is utterly dazzling. Even if I think I understand what might be done to resolve the problem, or to see it differently, I have an even stronger sense not to impose on or toy with this perfection. I can see this person already possesses everything necessary; there is nothing pressing to be done in this moment. My perception is a contradiction to the individual's story, and the stated or unstated pain it evokes, but is an important aspect of the experience. The Other is somehow damaged, or broken, or misguided, and yet whole in the same moment. Further, my perception of this quality in the Other evokes in me contrasting emotions, thus, I feel myself brimming with joy, and torn with sorrow in the same moment.

Physical experience. This experience is very physical. I have noticed in myself a spectrum of physical reactions ranging from subtle to painfully intense. When the Third Thing is present, I may feel myself initially paralysed, dumbstruck with wonder and disbelief. I can also experience waves of goose-flesh. My throat may get a lump similar to that

experienced when I am moved and want to cry but can not. My eyes well-up spontaneously. My teeth want to chatter, I feel chilled, and may tremble. These physical manifestations are dictated by the strength of the emotion experienced, but are typical. Even when these reactions are subtle, they are arresting and enlivening. This is an extremely rich physical experience, so rich I can not handle large quantities of it without becoming very tired. After my hour and half session with Chris I was exhausted.

The desire to touch. I am often struck by the urge to touch the other person, to lay my hands on their body, to hold them; to make some physical connection. Touch has been an important part of my life. I am fascinated by the healing power of physical touch, and have at various times in my life pursued training so I could work with people's bodies. It is a compelling urge which I have strictly avoided as a counsellor because of my fear of client abuse, and my awareness of the power imbalance in the counselling relationship. There is a real sense of loss for me within this inflexible avoidance, because I know the healing power of touch, and of the hands' ability to receive and relay expression not available through spoken language.

Power differences are levelled. Implicit in even the most client-centered approach to counselling is a power imbalance. But during the experience, power and any notion of who is in charge simply evaporates. Instead, I have a very strong awareness of equality between myself and the Other. We become collaborators, fellow travellers, and the significance of the roles becomes blurred if not indiscernible. We become two people focussed on a question or situation related to the client, but which actually affects

both our lives profoundly.

The Vision. In the deepest moment of the experience, it is as if a window opens that allows me to glimpse, and *experience*, to my utter stupefaction and inexpressible joy, the simple truth and answer to my very existence: I am the Other and the Other is me. Somehow I "know" this. It is obvious, absolute, and stunning. There is nothing rational or logical about it. Within this knowledge lies the treasure: the certainty that I am unfathomably loved. This blessing comes neither from myself nor the Other, but from a synthesis of the two that brings forth a third component greater by far than the two of us combined: the Third Thing. This force is powerful, remarkable, palpable, and awe-inspiring in its goodness and compassion.

How may I serve you? One of the most powerful aspects of this experience is my desire to give. I long to offer something - anything - to the client while recognising I am professionally bereft in this moment. My desire does not appear to be fuelled by guilt, although I am aware of receiving much more from the individual involved than I could ever return. My enormous gratitude, and recognition of myself as Other are what seem to be motivating me. Effortlessness is key. I am not doing anything but receiving what feels like the ultimate gift, which creates a formidable yearning to serve the Other, and infinite gratitude for the privilege.

In my experience with Chris, no empathic response, summary, clarification, validation, reframe, analysis, or suggestion was even in the realm of possible options to offer. All paled in comparison to the

staggering beauty and integrity I perceived in him, and which enveloped us both. Anything I could do as a counsellor would simply diminish, and impose on, or corrupt, the sacred perfection. At one point during this experience, I remember scanning my mind in disbelief, finding there was nothing to be done, and coming to what seemed like more adequate, if unprofessional alternatives. Thus, I found myself wondering if I should offer Chris my sweater, or extend my hand to hold his, or get up from my seat to embrace him. Perhaps I could honour him with the gift of tears welling up behind my composed facade, or invite him home for some dinner. In the end, I did nothing but continue to listen until the story was finished. However, the seed of conflict between my professional knowledge and my personal experience was sown. The impulse to service in this experience made it impossible for me to justify my role as a witness to this individual's story. I had to do more, or so the feeling informed me.

Intention. This experience can not be manufactured. Like any experience it fades or simply fails to occur if it is pursued. I can hope it will happen and sometimes it will. I can try to make it happen but any attempt invariably pushes it out of reach. There is, however, a way of being that is very conducive to its emergence which could be described as "tentative curiosity."

I may, for example, have no preconceived idea of who this person is before me. I am curious, perhaps fascinated, but in no great hurry to do anything; to perform, solve, or anticipate needs. There is a patience about this attitude. I am surveying the landscape so to speak, relaxed yet extremely alert. Another attitude I notice is a sense of trust or acceptance

that whatever takes place, whatever is revealed or not revealed will be fine. Doubt can also promote this experience; not the wracking self-doubt of worry or fear, but a genuine sense of uncertainty.

Beginner's mind. Doubt, the sense of not being sure of what to do, how to feel, how to behave or proceed, is a very uncomfortable place for me, for most of us. Doubt tends to demand a decision, an action, and we are not culturally sensitive to its wisdom. I do not like spending time in doubt because it creates tension within me. But over the years I have practised the art of staying in doubt with some success. I usually have to give myself a conscious prod to avoid trying to get out of that space, particularly when I am with a client, and especially if their story prompts my desire to help them see the light. If I can relax in my doubt, and usually I can even if I have to will myself to do so, the Third Thing is more likely to appear.

When I allow myself to stay in doubt, it is impossible for me to impose my will on the Other because there is nothing to be done. Doubt gives me permission to simply hang out with the person. When I am in doubt, the whole notion of sharing a vigil with the Other becomes the order of the day. Such an attitude allows me to suspend decision, action, or my certainty about either. With doubt I can only see with soft eyes; the Other is all potential. Further, this perspective keeps me from focussing on the client's problems, or strengths, so I can avoid the pitfalls of pathologizing or idealising. There is a spaciousness to this perspective.

This doubt provides a space where an unknown and unknowable can and surely will reveal itself. Also, my doubt provides the Other with permission to suspend their pressing need to understand, make sense of,

or resolve. Again I must qualify. In this doubt I would not simply say to the Other "I really don't know - what do you think?" The whole point is to stay in the tension; to explore it, to look for ways of accommodating it, appreciating it. Here is where the Third Thing can flow in with its message of communion, and its profound healing.

What the experience looks like to me. If I could suggest a diagram of the Third Thing, it would be the centre point of a line pulled in opposite directions. It would be the peak of an equilateral triangle. I feel this point is really the meeting point, or centre, for all other points in whatever diagram I might suggest. A mandala comes to mind; the Third Thing would be the centre of it.

In my Zen phase, many moons ago, I understood the peak of the triangle was supposed to represent the place where duality was resolved and oneness achieved. That is still too intellectual. What I do sense about the Third Thing, about the centre of that line, or the peak of that triangle, or the middle of that mandala, is a tremendous tension. From this centre, where all the converging lines of tension meet, the greatest perspective of the component parts can be understood, but as a whole, not as pieces.

I am coming to sense/feel/know in my bones (as opposed to my head) that this Third Thing is not so much created or manifested as it is stumbled upon. It is not something that comes and goes, appears and disappears to torment me, although it does. This experience, this quality, is always present and can be found anywhere, and everywhere, by anyone, although it is not easily approached. Doubt, from my experience, is one of the fastest ways to get there.

The Experience is about to end. Usually I know when this experience is about to end. Closure may be compelled by a respect for clock time that is bringing a session or a visit to a close. Conversely I may simply intuit the finish, which may come in the form of cues from the other person, indicating he or she wishes to close. I witnessed something similar in Chris who repeatedly "came back" from his story, as if he was making sure I was really paying attention and willing to go on.

The impending sense of closure can sometimes be dispelled and the experience continued if both parties are willing. Such an agreement can be reached with very little discussion or none, but some kind of exchange leading to mutual agreement has to take place. The feeling is like coming up briefly for air to ensure no imposition is taking place. Past a certain point, however, the experience changes dramatically and there is no easy way back, at least not for that time, or day. Even if all parties wish the experience to continue, it can not happen. In my mind's eye I often see a door slowly closing a short time before this experience ends, and inevitably I experience a sense of regret.

Conclusion. An excruciating aspect of documenting this experience was language. I became all but totally tongue tied trying to describe the paradoxical and multifaceted nature of the thing. The joy/sorrow dichotomy, the you are me and I am you realisation fall apart in the describing. While writing I spent hours staring into space flipping back and forth between memory of the experience and an intellect trying desperately to make sense of it. Language, while necessary for this process, simply gets in the way more often than not. Paradoxically, this very

experience, at least in counselling, seems to be precipitated by the exchange of language.

Even so, the most accurately worded and well informed description of this state is a shadow compared to the brilliance of the experience itself. It is an experience to which I am gaining increasing access as a participant, not just a bystander longing for its gift. I have much to learn about the experience and how to make it part of my every day life. That is the real motivation for this thesis. I would like to know how to live in this state all the time, and to allow its gift to inform my work with others.

Update, November 1995

My perspective of this experience has changed in the past 2 years since I wrote this description. The most significant change is my view of the Third Thing as a being, or a person. Even the word "presence" now seems misleading because of its ghostly implications. Ironically, the word "thing" still has some appeal because of its neutrality, but the struggle for precise language is ongoing. I am still not sure what to call this experience, partly because I am not willing to make a decision about the source. The problem of whether or not this experience is subjective or objective, is likewise of little interest. The subjective/objective question, which 2 years ago struck terror in my heart, now strikes me primarily as a tiresome reflection of our dualistic paradigm, our inadequate language, and our fear and distrust of our feelings and our bodies. Today I am more focussed on the passionate and ecstatic emotions this experience engenders, and the impact these these feelings have on my self-understanding, and on my motivation.

Chapter Two: Emergence

"It's gone!" sighed the Rat, sinking back in his seat again. "So beautiful and strange and new! Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has roused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worth while but just to hear that sound once more and to go on listening to it forever. No! There it is again!" he cried, alert once more. Entranced, he was silent for a long space, spellbound (Graham, 1913, p. 176).

The experience of central concern to this thesis did not begin to emerge as an integral part of my life until 2 years ago, when I documented my session with Chris and started calling it the Third Thing. Making my perceptions "official" propelled me and my experience into the light of day. The prevalence of this ecstasy in my life seemed incredible. I was shocked to realise this was no insignificant occurrence, no aberration, nothing to be ashamed of or hide. It was a thrilling constant that had been with me almost as far back as I could remember. Suddenly I could see the road map of my own history dotted and sometimes paved with with these shining moments, hours, days, and even weeks. Some were small and brief, others volcanic epiphanies like my encounter with Chris.

A significant part of this wonderful discovery came from writing stories about my own life in which this experience played a leading role. I hesitate to say these stories dictated my decision to write autobiographically, but the pressure from the stories themselves was considerable. After almost 5 months of meetings and careful deliberation, I remember rushing home to write my first story the day my supervisor and I agreed the thesis should be autobiographical. My relief was immediate and palpable. But even before I had written the first story, another was there waiting in what

appeared to be a very long line up. For more than 4 months I wrote these stories as they came to me.

Curiously, I felt more like a scribe than a creator, particularly when stories I did not like asked to be written. Some were too revealing, too devastating, or just plain sad. "But this isn't mystical," I would protest to myself. As it turns out, the least pretty of these stories do indeed have a place here, and an important one for me as counsellor because grief and loss are no strangers to mystical experience. There is still a long line-up of stories outside my door, like waifs in the snow, stamping their feet to keep warm and waiting yet again for the opportunity to come in out of the cold. However, the ones that have made it onto paper offer more than a superficial glimpse of this experience, its origins and its impact on my life and work.

The 6 stories in this chapter illustrate three significant views of this experience from the time I was approximately 8 years old until I was 21. The only exception is Banana Tree Man which happened when I was 27 years old. The stories do not provide an exhaustive perspective of my life during that time, but belong together for two main reasons. First, because they identify my earliest connections to nature, the visual arts, and music. These influences were significantly connected to my own awakening spirituality, and provided access to an experience I adored but could not name. Second, because of the influence Christianity exerted on my childhood and early adolescence. This aspect of my own history surprised me greatly, because I have never seen it clearly stated on paper, and because I am unapologetic in my resentment of the Church and the

patriarchy it exemplifies. I have refused to call myself a Christian for two decades. However, I can not deny the impact of my early indoctrination given the evidence in these stories, and my current inclination to borrow heavily from a Christian lexicon.

Not surprisingly, the earliest memory I have that is in any way related to mystical experience - and in this case miracles - occurred in Lourdes, one of the most famous Christian shrines in the world.

Lourdes

A day trip to Lourdes, I'm seven maybe eight. The people throng through the streets on a bright sunny day. There is something wrong, I don't understand. "They're sick darling, they're crippled" my mother explains. Nuns with strange head dresses, like white birds in mid flight, perambulators of all sorts pushing the dis-eased. It's lunatic, immense, naked. Look at his foot, bloated, exploding, oh look she's crying, what a strange wheelchair, like a box with the wheels from a stroller. Is he dead? are they poor? doesn't that hurt? why are they here? why so many? what are they waiting for? Mother's upset, she doesn't want me to see this but it's too late, we're caught in the crowd. I see it, I see it. I shouldn't but I do. Why shouldn't I? It's indecent, it's upsetting. But it isn't, it's fascinating.

Later, inside the cathedral I still don't understand as I gaze at the letters of thanks framed in glass, hanging from the walls by the hundreds, by the thousands. I try to translate one of them for my mother, "Merci, merci." And something more, that I don't recognise at first because it is dim, because they do not belong in a church, because they're not supposed to hang on walls. Crutches! Crutches everywhere. Lining the walls from eye

deferential nod.

The heretical counterpoint to this influence was provided by my mother who taught me to love nature, and who harboured a fiery antagonism for the Church in general, and the Roman Catholic church in particular.

Creed

My French Canadian father stopped attending the Catholic church when he married my mother. "They excommunicated him because I was a pagan," mother said once with a sly grin. She was raised in the Methodist church and had stopped kneeling in the dining room after Sunday night dinners when she was 13. Mother claims she's atheist but it's hard to believe when that rapt look settles on her face and a husky breaking sound enters her voice that brings me running every time. "Look Cass!" she'll say, and I do. It might be a bird, or the delicate fur on a newly emerged leaf in spring, perhaps the inside of a wet sea shell gleaming in the sunlight, or a flock of Canada geese on their way south, or north. Nature was her church, even though she could be afraid of it too. But organised religion was quite another matter. On those few occasions when we actually shared pew space, I would hear her whisper angrily a word I came to expect over the years.

"What's witchcraft?" I whispered back to her one day while we sat in the gloom of the town's black spired catholic church. We were attending a special communion service for the elementary school students of the convent I attended as a day girl when we lived in France. Of course I did not participate in this service, nor was I required to take the daily religious

instruction. My mother wouldn't have it. Every day while they prayed and discussed "les péchés" with the white collared priest for an hour or so, I drew pictures in my lined workbook. "That's witchcraft," she hissed, stabbing her index finger towards the altar and the line of little girls who, each in turn, stuck out their tongue to receive what only a priest could touch. Then silently they single filed back to their seats, hands pressed firmly to their faces. How could they see? Why didn't they stumble? I never did find out.

Whenever I asked my mother questions for assistance with the kind of spiritual inquiries common to children: "Mommy where's heaven?" she might, depending on the question, give it a shot. Usually, however, she would express a slight grimace punctuated with an abrupt sigh and a brief closure of eyelids. "Ask your father, I don't know." So I would, and if mother was in the vicinity she would inevitably interrupt my father's process with her most common expletive: "Oh for God's sake Bruno, don't tell her that," and proceed to challenge him.

At the age of 10 when we moved back to Canada, I began attending church on a regular basis with my friend Barb who lived next door. Every Sunday, we'd put on special clothes and walk to Saint Aidan's, the neighbourhood Anglican church. Eventually I stopped trooping down to the basement for Sunday School, and stayed upstairs for the whole service. Barb and I did not become more devout with age and could be found at any time during the service, choking and rocking in spasms of uncontrollable laughter which erupted every time we looked at each other.

The services were predictable, repetitive, boring, and uncomfortable. Sit, listen, kneel, pray, stand, sing. Barb knew the liturgy by heart, knew the Creed by heart: "I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table, but Thou are the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy, so grant us Gracious Lord...." She could recite the whole thing without looking at her prayer book once. I really liked the crumbs part because it was so evocative. The words made me think of someone on their hands and knees picking up bread crumbs under a dining room table during a raucous dinner party. But I wondered, would I really be less worthy than the family dog we so generously fed from our own supper table? Even he got more than crumbs.

Despite the inconsistencies of the liturgy with my own awareness, I can't say I struggled with the contradictions, but I recognised them. I also knew I wasn't being forced to church, that it was part of my weekly routine, and of a modest social life. Barb and I joined the church choir for awhile, and I still remember my favourite Easter hymn: "He is risen, He is risen, sing it with a joyful voice. He hath burst His three day prison, let the whole wide world rejoice." I loved to belt that one out and the harmony was great.

When I was about 12 years old I started taking weekly classes to prepare for my first communion. Again, I have no memory of being coerced into this training, it was just a natural progression, a right of passage. I was finally going to be able to go up front for the wafers and wine. My mother made me a white dotted swiss dress with a full skirt for the occasion. I like to imagine she mouthed incantations for my safety from witchcraft while

she sewed, never suspecting how close to Wiccan she really was.

The only event of real significance I remember during this training was being quoted by the Minister. He actually quoted me the week after we had handed in homework requiring us to explain the meaning of faith. Clearly he was impressed, and the lead up to the quote was a cliff hanger.

Someone in this room had captured the essence of the matter with considerable insight and depth. Someone, one of the younger members of this class in fact, had grasped the real meaning of faith. My eyes darted around the room checking the faces of my classmates to fathom who's brilliance was about to be revealed.

"Faith is important because it gives you comfort," he read. "Comfort," he restated emphatically, looking up from the page he was holding. Was that my paper? I couldn't tell. I knew that's what I'd said, but maybe someone else had said it too. Someone who had meant to convey something else, something more significant, more helpful. My mind chattered on in this way while the Minister expounded on my word and I became increasing perplexed. Comfort, was that all?

Honestly, I can't remember what the last straw was, but the day arrived when I decided I just couldn't go anymore. I was at most 14 old. I knew the hymns, most of the liturgy, and a good number of kids my age, but there was nothing there for me. My decision was a non-event. Dad asked me why I didn't want to go anymore. Mother told me I didn't have to go. I didn't miss my Sunday morning ritual, nor did I return even sporadically until two decades later. Interestingly enough, I was probably looking for comfort the day I did go back to church. I wanted something, and church

and despite my antipathy, Christianity provides a draw because of its pivotal role in my own culture and within my own history. I am comfortable in churches, I like the smells, the satiny finish of the wooden pews, the echoing spaces, the quietness to be found there. Yet my alienation is hardly recent. Even as a child I knew church was not the answer. I needed and wanted something more, something I could sense but not articulate. This next story suggests what that need may have been, and how I attempted to fulfill it.

Tree

I used to talk to a tree I'd pass every week on my way to Girl Guides. This tree stood on the front lawn of somebody's ordinary home in the working class neighbourhood where I was raised. I can't recall what aspect of its nature first attracted me, nor when I responded. In memory I see this tree in winter; leafless, seemingly unremarkable, but possessed of a quiet eloquence I could not ignore. This lovely young tree stood out, much like a single blade of grass emerging from a hairline crack in otherwise rocky terrain; isolated from its own kind, but tenacious and alive.

Our conversations were all one way, that is, the tree never talked back. "Hi Tree, how are you today?" I would inquire silently inside myself, slowing my pace ever so slightly as I passed by. Then, as I became bolder over time and started speaking out loud, I would stop for the conversation. Of course I was careful not to if anyone was looking through the living room window, or if there were people walking nearby. Usually the conversations took place at dusk, or near dusk, in the fall or winter months when the streets were empty and families at their evening meal. I

remember the silvery cast of the smooth bark at sunset and in moonlight, the dark knots embossed on the slim trunk, the finely tapered branches that rose straight up to the sky.

Then one day we touched. I was standing on the sidewalk talking to my tree from 15 feet away and had this crazy urge to get closer. I had to think for a minute, the whole notion was silly, this was a tree after all. But my desire was stronger than my censor, so I stepped off the cement side-walk onto the the lawn and went over to the tree. When I got close enough, I extended my hand and stopped with a jolt. The bark was cold, bumpy and irregular, not smooth at all, and the wood was hard, solid as a light standard. Was I expecting the warm resistance of human flesh beneath my hand? Did I imagine my gesture would bridge the linguistic barrier between us? I remember feeling a flicker of disappointment, and hearing the rational inner voice kick in to chide me for tricking myself in this way. But I didn't turn away. I stood there stroking and patting the trunk for awhile, and talking out loud. I can't remember the words, only my self-conscious and sincere intention for the well being of my mute friend. There in the dusk, safe from judging eyes, in my Girl Guide uniform and navy blue knee socks.

I never did tell anybody about my tree and our little conversations, I knew even then this might be risky. Such an admission could be viewed as foolish, perhaps abnormal, even "mental" as my youngest brother used to say. "You're mental Catherine." I didn't want my behaviour witnessed or to look stupid, but I wouldn't stop myself when I felt safe and no one was looking.

One thing I did find in church that even nature could not duplicate, was music. From an early age the big music of pipe organs and church choirs was a vehicle for an experience I would have paid to have, and that kept me committed to Sunday services, long past my interest in participating. Liturgical music is still a strong pull, and I love listening to it in church.

In one of my first attempts to describe mystical experience, I used an expression that came to me during a particularly overwhelming concert of liturgical music when I was 21 years old. A "tearing joy", I called it, because I felt torn in two and joyful in the same instant. I was attending an organ recital in London's St. Margaret's Church. The day was overcast, and the inside of the church was a study in grey. Then, without warning, sunlight crashed through the stained glass windows and on to the stone floor of the church like a fallen rainbow. The combination of colour and organ music exploded within me leaving me breathless and weeping with the most intense feelings of sorrow and pleasure. My body felt as though I was trying to levitate, and I was sure I could see the colour and shape of the music as it rolled through the building. The following musical experience which occurred during the same European trip, was also very powerful but unfortunately of briefer duration.

Normandy

I felt the thrum in my core even before I could hear it, and I knew it was music. We were in Normandy, Margaret and I, sharing a four month tour of Europe typical of university graduates in the 1970s. The day was brilliant

and hot long before the sun reached its zenith. A cloudless blue sky domed the summer landscape and illuminated the sea to the edge of the sparkling horizon. We were making our way towards a small church that stood on the crest of hill when the call reached inside, electrifying and urgent. It was music but from where? An orchestra? An outdoor sound system?

Whatever the source I started to run, I had to find it. NOW. I was running before I knew it came from the church, before I knew it was organ music pumping through hand hewn stone.

With the source identified, urgency escalated. I neared the building rushing for the first door I saw. It was made of old wood, no taller than myself, silvered by centuries and sturdy as the walls surrounding it. I grabbed the rusted handle, pushing and turning it, hoisting my weight against the door that refused to give. "Dammit it's locked, I can't get in." *Get in. GET IN.*

I felt the handle in my grip warm from the sun, and stood arrested by the sound, helpless, gritting my teeth, looking up to the roof of the tiny church. I could feel the desperation rise as I strained to catch the melody that came only in snatches, for it was muffled by stone walls and interrupted by the irritating buzz of cicadas and chatter of bird song. *It's going to be over and I won't get in. I won't get in, I know I won't. Please, please let me in.* "Stand still and shut up or you'll miss all of it." *No! Don't stop. GET IN.*

I ran around the corner. There was another door, it still wasn't the main one. I tried it. Locked. Then a third. *No. Shit. SHIT!* I was frantic. "For God's sake Catherine it's only organ music." *I gotta get in.* "You'll

hear more organ music before this trip is over." *There can't be any more doors, I've checked them all. This one has to work.* It did. *A h h h h. I'm in.....I'm in.* Grinning, gasping, feeling the eruption of astonished barks of laughter escape me, greeting the incoming wave of sound on its way down. Down through my chest like a massive heartbeat, into my trunk, shuddering down my legs to the uneven flagstone beneath my feet and onto deep earth. Thrilling my fingertips, shivering up my arms, curling round my neck like warm velvet, and bursting through my head in a shower of invisible fireworks.

It was cool inside and dark. Candle scent mingled with the smell of damp stone; rich, musty, authentic. I felt my breathing shallow and quick as I floated along waiting for the next crescendo, waiting for the next swell to pick me up and slide down with me to the bottom of a sigh. I heard Margaret behind me and turned to her, beaming, triumphant. "You see? You see?"

She didn't. This magic had failed to command, failed to enrapture her, and I felt the stab of disappointment of not being able to share a windfall of such magnitude. But regret melted as the next wave rose up again, engulfing me in bliss and immense gratitude. *Where is He? Where is my Benefactor? I have to thank Him.* "It doesn't matter, just enjoy this." *But He's playing for me. This is for me. What were the chances? On a weekday morning? No one's here. There isn't even a votive candle lit, it's unbelievable.* "He's probably rehearsing for the Sunday service." *He is not. He's playing like one possessed, He's wild with passion. Listen. He's flying for God's sake. Oh please don't stop. Please play for a long long time.*

works seemed to share that I could not identify, and no one could explain to me. "Do you know what I mean?" I kept asking my peers, my profs, and anyone who would listen. "You know that thing you feel when see great art? That true thing? That disturbing emotional thing that makes you feel the same whether you're looking at Titian's Entombment or Da Vinci's Madonna of the Rocks. What is that? Do you know?" No one did. At least no one was able to help me make sense of my experience, or to reassure me my perspective was legitimate. After months of frustration and unhappiness I abandoned the project and decided I was making something up that either was not important, or did not even exist. Even so, I didn't stop looking at art, and the feelings kept coming.

Oh Mary

The morning news announced it while I was having a bowl of cold cereal. Some lunatic had walked into Saint Peter's and attacked Michelangelo's Pieta, his first one, the one he'd carved when he was twenty three years old. This man had smashed it with a hammer. A *hammer*. Maybe he'd stood there for awhile first just looking, trying to shield himself from the radiance while his fingers twitched around the handle of his weapon. But at some point he just couldn't stop himself, he wouldn't stop himself he had to, for some stupid reason he had to. Mary's face took the worst of it, I remember the reporter saying, until guards finally grabbed the guy. Can you imagine? He simply walked in like a tourist; like some ordinary mortal hiding the soul of poet. Like someone who longed to see marble breathe, to know the sting of unabashed tears expressed in public, and the pain in the chest that comes when gratitude

rends the heart.

I idolised that piece and knew it as well as anything can be known from pictures and the research efforts of a third year under-grad, which I was at the time. This sculpture had captured me more than any other image of the thousands I had seen in Mrs. Carlo's class on Art of the Renaissance.

The trip to Europe I was planning at that time included a firm resolve to get to Rome to visit the Pieta. I had been working part-time in the slide library of the art history department, saving every dollar to finance my goal which was only months away from happening. But as I sat there eating my breakfast, going through this simple ritual of daily life, my world changed. I remember being suddenly on my feet, frozen, staring at the old radio on top of the fridge, and feeling the newscaster's words reach inside and squeeze something behind my breastbone sure as the grip of talons on live flesh.

My head snapped round to look at my mother who was standing at the kitchen sink and who had turned around to look at me, to assess the seriousness of the matter. I could feel my mouth working as I started to speak. "He killed it," I said panting. "He killed it, he killed it," I chanted like a banshee in a rising crescendo of fury and despair. "Why did he have to kill it?" I demanded, weeping, outraged, wanting her to justify the senseless murder of sacred stone in a cathedral half a world away. Mother had her crisis face on, the one that's meant to provide calm reason in the midst of mayhem. "Darling, I'm so sorry," she began with the demeanour of a kind soul who has to confirm the death notice, but who simply can't do it. "They'll repair it, it'll be the same," she said gently, no doubt hoping

I would believe. "No! No! They never will. It can't be repaired!" I wailed.

I did not get to Rome that trip. I was in Italy but never travelled that far South. It didn't matter, I knew the piece was being reconstructed sliver by sliver from photographs like the ones I'd pored over myself. Even if the repairs were finished and the shiny new product back in its niche, I knew mother and son would now be sequestered. They would now be surrounded by guards and silk cords to keep the crowds at a distance, armoured in plexiglass thick enough to repel bullets; imprisoned. I forgot about it.

Ten years later I was in Rome briefly but long enough to get to Saint Peter's. I was alone and wanted to be excited about being there, wanted to be enraptured by this phenomenon. But I wasn't. Numb, I walked lead footed over the cold stone, oppressed by the dank smell of stale incense, punished by the excess; the jewel crusted baldaquin, the enormous gilt framed paintings, the erotic undulations of the baroque sculptures. A voice inside nagged me to admire the opulence of this extravagantly appointed tomb, but there was no response and I felt very small, unwilling even to ask someone where the Pieta was stationed. I hadn't bought myself a floor plan on purpose so I wouldn't know where to look. I didn't want to know, I'd be there soon enough. So I wandered, pretending I didn't care, pretending I wasn't afraid to see the corpse and that I'd actually come to see other things. Waiting for the inevitable for well over hour, maybe two, I finally turned a corner and stopped.

The scene was all I'd imagined it would be. There was the crowd, the guards, the thick ropes covered in plush maroon velvet hanging from

and artifacts of Canada's First Nations. Within weeks I was reading about shamanism. Shamans, I quickly discovered, knew a great deal about ecstasy, and I was hooked.

Over the next few years I focussed my reading on spiritual and psychological subjects, and although I was excited by my reading, this pursuit was intellectual not experiential. The contrast between the two was sharply and wonderfully drawn by another experience with a tree when I was about twenty-seven years old. This experience came without warning and never occurred again, and while I have told this story sheepishly over the years, I have no doubt it occurred.

Banana Tree Man

I don't tell this story often although I do believe it happened to me. It's not the kind you tell at a party, or relate to someone you don't know very well. But the story really is too lovely to hoard, and chances are someone will believe me. After all, why draw the curtains just in case the sun won't shine?

My friend Robert had a banana tree he had inherited but never really wanted. It stood in the hallway near the front door of his apartment, orphaned from the lush vegetation flourishing in the living room. This tree had a spindly trunk that snaked in a graceful curve some seven feet into the air. A frond of half a dozen large variegated leaves drooped dolefully from its apex. "Are you watering this thing?" I asked every time I visited Robert. He was a home gardener capable of spending an entire afternoon washing the leaves of his fig tree with ginger ale so they would shine, but this banana tree never got such treatment and it showed.

Eventually I could see the tree was in trouble and Robert, red-faced, admitted he had decided to let it die. "You are not!" I told him, and promptly adopted his cast-off. Minutes later we hauled it out to the elevator and up three floors to my apartment, where I placed it in my bedroom in the corner near the head of my bed.

The remarkable event occurred several days afterwards in the middle of the night. I had been sleeping and wakened; not an uncommon experience for West Enders in the early 1980s when prostitutes plied a brisk trade with Johns who crept up the back alleys in their cars. Ambulances and fire engines were also out every night, sirens screaming. Interrupted sleep was a way of life and the price I paid for living in the neighbourhood.

Being fully awake, I raised my head to look at the harbour lights. The special pleasure of this apartment was the unobstructed view of English Bay. I had my bed positioned so I could enjoy the view even at night by simply lifting my head off the pillow. From there I could easily see the lights of freighters moored in the harbour, or watch the play of moonbeams on the dark water.

Then I turned towards the corner where the banana tree stood a few feet away. That I wasn't afraid of what I saw still troubles me, all I felt was mild amazement, and a sense of enormous pleasure mixed with curiosity. There was a being, a person, in the pot with the tree. My room was dim but not dark. The drapes were never drawn at night and street light filtered unfettered through the wide floor-to-ceiling window that opened the wall just beyond the foot of my bed. I couldn't see perfectly, but I could make out the contours of a substantial body, see the arms outstretched in

assessment on me:

There's a tree theme emerging here. What do you think that's about?

I have no idea.

Do you still believe there was a man in the tree?

Yes I do. He was part of the plant. At least he seemed to be. I'm sure he was.

Like a spirit?

Maybe.

Could it have been a dream?

I don't think so. I knew exactly where I was, saw it all, took it all in. This was not a dream. Do you believe me?

It's a very unusual experience. Who knows what you saw in the dark.

I saw the arms and the shoulders and the head, but most of all I felt it, I felt him.

You felt him.

Yes, I just knew he was male.

How?

I don't know.

What does this mean to you?

I don't know. All I know is it was good, it was truly good and I honestly believe something was actively, deliberately, communicating that goodness to me.

Remarkable.

Do you believe me?

I'm not sure. I've never had such an experience.

Would you like to?

normalcy and evidence of a sensitivity that was certainly not out of place in these women's lives. This kind of corroboration only underscores the importance of sharing our own mystical perspectives, and spiritual sensitivities within the academic community.

In conclusion, when I consider the stories in this chapter, I wonder how my training could have overlooked the importance of counsellors' religious background, and spiritual development, experiences, and beliefs, no matter how vague, or unusual. Stories like these seem pivotal to our self understanding, and to our work with clients. I had no idea how influential and dear these stories were until I put them to paper. Had I guessed their power I would have written them out years ago and carried them in my bag like maps to the buried treasure. I now see the patterns and symmetries they describe, like overlapping circles fanning out from the sploosh of pebbles tossed in a pond. More importantly, these stories helped me understand why I kept this experience to myself for so long. I knew I was nervous at the prospect of writing a thesis based on this very personal event, and the conflict it created for me as a counsellor. But I was naively confident my stories would illustrate only the constancy and beauty of this experience in my life. I was completely unprepared for the eruption of sorrow and terror that spewed forth like the steaming guts of a volcano.

Chapter Three: Terror

Whenever I feel afraid, I strike a careless pose and whistle a happy tune so no one ever knows I'm afraid...The result of this deception is very strange to tell, for when I fool the people I fear I fool myself as well (Rodgers & Hammerstein, 1951).

At first glance, terror may not appear to belong in a thesis on mystical experience, yet I have found the two are related, although not perhaps in the way you might imagine. I did not start to see the connections myself until this work was well underway. Until a few months ago my only real awareness was the fear itself, which was all over the place. I remember the burst of fear two years ago when I typed "The Third Thing" on the title page of that first detailed description. Every evening for three weeks after classes I sat down at my computer and wrote joyfully, with an excitement I could hardly contain. I stopped frequently to gaze slack jawed at the wall before me as the rapture of the Third Thing opened to me even while I wrote. I was living it "in vitro", culling the experience from memory and basking there, immobile and replete as a fat iguana under a hot desert sun. Then I would return to my computer screen, and the tension that shortened the distance between my sternum and my pubic bone like a bungee cord. "You can do this," I told myself repeatedly. "It's important, it's okay." But I was afraid.

Every word was measured, every nuance weighed while I tried to tell the truth, tried not to tell too much, tried to remain on safe ground. I wanted to be objective, to report the emotions, yes, but from a distance. Of course I had experienced some anxiety writing term papers; had laboured over them, and sometimes worried about voicing my opinions and

criticisms. But this level of fear was new, at least to my academic writing, even if it was not really new to me at all.

A Brief Introduction

I want to proclaim the truth, but all I hear is the raspy whisper of my own voice, eager and afraid at the same moment. I hear no firm resolve in my words, feel no power in the vocal tremor that announces, to my irritation, the judgment I anticipate and fear. This mystical experience was the truth when I decided to write my version of it, but now I'm not sure. Maybe I should keep this to myself. Much as I want to open myself to you, I also want to keep my teeth in and my surface polished. I don't want to be thought of as foolish, or worse. I don't want you wondering how stable, how trustworthy I am. Perhaps I should get that over with right up front. Shall I tell you? I am not stable. There, that wasn't so difficult, it was a piece of cake. I'd like to do it again just for exercise: I am not stable. I am labile, artistic, disorganised, tender hearted, passionate, and sometimes tactless. I scare easily, and don't particularly like being alone in the dark. I cry like a baby when my feelings are hurt, I dream of making a difference, I obsess over the 15 pounds I'm carrying around in excess body fat. I wonder if I'll die alone, and how much I'll mind. I never ever get too much love.

This is the humanity I tend to hide behind my professional smile. This is information I would think carefully about sharing with my clients, and that they might never really know about me unless I decided to come clean. But how clean can I afford to be and still maintain my position as the paid expert? I do not know, but the paradox is evident. If my clients really understood that we were the same, could I still justify my role? I'd

just be me, another soul wandering the planet, trying to belong, trying to make meaning, trying to make a difference, and what's so professional about that? The point is my profession offers all sorts of endorsed places for me to hide. Consequently I can avoid being truly known by those I am supposedly serving, and I can keep the ruse going.

I tell myself I'm reticent to speak freely here because I'm not entirely sure what's pertinent and what isn't. What's responsible disclosure and what's gratuitous disrobing, what's withholding and what isn't. The truth is I'm nervous about revealing myself at all. Right there, however, academia and my profession offer me an out. I can stay as hidden as I wish without penalty, and I even get extra points for objectivity and arm's length skepticism. In the face of such toe scuffing confusion, however, I look for ballast in remembering the battle I've fought to trust myself; to trust my innards, my eyes, my ears, my nose, my *experience*. They weren't lying to me after all, they never did, never will. I also need to remember that you out there, dying to read what my heart most wants to say, will be utterly betrayed if I am coy with you. If I do not at least try to show you my face and hold out my heart for your inspection. Of course it's a risk but I'll betray myself if you, my dear longed for tribe member, can not recognise me nor find any sanctuary in my words. We will not find each other if I insist on hiding myself in the bushes, no matter how vigorously I rustle the branches. "She who cannot howl, will not find her pack" (Estes, 1992). Ahhhooooooooooooo.

Let's see, what can I say about myself that is pertinent but not too impertinent? I am a 42- year-old Caucasian of mixed French Canadian and

Wasp heritage. At the age of 38 I returned to school to work towards a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology. I call myself a feminist, an educator, and a writer. I feel the need to say a little more about about my feminism because I find this a confusing issue. The plain truth is I don't know what kind of feminist I am. Recently I spoke with a feminist activist who objected when I called myself a radical feminist. "Why complicate it sweetheart? Just call yourself a feminist that's good enough," she assured me.

Calling myself any kind of feminist gets me into deep water with men as well as women. I have been at odds with many women regarding my feminism because so few seem to share my current place on the feminist continuum, and the majority of people in my circles are women. Thankfully, I have a few friends with whom I am in perfect political and philosophical accord. However, I have been as reviled for being an inflexible harpy, and a wanton destroyer of family harmony and the democratic process, as I have for being a political sell out. I also recognise I perpetuate the same problem every time I hear myself say aloud or in private "She just doesn't get it yet."

There is little else I have to say about my politics because they're shifting all the time, just like they do for warrior women like Carter Heyward (1989). She understands that I will be able to contradict something I've said today by tomorrow at the latest. Inevitably I'll read a paragraph, or someone will scare me, or inspire my outrage, or wound me, or love me, or challenge me, or educate me, and I'll be trying to make it all fit again. I am changing even as I write, as I scour my heart to find my

mute and terrified, these are the words I want to remember. Eventually I will achieve enough equanimity to never forget them. Terror will then be less likely to derail me, make me forget, run for cover, or shut me up. Eventually I'll never lose sight of what I myself have avoided, denied, defended, hidden for decades and for many reasons. I did not see, I was not supposed to, no one was talking, the matter was not that important (or I wasn't), the game was not played that way. I had to play by the rules or suffer the consequence: banishment. I must have known that in my genes.

Until recently, much of the terror in my life and the pain it caused me had no context. Fear was simply part of my quirky personal configuration which I might in time outgrow, and which burdened me like a case of the flu from which I was forever and never recovering. "I think I'm getting better," I told myself from one year to the next, never sure of the etiology, nor the diagnosis, nor even the correct treatment.

My perception has changed significantly in the past few years, although I can not itemise the sequence of events, or the galaxy of influences shifting my world on its axis. The result is a stunning new perspective of myself, my own story, and the world in which I live and work. Everything is making sense, how could I have possibly missed it? But then again, I had many reasons to miss it, not the least of which was terror itself. Terror is such a convincing deterrent, such an effective curtain, such a powerful silencer: the ultimate paralysers.

Practicum

Oh I was scared. Scared so bad I started waking up at 5 in the morning. I'd lie there listening to my heart pound in my ears, and deep breathe into

the all gone feeling I usually get when I'm looking down from an unprotected height. Into my second week of sleep deprivation I started worrying about depression for God's sake. I give everyone around me hell for using that word. "Forget depression," I tell them. "You're sad, you're grieving, you're overloaded, you're outraged, you're fed up, you're exhausted, you're paralysed with fear, but you're not depressed." I hate that word, it's so passive and random, like a virus, like a break and enter. Impossible to know who will be struck next, or when, and of course so easy to manage with the right drugs and counselling.

I'd wanted this practicum placement badly, had broken the rules to get it, and even convinced the Director of the agency he should allow me to train there for an additional 5 weeks, "Because I need the practice." Can you believe it? The first 4 days were alright. I was flat out on a 90 degree learning curve, too busy trying to remember people's names and how the outfit was run, to pay much attention to how I was feeling. I ignored my anxiety at the first lunch meeting; a weekly event where the team members got together, usually over a bento from from the local Japanese restaurant, to discuss the clients' "progress."

Far as I could see, progress meant the clients were falling into line; getting off the pain killers, being less withdrawn, and co-operating during exercises. Most importantly, they were talking about going back to work. "Yeah I'm better," "Those exercises are tough but really making a difference," "I'm almost clean this week man, yeah, feels great." But it wasn't until the beginning of the second week that I really got it. This was prison; they were the inmates and I was one of the screws. I could read it

in the flatness of their smiles when I greeted them in the halls. Could hear it in the sudden silence of the coffee room, where they hung out between sessions, whenever I walked in to make myself a cup of tea. I could even feel it in the attempts a few of them made to engage me in casual conversation about my studies, and why I'd decided to do my practical training there. "Find out who the hell she is, show her you're fine, cover your ass, don't say a thing, smile, just smile." I couldn't tell them I was safe ground, that I was scared too, that I knew they were pawns in a nasty game of coercion, and that the stakes were all about money and power, not really about them at all. I was in my own game, and the terror told me I was losing ground.

The Director scared the hell out of me. He skewered the guys with his dagger tongue, and the women too. But he did other things to the women, with his eyes, with his slow snow white smile, and the off stage jokes about what we really wanted or deserved. No one countered him, not really. I knew they were too afraid of losing their jobs or being humiliated further, and there was ample opportunity for that. Each day started with a brief "check-in" of all the staff members. We'd gather in the Director's office for 15 minutes before work started, ostensibly to compare notes, divvy up the work load, put out little fires before they became big ones.

I was so impressed by the cohesion this meeting implied I was initially blind to the deadly ritual it always seemed to involve. There we would be, professional care-givers all, still dewy from our morning showers, dressed in our middle class casuals, kibitzing with each other, apparently relaxed and confident. But we waited vigilantly. Waited to see who would be "it",

and who would be fast enough, glib enough, to avoid the public whipping that predictably occurred. "He always knows where to hit you," someone confided to me early on after the Director had embarrassed me in front of the group. He did too, and if he missed the mark he'd persist until someone registered enough humiliation or rage to satisfy him, even if he had to go through all of us to find that person. The pros who'd been there the longest were the most skilled at reflecting the jibe in someone else's direction. Or worse, of laughing at whoever was nailed to help ensure the barb wouldn't be tossed back at them. The rookies took the worst of it, and by the end of my first week I felt like a fish in a barrel from the moment I arrived until quitting time. Anything might be used against you; attitudes, opinions, judgment calls, skills or lack of skill, personal quirks, expressions. Even food and clothing preferences were potential arsenal.

"Hey Mike, nice tie ya got there." I heard him say about an expensive hand painted silk tie the man beside me was wearing one morning. Mike was a little shy, articulated his words carefully, and had a scrubbed clean look about him I trusted. He'd started a week or two before me, and we'd made a friendly connection as the two new comers. But that morning I stood by like a mute accomplice while Mike was crucified for the beautiful tie he'd decided to wear. In silence I watched the crimson wave rush under his white Irish skin, from below his shirt collar, up to the roots of his thick black hair. The job was done when he bowed his head and a small smile played his face like a requiem. I looked at the Director with what I hoped he would interpret as unashamed loathing for his monstrous behaviour, and he winked at me.

Anxiety tracked me like a hound. I dreaded going in, dreaded the morning whippings, the lonely lunches, the required supervisory hour with the Director, the meetings, especially the lunch meetings. I think it was the third one I attended that broke me. There were 7 of us sitting in the small conference room eating and talking about the clients. I didn't like how they were being discussed. This one was lazy, that one was uncooperative, someone else was lying. "She's taking more Percocets than she's admitting. They can buy them on the street!" I could feel the tension in the room between the Director and some of the players. I watched the reactions as competence and credibility were undermined with a word, a cocked eyebrow or a derisive snort. The clincher was the controlled fury of the good natured staff physician who clearly struggled with the Director's abusiveness.

We had been reviewing the progress of a man who, one of the counsellors suggested, should not be encouraged to work with children. Although I agreed with the recommendation, I remember staring at the physician in horror when he delivered the verdict: "He's having psychotic delusions." Was he? I'd spent the better part of two weeks in class with this man, and while I felt he was angry and somewhat destructive of group harmony, he was present and lucid. I was dumbstruck by the power this doctor had to make such a diagnosis. The Director's annoyance was clear. "You've got to be careful about saying things like that," he said, trying I imagined, to intimidate the doctor with the spectre of a law suit. Other members of the group offered their impressions of the man; he simply wasn't performing adequately and they didn't like him. The doctor

pressed his advantage, his words were brief and final, delivered with the full force of an irate parent determined to teach his recalcitrant offspring a lesson to remember. "That's *it*. He's going on antidepressants tomorrow."

I stopped eating. I was losing my concentration, could feel myself slipping into a quicksand of dread. I wanted to throw up. "That's it...That's it...That's it.....That's it." Those were his words. I had this overwhelming urge to say "Look, I've been holding out on you, I don't belong here, you see I'm really one of *them*. Small oversight, nothing to worry about, but if it's all the same to you, I think I'll just mosey on down the hall where a few of them are having lunch." I couldn't though, I was too afraid, it was too close to the truth. It was the truth.

Afterwards I went back to my office and the counsellor who had been at the meeting came in. Something in my demeanour had telegraphed itself to him and he seemed to want to comfort me. He himself had admitted being an outsider there, but I looked at him and knew he wasn't far enough outside for me to trust. I gave my notice the following day and left at the end of the week. Surprisingly, a handful of staff members dropped by to congratulate me on my decision to leave. Their message was clear, "Good for you, get outta here."

On the final day I had to say goodbye to the clients in the group I had observed, and helped facilitate during my 3 weeks there. I longed to tell them I knew I had betrayed them, that I was indeed one of them, that they were being used in ways they could not imagine, and that I begged their forgiveness. Instead I simply said thank you to each one of them that were sitting in the circle, then got up and left. One of the women in the group

speaking. I get to relax, to move into my gentle reassuring counsellor mode, to be the concerned observer. This creates some distance between me and the threat of impending terror, certainly it seems to comfort me. Am I overstating my case? What after all is there to be so afraid of? What indeed.

Holy Terror

I'm distracted. I wanted to discuss more about the joy, the wonder of this thing, but it's out of reach and tears are on top. Nothing has happened really, Lisa and Grace were here this weekend and we laughed and raged together and felt the terror. It's about death, wasteful death. There's a lot of terror and grief involved here, endless caches of it hidden under the snowy veneer of our cool exteriors, and today I can feel it. We watched a movie last night with a scene that caught me like a fox in a bear trap. I've been wishing all day I could chew my leg off just to escape it.

One of the characters in the movie is taken into custody by the military police, and her torturer is her half brother; the child of a peasant woman her own father had raped. She's blindfolded, bleeding, handcuffed. "Who are you?" she asks him repeatedly. He sits beside her, and slowly creeps one hand up the inside of her leg, holding her neck with the other, whispering what he'd said to her the day he'd come to her father's house, and tried to molest her when she was a small child. She starts to scream as she remembers. As we watched I remembered, and Lisa remembered, and Grace remembered. We all had our own real life versions of the scene. "Same shit different pile," we kept on saying through the movie.

I felt sick by the end of it. Lisa said the torture scenes were nothing

compared to the book, and I said I'd never be able to read it. Then Grace started to talk about the nut house she'd committed herself to when she'd felt suicidal 20 years back. The story just started without warning. The words "nut house" and the wry sound of her voice tricked me, prepared me for something funny, which it wasn't. Grace has a musical voice, and she was speaking in the sing-song she tends to reserve for belly laugh horror stories about her cat's near death experiences. I tried not to, but I shook with laughter and terror until the full impact of her story subdued me like a large blunt instrument.

Grace described how her days began during her time there. In the morning, her first thought after opening her eyes, was whether her name would be on the blackboard hanging outside the entrance to the cafeteria. If it was, she knew she would not be eating breakfast, she would be going for shock treatment. Every day started just like that, wondering, lying there in a freezing terror, knowing she had to go and find out. She said it was just like *One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest*. She said she quickly learned how to make a bed so flawlessly no one could send her for shock treatment for being disorderly or disobedient. Others, she told us darkly, were less adept at bed making. I kept battling her pointed wit; it tickled me and left me bleeding internally.

When her story ended we sat together, speechless. The light from the candles sitting on the mantle warmed the edges of the surrounding darkness and tried to beckon us back. But we were far away and alone, stumbling like zombies through a moonless night. Trying to understand, wanting to be good, scanning with dead eyes the bodies of countless

women that lay on some minefield stretched across a vast horizon.

Women whose shadows leaped up to accost us, to haunt us with their blood spattered faces and sweet smiles. Our darling women.

Eventually we began to talk about how easy it would be for any of us to be incarcerated, how rational and hygienic the treacherous system that still pathologizes us. The conversation moved on but I hadn't finished with the story. I was back there with Grace, thinking of the male nurse who'd approached her one day when she was sitting alone on the landing of the staircase. He had recognised her despair, knew she didn't belong there. "What are *you* doing here?" he'd asked with surprise. He was the only one who really saw her, and he broke professional protocol by showing Grace her chart so she could keep up to date on what was being recorded about her. "He was your ANGEL," Lisa and I had responded at once with relief.

Death was everywhere in the room while we talked, terrifying but beautiful, iridescent as the feathers of a wood duck in a flash of sunlight, shot with gold, fleeting, astonishing. I looked at the two other women, and felt a current in the room, soothing as a heartbeat. The current was there in the smell of food set out for friends, there in the spirit of an angel masquerading as a nurse. But mostly the pulse was in the story of a scared-to-death kid who thought she was being responsible when she had herself committed. Who came so close to getting shocked, but who avoided it even though they kept her there for 6 weeks. She'd survived.

I wanted to put my hands on her, to make a connection, to comfort the part of her who'd dared to come back through 20 years of history to tell the

wish the terror did not make it all so beautiful, so compelling. This suffering should not be the thing that makes it the easiest for us to see each other, to really see each other. The paradox is that the moment I "really see" anybody is the same moment I recognise myself.

Serenity

"Oh, you're so eMOtional, so draMATIC", I was often told. Too often for my liking, even though I was. Still am. Back then it was a stinging indictment. Not always of course, but even among close friends, what I now like to call "my passion" was noticed, commented on, laughed about. Something would be said and I would react with feeling; slam a plate down on the table, burst into tears, stand there and turn into stone with a look of horror on my face, or rapture, or incredulity, or laugh immoderately, screaming my delight in a moment of helpless mirth.

I was never cool. Not unless I was in a certain mode which was my best defence, only it wasn't cool it was frosty. Who knows when I perfected that one. But I knew I had when people in the Drama Club I belonged to at Ottawa U started approaching me and saying, "You're very nice, you're warm! Why, I had no idea," in a tone of amazement that always took me aback. "Are you kidding? What ever gave you the idea I was anything other than total mush?" "You can be quite intimidating." "You're joking. You *are* joking." "No really, you can be very aloof."

This observation became clearer to me because I was told, and sometimes I would catch myself in behaviours I knew would ultimately isolate; that surrounded me in an aura of regal and repelling disdain. There was no middle ground, or no apparent one, between spontaneous

and extravagant emotions and, as I came to call her, my "Snow Queen." What a painful dilemma. I didn't want to be alone. Not at all. But I also didn't want to be strange, eMOting all over the place, inappropriate, the object of conjecture, at the mercy of a raised eyebrow, or a certain smile that could register a paralysing tingle at the base of my spine and lock the door on my expression faster than a deadbolt. I knew that feeling and hated it.

If there was any middle ground I only appreciated it years later, although it became noticeable to others about the same time I started seriously examining the push pull between these two personas. I still don't understand it because I so rarely experience myself as being serene. But this is the word people have used to describe a feeling I evoke for them. "You look so serene, your space is so serene." There is in this remark a recognition of the distinctiveness of the quality, and the welcome it provides. Often I sense an unexpressed question in this remark. "What is this exactly? Isn't this.....lovely." The eyes may cast slowly about to take it all in before they settle back on me for what feels like an explanation. "Serene? Me? I'm a walking volcano. You should see my house, I wash my dishes once a week whether they need it or not. Turmoil is my middle name." This litany never had the effect of diminishing the individual's immediate experience, and has elicited murmurs of disagreement, or mild surprise that I don't, at least sometimes, walk through life in a lustrous cloud of fairy gold.

Now I am much less inclined to point out the inconsistency between such perceptions and the emotional climate of my daily life. There *is*

where my colluding silence finally becomes more painful than the risk of speaking of up (Turner, 1995), and where inaction brutalises both of us if I hold back out of fear. Here also is where action desecrates if it seeks recognition or advantage. In this place I have to tell the truth, to take my responsibility personally, to love you with all my heart. There is no choice because I already do.

But what does right action involve? How do I navigate what is sometimes wild water, sometimes a razor's edge, between such widely diverging mandates? One that assures me "I am you", the other that insists our relationship can and must be contained within the limits set by my professional role. Although these limitations may be intended to protect you, they also offer me status, money, and a position of influence you will rarely match as my client. But I hesitate to admit this truth to myself let alone to you, for doing so will set me apart. To question the status quo of my profession, and the patriarchal underpinnings of my own culture can not help but make me an outcast, certainly within mainstream culture. I have always known that revealing the simple truth of my experience would isolate me, or leave me open to attack more often than not, and I was right. Much as I hate these two options, I now hate silence and compliance even more because they rob me of so much.

School Days

"Catherine, it fits, this part of the terror knits this chapter together, it needs to go in. I know it's hard, but it should go in." I can hear Lisa's sweet voice over the phone line. This is the voice of my best friend. She is a professional writer with a background in journalism. Lisa has read my

first draft and has told me there are holes in it, but she's suggesting I fill them with the rawest terror in my repertoire. Stuff related to the sexism and the oppression I experienced as a post-graduate student at UBC. Stuff related to my own family of origin. I don't think Lisa is being being fair. She's someone who has been as close to me for the past five years as anyone else in my life. Right now she's talking to me from the little office at the back of the log cabin where she and her boyfriend live on Saturna Island, and from where she watches eagles and hummingbirds. She's safe, I think to myself, and feel my panic rise in the face of her encouragement. "I know it's not my ass on the line." "You're damn right it isn't." I'm annoyed at her for being so reasonable, so convincing, so tender in her approach. "It's just a little cliff," I hear the sub text of her words whisper lovingly in my ear. "Just a teeny little five thousand foot drop. You won't hurt yourself. *Jump*, you'll see."

My response is a high pitched frantic laugh. I read her the excerpt from *The King and I*, that I've decided to use as an opener for this chapter. "Don't you love it?" I scream, laughing into the phone. "Why aren't you laughing?" I ask her. "Because it's not funny," she says quietly, with a small edge of pain that belies the doubt I know she's suffering on my behalf. Lisa understands the risk and knows I'm making it alone. "You're laughing because you're afraid." Yes I am.

Then slowly, as we talk, I start to thaw out, I feel a growing lightness as the waves of energy release themselves from my frozen body in rushes, and I emerge from a sense of having sleepwalked through the day. That's been the problem: I'm scared. Still. I feel the loathing for what I don't want

to write, the frustration at being caught like this in an ethical bind of my own making. This thesis was my idea wasn't it? My friend is only encouraging me to follow through here, not to lose my nerve at this point. She's right, at least I think she is, but I tell her point blank: there is absolutely no way I can. "Tell me why you're afraid?" she asks me. We've been through this before, and I begin my litany of reasons. Because I want to graduate. Because this has nothing to do with mystical experience, it won't wash with the committee, and why bother writing what I know will be disallowed. "Are you sure?" she challenges me before heading for the psychological tricks. "Why don't you just write it in the third person?" Then the final permission is offered: "You know, if you really don't think it fits once it's written, you can leave it out." Sure I can.

This dear friend is currently reading the McEwen Report (1995) dealing with allegations of racism and sexism in the Political Science Department at UBC. I gave her the copy that arrived in my mail last week because I didn't have time to read it. I'm so sick of all of it, and I sure don't want to write about it, but the events from the last three years of my own academic and personal experience line up in my mind, jostling for position. "Tell them! Tell them!" my inner speaker says, bright eyed, insistent, fearless. "Get it out, say it, say it. So what if it isn't nice, too bad, just say it." Oh God. I feel the pressure on my heart like a boulder while I scan the room for an exit I can't find.

What I haven't told you in this chapter is a lot, and I'm not going to tell you very much, even though you do deserve to hear every word. It's just too risky, and I want to finish this degree. Of course I see the paradox of

wanting to spell out my discontent, my outrage, my truth, my knowledge in a public document that will also allow me to receive a Master's degree. "She's biting the hand that feeds her." Yes. This hand needs to be bitten. In the same instant I become confused. What is pertinent and what is not are tangled again, hopelessly meshed with what is risky, scary, uncomfortable, honest, and what is safe enough to write here. Oh my.

Perhaps I could start with something minor just to warm up. For example, I could tell you about being reduced to tears one Sunday afternoon by my fear of going to Main library. I was afraid of being in the stacks after dark. I felt like a fool, standing in my bedroom crying while my husband tried to comfort me, and Lisa stood by telling me my reaction was completely appropriate. The story of the abusive letter campaign at the Counselling Psychology Department had broken earlier that week in the news. I'd sat there overwhelmed with fear and outrage in my car outside a 7-11 reading the threatening letter printed on the front page of the Province newspaper. Then I drove to my five o'clock class wondering what awaited me.

The class was held in room 102 on the first floor of the old Counselling Psychology building on Toronto Road, and were we spooked! Those of us sitting with our backs to the bank of French doors that lined the back wall of the room laughed nervously, excessively, and made bad jokes about cross hairs, and the safety of our academic environment. I thought of the Lépine murders, of course I did, we all did, and the madness of sitting in a classroom worrying about the darkness outside, wondering how this threat could be so close to us. Our professor - a woman in our department -

confronted the issue directly and honestly, told us what she knew, let us talk for awhile, acknowledged our terror and confusion. When she asked us if we would prefer to cancel class for the day we accepted the offer and teamed up in groups to walk to our cars, but not before a security guard walked in the room making us all jump. The fear was palpable and it went on and on, and is still going on, only now the contentious McEwen report is naming the cause: systematic oppression by those in power. Hurrah.

The day I stood in my bedroom mourning my right to safety even in the stacks on a Sunday afternoon, and struggling with the decision to go to the library despite my fear, I made a connection I could no longer avoid. This terror was not an occasional blip on the surface of my life, *this was the foundation of my entire experience as a woman from earliest memory.*

I did go to the library that day and, not so ironically, met a woman from one of my classes who told me in a broken voice, of a prostitute she had recently counselled who had been murdered the day before. "No one cares," she said. Nothing was going to be done about this murder because she was only a hooker. I tried to comfort my sister student by telling her how fearful I'd been to come to the library, and how embarrassed my fear had made me. We talked about the abusive letters, about how little was being done and how much denied, about the frustration and anger we felt. We whispered our truth to each other in the bowels of Main Library that late afternoon, on the floor lined with books on psychology and religion and philosophy. Books that for all their attempts at truth and insight negated my own experience as a woman by simply ignoring it.

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Listen, I've *not* been crazy, insane, unhinged, unreasonable, or overly emotional. I've just been scared. Merely terrified. My insistence on labelling my terror as pathological, as "my fault" is almost a thing of the past because I get it now. I *get* it. Making someone crazy is dead easy. All you have to do is convince her or him that their experience does not exist, or isn't important. That their perceptions are skewed, and that they are a danger (or a burden), to themselves or others. Then, treat them disrespectfully over the long term to prove the point, and throw in the ongoing threat of mental illness, isolation, or death should they ever decide to seriously protest, and voila: instant insanity.

Now when I'm feeling scared I rarely wonder about my mind. I simply call on a trusted tribe member to talk me down, to listen, to validate my reality, and cradle my grief until I can regain my equilibrium and remember that silence and compliance never saved me. No longer do I withdraw when the heeby jeebies hit, no more will I insist that the fundamental flaw lies within me. No thanks.

## Chapter Four: Taboo

Trust your nose. You know what stinks. Don't try to replace the helpless frustration you feel, the powerless victimisation, by working out a rational answer...First protest! I don't know what should be done about most of the major political dilemmas, but my gut (my soul, my heart, my skin, my eyes) sinks, creeps, crawls, weeps, cringes, shakes. It's wrong, simply wrong, what's going on here...I'm going on protesting and protesting against therapy. Something's rotten in its kingdom, and I'll go on saying so, even though I have not been able to imagine what to do about it (Hillman, 1992, p. 104 - 107).

As a counsellor I do not really feel I am supposed to love my clients, let alone tell them I do. Of course I am cognizant of the ethical ramifications of doing so; I just have too much power for my love to have an obvious place in the counselling relationship. But when I sit back and think of some of the people I have "counselled" in the course of my academic studies; during a one year volunteer stint with the Richmond Crisis Centre; and for five years in my work as a part-time shiatsu therapist, I feel both shabby and outraged. Not because I treated anyone badly or indifferently in any professional sense, but because I loved them and they never knew it, not directly. I withheld that knowledge, I hid myself, and enjoyed the blessing of an enviable intimacy I accepted as my due, along with all the other privileges of my position. That can not be right. With Hillman's permission I will avoid trying to solve the problem. I only want to raise the issue and wade through the mire to get a lay of the land.

Openly admitting I have loved clients tenderly, passionately, gratefully, has felt a little like throwing myself in front of an oncoming train. I could not be sure my experience was appropriate, and I feared professional

censure. Even more, I feared I might be taking advantage of the client, although exactly how was not clear. More confusing still is the frustration I have experienced in not being able to fulfill my responsibility to the client. Mystical experience beckons me to an act of devotion, of service, of commitment that seems to fall outside my professional mandate. In the darling light of mystical experience I find it difficult to turn to my skill base, my training, for answers. I stand professionally bereft, humbled, and amazed before the client. Seeing this spark of divinity before me, embraced in the sacred shelter of this relationship, and knowing the depth of its meaning in my own life, I have a terrible decision to make: what must I do? What *can* I do for this person?

While I have understood, at least in theory, that my love for the client could place him or her at risk, I was fascinated to learn early on in my training that I too was at risk. This particular concern was initially a stretch, but my very first client - a student in my class on basic interviewing skills - spelled it out for me. She was a school counsellor who had counselled an abused First Nations girl the previous year. This girl's plight had affected my client so much that she awoke one night, got up, and drove to the girl's reservation in the early hours of the morning to check on her safety. She had recognised her client in the same way as someone from her own family, someone she loved. Following the incident, a counsellor from her school chastised her for putting herself at risk and for overstepping her role. I could not understand my client's willingness to agree with her colleague, nor the pain she felt for her lack of objectivity. To me her actions and motives demonstrated integrity and

tremendous compassion. Yet I avoided any attempt to contradict her, and decided my own boundaries needed reinforcement. These beliefs became so ingrained, so rational, I eventually swallowed them whole. I certainly did not want to hurt my client, nor did I want to be used up, to exhaust myself, or do my clients' work for them. In sum, I learned that loving the client could put me at risk of taking too much from the client or giving too much away. I came to accept these beliefs for the sake of my new profession, and willingly pretended such divisions could be made. But personal experience told me these beliefs were not necessarily true, and mystical experience assured me they were not.

Mystical experience has really informed me *how much I get out of this work*. It has pushed to breaking point my ability to withstand the ambiguities of mainstream counselling theory and practice. When I behold the client in this momentous fashion, my professionalism disintegrates before my eyes. Here is where I am left alone to piece the shards of my "ordinary" reality back together so I can enter the world again, blinders on, conscience fairly clear, privilege intact. But I do not want to return to the world as a I knew it before I began this exploration. I would be a fool to squeeze myself back into a world which denies, and has to deny the existence and importance of mystical love if it is to maintain any authority whatsoever.

If you and I share a therapeutic relationship which is as healing to me as it is to you (assuming you actually reap as many emotional, psychological, and spiritual benefits as I do), how can I possibly claim the privilege of my position without taking advantage of you? Without,

lying? In my view I can not, which leaves me feeling deeply compromised. The extraordinary love at the core of mystical experience makes it impossible for me to reconcile the stupendous privilege I enjoy as a counsellor, and the foundational assumption of my profession, that I am the healer not the one being healed.

There are a number of assumptions basic to counselling practice that are currently disturbing my professional equanimity because they do not stand up well to the light of mystical experience. Here is a sampling:

*- I have a level of expertise that can help people who are troubled or traumatised by their problems. I know nothing, this person teaches me who and what I am. Anything I have to share is inconsequential compared to our community, our connection. This moment is the only thing I would want to give the client if I could give anything at all, and she, or he, has already given it to me.*

*- The "process" is the most important aspect of counselling. This story is sacred, I see the sense this person has made of it. I need to do something more, but what is it? Listening is not enough. Witnessing, vigiling, even loving is not enough. Neither do I want to "therapize" the client's feelings. My experience wants to be translated into some action. I want to give something. But what?*

*- Individuals can benefit from my objectivity over the biased views of a family member or loved ones. I am not objective. I bring a life time of personal values, and experiences, to this encounter which I must share if my client is to understand who I am, and what we are doing together. Moreover, my experience reveals this person as part of my own tribe, my*

kin, as *myself* in fact.

*-I usually know when it is time to stop seeing a client. Do I? I have no clarity about what constitutes a successful counselling relationship other than the quality of my relationship with this person, and his or her level of satisfaction. Is that sufficient? The counselling paradigm suggests that when the client is less troubled, or has resolved a problem, or acquired a skill, or direction that precipitates beneficial change, then the relationship is over. But what is beneficial, who is benefitting, and how can this be measured?*

*-I would never have any vested interests in having a client come to see me. My ethics and motives would keep me from seeing a client for emotional, or financial gain. How can I pretend I am not seeing this individual for financial gain? I can not avoid doing so. Hillman's (1992) analysis of our business arrangement illuminates a large part of my discomfort:*

Psychotherapy's clients are customers, who, instead of having the usual rights of customers (the client is always right) are dependent on their therapists....while the therapists in turn are emotionally and financially dependent on the clients who are also their patrons (Hillman, p. 101).

*-Through a relationship with me, the client will go on to make or remake better relationships. Where is my relationship with the client? Does this not work both ways?*

*-There is a boundary between my personal and professional self, and I have a pretty good idea where that is when I am counselling. There is no boundary between myself and the client. This is the paradox and the*

blessing mystical experience offers.

*- I am entitled to charge the client for my services.* How can I allow myself to be paid three times? That is, once for the relationship, once for all the privileges of my position, and once in cash.

While I may be accused of oversimplifying an extremely complex process in which both parties will and should naturally benefit, I am still unable to understand why I should receive so much more than the individual who is ostensibly there to be healed. "If you want to be king be a healer." I once read these words on the frontispiece of a book on oriental medicine, and was struck by the verity of the sentiment, but my interpretation was probably more literal 10 years ago than it is today. Now I wonder if the writer was referring to the kingly privilege all healers receive when they encounter the Other, and find that the healing they want to offer is simply a gift to themselves.

### **The Healing**

Damascus was a cesspool, that's what we called it, and most of the 13 people travelling overland with me from Athens to Katmandu had gone through at least one major bout of amoebic dysentery by the time we got there. It doesn't matter what anybody actually *tells* you about dysentery, the experience is worse. We had set up our tents in a little dust bowl of a campground somewhere on the outskirts of Damascus, and this one evening half the gang had gone into town. I was sitting outside my tent visiting with Yvonne and Marie, and soon our conversation became focussed on Patricia's wobbly progress back and forth between her tent and the toilet. I can still conjure up the fetid stench of human excrement that

wafted through the campground, mixed with the delicate perfume of jasmine flowers growing like small porcelain stars on a bush just outside the toilet door.

Pat was a young medical doctor who had managed to alienate most of the women in the group, particularly Marie and Yvonne who were both nurses. She was tall and carried herself with the bearing of a young queen, but she was prickly. Her words had the power to sting and often did. Most of us felt she was overly impressed with her professional status, and resented her for it. I was impressed too but I kept a safe distance between us. On her fourth trip to the toilet in less than an hour she was doubled over with pain and we could hear her panting as she hobbled by. Marie offered her assistance, Pat declined. "There's nothing we can do, she'll be alright," Marie said, but we could see how bad she was. We could hear her vomiting and then the broken sobs punctuated by gasps of pain as the dysentery ripped through her. We knew what it was like in that stinking little cement cubicle with the wet walls and the hole carved in the middle of the floor. We had a pretty good idea what she felt like as each time she emerged and staggered back to her tent. The last time she emerged, I think it was the fifth time, she collapsed.

The guys from the group who'd stayed behind had been watching from an open shelter away from us. It housed a few tables and chairs and a refrigerator for the bottled water that we drank so gratefully. They got to her seconds before we did, and as they picked her up one of them hissed at me through clenched teeth, "*Do something for Chrissake.*" Dysentery is a spectre when you're travelling in Third World countries; we'd already

heard of one person on another bus tour who'd died of dehydration. But what could we do? She couldn't even hold down a mouthful of water, drugs were out of the question. We had nothing as sophisticated as intravenous fluids, and we assumed there was no hospital in Damascus that anyone among us would have willingly gone to, least of all Pat.

I made a decision to do the only thing I knew how, and I nervously wondered if she'd let me. We got her sleeping bag and laid her down under a light so we could see her, and I told Pat what I wanted to try. "Okay," she agreed immediately, and pulled back her clothing to expose her belly. I placed my hands palms down on her abdomen, and we held each other's gaze for a long time while we traded roles, and learned more about ourselves and each other than we had before. "You're going to stop this right now, it's over," I told her calmly, firmly, repeatedly. "We're going to breathe together, and make the pain go away, and no more trips to the can, okay?" She nodded tearfully, and soon the nausea and the excruciating spasms began to subside.

We sat there in the dirt those women and I, tending to Pat for at least four hours until the bus came back with the others, and we finally had to go to bed. I hated to take my hands off her because the improvement had been so dramatic and I was afraid she'd relapse. Although I longed to stay with her until morning, one of the women managed to shame me by suggesting I was overdoing the Florence Nightingale act, so I went back to my tent. I crawled in exhausted but buoyed with a happiness that made my heart ache, for I'd found at last what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to use my hands to heal, I wanted to be a healer, *I was* a healer.



about loving clients, I found myself repeatedly trying to avoid the issue of my own body. I finally confronted it while discussing my thesis with a 74 year old woman; an acquaintance who sings in a choir with me. She is a soft spoken, articulate, elegant, white haired mother of eight, and a devout Catholic, who has been married to the same man for 50 years. When I described the subject of my thesis, her face brightened. Clearly she understood, and I could hardly wait for her response. "I've had that many times with my husband when we make love," she said with a thoughtful smile. I was shocked, and rushed to assure her my thesis was not about sexuality, nor love making, but I stopped myself. A sense of sacred connection is hardly antithetical to the expression of sexual love. Similarly, I recently asked a friend to tell me something of her faith so I could understand her better. Expecting her to explain the basic tenets of her religious beliefs, I was caught off guard when she began to speak diffidently about her relationship with her god, and then to cry. "It's more personal than sex," she said at last.

How do I deal with such statements made innocently and reverently by these two women without placing the issue of sexuality and body squarely on the table? If I do, can I avoid placing my own mystical experience in question, and undermining my integrity as a counsellor? I do not think it is overstatement to suggest that boundary violation, especially sexual violation, is the greatest bugaboo of our profession. Am I saying this experience is sexual? Not necessarily, although it can be that intimate. As mystical writing attests, this experience is much like falling in love.

"Generous love" (Underhill, 1911) is the keystone of mystical experience;

ecstasy, awe, gratitude, and anguish form the strong emotional palette of mystical writers. Poets like Kabir (Bly, 1977), St John of the Cross, Hildegarde of Bingen (Underhill, 1911), Christina Rossetti, Wordsworth (Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 1955), Dickinson (Miller, 1966), all describe this experience in terms typically used to describe passionate love affairs. It is interesting to note this commonality although much is made of the ineffability of mystical experience.

My body has been a sword of Damocles throughout this exploration although I have my body to thank for this experience, for it receives and transmits this knowledge. Even so, the physical, sensual, and intimate aspects of mystical experience have made me wonder about the propriety of this experience in my counselling work. I have wanted to hide my intelligent, ecstatic body when speaking about mystical experience. Is this why counsellors' bodies and feelings are so absent from mainstream psychological literature?

Bringing my body into the equation does not discount the sense of divinity I have described as the Third Thing. It does, however, challenge me to consider my experience in a very different fashion. For one, the lexicon changes. Audre Lorde's (1989) riveting essay on eroticism illustrates this shift. I am awed by her forthright acknowledgement of what she calls the erotic. She claims the passion, the ecstasy, and the wisdom of her "erotic" as her own and I know in my marrow she is not wrong. Lorde reminds me of the necessity of owning this awareness, this life force. I need not recoil in terror from this knowledge, I can embrace it, use it, trust it. "The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest

knowledge" (p. 210) says Lorde.

As a counsellor this notion is foreign to me. The intellectual focus of my education; the absence of the counsellor's body in practice and theory; the unalterable power imbalance in the therapeutic relationship, and a culture that, as Lorde points out, separates the erotic from all aspects of our lives - except sex - has made me wary of my body as a counsellor. The words I have used to describe my experience have also contributed to the separation. Words like transcendent, ephemeral, noetic, immanent, sacred, holy, mystical, and even the Third Thing, "transcend" the body; in sum they deny it. But when I use words like passion, love, body, ecstatic, erotic, I am less comfortable. The moment I admit *in words* the pivotal role of my body, I begin to doubt the propriety of my experience as a counsellor.

My discomfort was in part foreshadowed at the 2 day orientation preceding the start of my graduate classes in Counselling Psychology. The strongest memory is of a collage done by a woman in the Ph. D. program. She had pasted a picture of a woman's smiling face on her page and below it a pair of scissors, where the neck should have been. Under that was a picture of a woman's body in a professional looking outfit. When this student talked to us about her collage, she told us ruefully that grad school had "cut her off at the neck." Initially I thought she was simply saying that overexposure to academia had made her live too much through her intellect. I now think she was trying to tell us grad school had shut her down so that she could no longer connect with her body, no longer gain intelligence from it, *no longer trust it*.

Paradoxically, the springboard for my decision to become a counsellor was a 5 years stint working with people's bodies as a shiatsu therapist at a therapeutic massage clinic. In my late twenties I began exploring hands-on healing through a course in therapeutic touch. Later, during an extensive trip to Japan, I studied oriental medicine and shiatsu for two years. I first came to know and appreciate the Third Thing in the context of my work as a shiatsu therapist. This experience was a revelation because it made my work so rewarding and meaningful. I could offer my services with a sense of devotion I had never experienced within the context of my work life. The unspoken communication occurring between me and my clients felt more like a dance than a conversation, and this feeling increased with my practice.

When the Third Thing occurred, I would sense a shift in my internal climate, and in the way I touched the client. My hands would become warmer than usual, so warm my clients often commented on the heat they transmitted. Sometimes I could feel a high frequency buzz, subtle but definite, as I held my palms lightly on the client's skin, which the client could also discern. In time I came to believe my hands had a certain consciousness, an intention that sometimes steered me off the course of a standard treatment pattern to which I usually adhered. For example, I might feel inclined to simply stop, and stand quietly for several minutes with my hands on the client's neck or back or abdomen. A frequent response from clients during these contemplative moments was a surprised murmur of comfort or relief, and often aches and pains of long duration melted away.

I welcomed the experience as a sign that the chi was moving, and I learned to work fluidly with the energy, allowing myself to cry, or sigh, or change the depth or speed of my breath, or breathe with the client, or yawn deeply, or stretch, or feel the waves of gooseflesh wash over me, and share with the client what I was experiencing. My body instructed and allowed me to work sensitively and effectively with the ebb and flow of the client's energy. There was something so compassionate informing my work I learned depend on it, and these experiences were always intimate and very moving.

Even after standing 5 or 6 hours without a break, talking to clients and providing the physically demanding labour of shiatsu, I never felt physically drained. Tired, yes, but not depleted, in fact usually quite buoyant. By comparison, I have felt exhausted after only a few hours of counselling. This exhaustion was particularly intense following my session with Chris, perhaps my fatigue came from trying to contain my emotion.

During the course of my shiatsu practice, I came to understand there was no significant separation between body work, and emotional work. On occasion, the shiatsu seemed like an excuse for clients to come and unwind their souls in the safety of the massage room. Although I did experience the Third Thing when I worked in silence, that connection tended to be initiated through verbal communication. In time, I believed that serving the client verbally as a counsellor would be more rewarding and of greater service than body work, but I am no longer convinced.

Despite what I perceive as the absence of my own body within my

academic training, it intrigues me to note how much of my work is focussed on the body of the client. I am trained to monitor the client's breathing, facial expressions, nervous tics and body language, and to elicit information about what is going on inside the body. I am also supposed to feed this information back so the client can create more complex connections leading to even deeper feelings, and greater awareness. Regardless of our method, getting to the feelings of our clients is a large part of what we do. As a counsellor trained in mainstream academia, I help the client to become aware of his or her body, to trust it, accept it, listen to it, and follow its lead. But I receive no such invitation, and as a result I feel constrained and unsure.

Throughout my training, professors advised us not to touch clients because even the most innocent intentions could be misinterpreted by the client, and law suits could follow. The issue of sexuality was raised numerous times in classes. I was taught to handle the matter by promptly disengaging from the therapeutic relationship, and referring the client on to another counsellor, which made perfect sense to me and still does. But no one talked about love, or the complexities of this subject. In 3 years of courses I never heard or read that loving a client was forbidden, the subject was just off limits; taboo. No where had I found any clear examination of the immense love I had felt as a counsellor, regardless of its possible effect on the client. Of course respect was discussed, empathy, sincerity, mattering, therapeutic alliance, and trust were all discussed. But not love.

My antennae were always probing the books, the words, the nuances,

and reactions of others for evidence that would shed new light on my own experience. Then someone threw me a bone. The reward came from a colleague in the program who sidled up to me one night at a social gathering and told me, with smug pleasure, what her clinical supervisor had said to her class one day: "It's all right to love your clients."

*Hallelujah!* We smiled at each other savouring the moment, both of us grateful to this man for acknowledging what we had always known. We were also relieved for permission to experience what we could hardly interrupt through sheer force of will. Of course we loved our clients, what else?

### **Midnight Blues**

One of the first "clients" I ever loved was a teenager who called one night at 11:30 when I was working an evening at the Richmond Crisis Centre. I remember the time because my shift was supposed to end at midnight and the prospect of bed and sleep was uppermost in my mind. This kid was a rager and I sat and listened to her spit fire for a long time wondering if she'd get to the tears, and vaguely annoyed that I'd picked up the phone instead of letting it ring and going home early.

Midnight came and went and her fury continued unabated. Then, without warning I saw her. She was tiny, already shrivelled, sitting cross-legged in jeans and an oversized tee shirt on a bare hardwood floor somewhere in a small dimly lit room. She was chain smoking, flicking the ashes into the lid of a jam jar overflowing with cigarette butts and talking on the phone to a stranger about her life. A stranger whose

voice she'd never heard, whose face she'd never see and who - this kid had to pretend - actually gave a shit. I could tell from her story she was one of those kids "who falls between the cracks." That was crisis centre lingo meaning no one really wanted her, or knew what to do with her, and that she was trapped in the social safety net like a fly in a spider's web.

When her tears finally came I could have drowned in them myself, and it seemed to me the torrent was too deep and wild to sustain her frail craft. "Do you know what I mean? Do you know what I mean?" came the choking sound of a small girl's voice through the wire to my receiver. "Yes," I whispered back, longing to go to her, wishing the rules were different, hating the distance between us. "Yes, I know what you mean."

I had no idea how she'd survived the lament that was her life, or how she would ever make it. This was Canada for God's sake, this was Vancouver and my darling was dying all alone, piece by piece in a little room she couldn't afford to keep. When she finally saw me, I heard the unmistakable shimmer of hope in her voice for the first time in an hour and a half since our conversation began. She asked me my name and if I had any kids. "I don't have kids," I told her. But she bet I'd be a wonderful mother, and she sure wished I was there right now so I could tuck her in and make her safe to sleep. "Do you know what I mean?" she asked again, not wanting me to think she was being childish. I assured her people well into adulthood, even very old people, liked being tucked in at night.

The conversation circled slowly for another minute or two like a large bird looking for a place to land. The storm was over and her voice was becoming gravelly with fatigue. I started to close the conversation when



I still flinch when I think of the shame I felt, knowing the other volunteer heard me tell this young woman I loved her. There is no "professional" context for my expression, I can not love impersonally. Love is always personal, and I did love her, terribly. It still bothers me that she only heard me tell her so as part of our pretence. Did she hear my sincerity? Then again I would not have wanted to burden her, confuse her, use her, but I feel I should have done more. Like what? Like go to her, help her, hold her, care for her, but something.

When I first became interested in writing about mystical experience, it was with the intention of proclaiming it as the holy grail of counselling practice. This experience is what the client needed most, I was convinced. My confidence began to curdle, however, when I considered exactly who was having the experience. A casual meeting with Chris shifted my perspective radically. Several months after our session I met with him, described my thesis and, with some caution, the epiphany I had experienced that day in the Nitobe Gardens. I assumed he knew what I was talking about although he had denied sharing my experience in the session itself. No, he reiterated, this time with an enigmatic smile. Without saying more he simply told me our experiences had been very different indeed. I could hardly believe him but lacked the nerve to query him further.

Was I the only one having this experience? How could I have overlooked the importance of this question? Was I doing something wrong? There was nothing predatory or abusive, or self-serving in this experience, was there? This outpouring of love, of soul recognising its

own connection, could not hurt the client, could it? But regardless of how holy, or sacred, or loving my experience was, it seemed I was still getting the most out of the transaction. The only solution was to stop counselling or stop the feelings, but that did not make sense either.

I felt pulled between my heart and my head, my experience and my training, my body and my intellect. I could no longer avoid believing I was getting far more from the counselling relationship than the client I was supposedly helping. The unevenness of the playing field, and the ludicrous advantage I had as the counsellor seemed too great. I know I am not the only one having this type of experience with clients, there is indeed something at work in the work we do. Some alchemy that takes place in counselling sessions which gives rise to feelings typically associated with the most private and hallowed moments of our lives. But could we as counsellors explore this experience more openly, and admit that our love for our clients puts us on an equal - or even more humble - footing with them, without calling our own need and privilege into question? I still do not know how we could without damaging our authority or our profession.

No wonder I have distrusted myself, denied the significance of my experience, and worried that I was doing something wrong. *I am* doing something wrong: I am pretending our bargain is a fair one when I do not believe it. So what do I actually receive as the counsellor? From my perspective a great deal. To start, I get the opportunity to engage in an intimate relationship with you in which you reveal your most private self to me. I may be deeply healed by the particulars of your story, and the

genuine emotion you express about your situation. Any story truly told will almost always reflect part of my own experience, and remind me I am not alone. I may also be rewarded by some profound mystery showing me how deeply you and I are connected. In this reward I also glimpse the vast web of love that holds my world together and provides my deepest meaning. As my client you are unlikely to challenge me because I am essentially hidden from you. I also carry the larger share of the power as the authority figure in the relationship, and am a skilled communicator which gives me considerable influence over you. The process of helping and supporting you also provides me with a sense of competence and I am viewed, if not respected, as an expert by you and my professional community. Moreover I get paid for this work. Although I am encouraged to consult with other professionals about my case load, I am actually answerable only to myself if I have my own business. I can also go home at night feeling reasonably satisfied with my contribution as a counsellor without ever lifting a finger to create social change. Nor am I encouraged to assume too much personal responsibility for you because this might be viewed as boundary violation.

I am not saying clients have nothing to gain by coming to me or going to any counsellor. But I will inevitably receive more than the client from this transaction and I must protest the unfairness of the inequity at the same time as I acknowledge my wonder and confusion. Paradoxically, I see from the crow's nest of mystical experience that loving the client in this manner may be the best I can offer as a counsellor. First, because this experience humbles me and makes me want to avoid imposing my will,

or my solutions, on the problem. Second, because this perspective enables me to see a client's perfection; an experience which helps me reflect back a vision of the client that is whole and unbroken. Third, because this experience has confronted me so clearly with my own privilege that I want to examine and challenge rules of my profession. Is such awareness, enough to justify my future role as a counsellor? I want to think so, but I am still unconvinced.

As a counsellor, how do I respond to your pain, or your life story, given the divinity you embody? You who inspires my awe and endless gratitude, you who answers my deepest longing by your mere presence. How do I respond? What am I to do with the knowledge that the perfection, the beauty and wholeness, presently hidden to you that is raising the hackles on my neck, and paralysing me with astonishment, is the greatest thing you can recognise about yourself and life around you? How can I tell you this experience can furnish your life with its greatest meaning and inspire your deepest love? I do not know. I have no answers, only questions, and the most troubling have to do with my role as the counsellor, as the healer, as the service provider.

### **Paper Whites**

My counsellor had a large terra cotta pot filled with black soil salted with vermiculite that stood in the corner of her office a few feet away from the chair I sat in during our sessions. This planter was almost always filled with spring flowers during the 7 months I saw her. Every few weeks they changed. Sometimes the tulips were flaming, sometimes warm pink like clouds at sunset. One week, hyacinths the colour of amethysts appeared

and drenched the room in a fragrance that took me back to childhood and the forest in France where I picked lily of the valley. Another time white crocuses grew in a tight little choir that fanned out to the very edges of the pot, and sang to me through the whole session.

Invariably I would come into the office, greet her, sit down and exclaim over whatever happened to be growing. She knew how much I appreciated the little garden she maintained for the cortege of mourning women who passed through her door. One day when the planter was empty, I felt a twinge of disappointment as I observed a trowel, stuck like a tree stump in the moist earth beside a pair of gardening gloves. "I didn't have time this week," she said with a note of apology in her voice, and I ruefully explained how much I had come to depend on the beauty.

I had gone to this woman on the recommendation of a colleague - herself a professional counsellor. Our counselling relationship was respectful and genial, but I was not especially drawn to this woman, nor she to me, as we found out when we eventually discussed the issue. As the weeks turned into months, however, her feelings for me changed. I noticed a difference one day when she looked at me with an expectant twinkle as our session got underway. "What?" I asked, and followed her eyes to the pot where a new thicket of flowers I had failed to notice, stood waiting for my delight. "Daffodils! They're wonderful!" "No they're paper whites, can you smell them?" she asked with a little rush, wanting me to notice these were no mere daffodils. I got up from my chair stepped over to the pot, bent my face down to the fragrant blooms and inhaled deeply. "Beautiful," I chirped back at her and registered the pleasure she felt in

my warm reception of her gift.

The sessions were uniformly painful and exhausting. She listened, she validated, she explained, she comforted, we did two chair work, we did guided visualisation, I read the books she recommended, I painted pictures for us to discuss, I kept a journal, and I cried and cried and cried. "This is not going away," I began to say at the end of our fourth month together, and she could not disagree. We could see the pain was deepening, and we were concerned. She would ask from time to time if I wanted to see another counsellor, implying I might have less difficulty trusting someone else. Did I not trust her? Was I not telling her everything? I could not imagine what I was withholding. But I began to understand what *she* was missing. The day I read her a blistering section from my journal, she looked at me with shining eyes that said, "These tears are for you, refresh yourself, please take them, let me give you at least this, I suffer for you."

I saw her love, her sincere desire to make a difference, but the gift had no impact. She could not possibly replace what I grieved for; hers was not the love missing from my life, and I was unmoved by her clear need to offer it. Into my sixth and seventh months of weekly sessions I was no longer sure I could endure the marathon. "Promise me I will survive," I begged her one day, but she could not promise. She offered me the only hope she had. "The theory says," she would begin, and once again we would agree: the only way out was through. I became increasingly worried and found myself needing to ask a friend permission to get a second opinion from another counsellor about the extremity of my grief. I

couldn't really understand my hesitation.

I waited until the last 10 minutes of our next session to tell my counsellor that I had called someone else for an opinion, and was aware of my reticence to come forward with this information. No wonder. Her rage scourged me with the fury of a scorned lover. Why had I not asked *her* for the name of another counsellor to consult? Had I actually *seen* this counsellor or just talked to her on the phone? *I didn't* trust her did I? It wasn't my fault, but clearly I didn't trust her, could I *see* that? "I feel completely used and betrayed," she exclaimed. *Betrayed*? I started to stutter an apology, and could feel the tears coming, I had known this would happen and here it was, but why? What had I done that was so wrong? She was shaking, her face white and taut. She wasn't about to hide her feelings, this was the kind of honesty I'd told her I aspired to myself, *wasn't it?* Well this is what it looked like, she said bitterly.

Fear tightened its noose round my solar plexus, I was in full flight unable to think, jerking to my feet, pulling on my coat, reaching a quavering hand for the door knob. She didn't want me to go, and stood up to continue the conversation. When I attempted to break away gracefully, by pointing out I was into overtime, her reply tried to convince me she didn't mind sacrificing this extra time for my sake. "*LIAR*" I wish I'd screamed, but I couldn't be sure she was. When I told her my intention had never been to betray her, but to care for myself, she broke the tie of my confusion with a bit of psychological subterfuge that makes me wince to this day. "I never said *you* betrayed me," she hurled back, "I said I *feel* betrayed, there's a *difference!*" If there was, she offered no evidence of



Incredible? Not really.

As professionals we all *know* about the power imbalance between counsellor and client, even if most of our clients do not. This is not really hidden in the training, or the literature. But it is downplayed; handled in such a way that has enabled me to believe my good will, my skills, and the client's need, would allow me to work around the problem. I now wonder if this was nothing more than wishful thinking.

I am not saying counsellors are a bad lot who pathologize oppression, and cash in on people's victimisation without doing much to challenge the status quo, just so we can stay in business and reap the many benefits it offers. But there is an aspect of truth to this statement that I cannot avoid as a mainstream counsellor, and that my experience has provoked me to examine and acknowledge. I do not want to undermine the work done by therapists who are dedicated to making a difference, who care about others, who are insightful, educated, and compassionate communicators, with the skill to help people change their lives. I trust I am one of them. But I need to do more than "counsel" the individuals who come for my assistance, much more.

My experience of mystical love is not just a state of bliss, it is a call to action and justice. The issue of justice has brought the greatest clarity to the many conflicts and questions raised by this experience, as they relate to the welfare of the client. Near the beginning of this chapter, I reduced the major concerns I face as a counsellor to two overriding issues: taking too much from the client, or giving too much away. I have focussed primarily on the first concern throughout most of this chapter. But it is the second

concern that raises the most interesting questions for me as a counsellor, because the danger of doing too much for the client tends to keep me passive, toothless and safe. Safe from sticking my neck out, from speaking the truth, from taking risks that might harm my privilege.

So what if I got over involved? What if I did love that client passionately and he or she knew it without hesitation? What if I overextended myself way beyond the boundaries of my profession? What would happen then? The most succinct and validating answer I have found to date comes from the writing of two priests, Matthew Fox (1979) and Carter Heyward (1989), both political activists. Their answer is, simply enough: I would recognise that my love for Other, and my desire for justice, are the same thing. "Love which is not an acute sense of justice and an authentic suffering with my outraged brother (or sister), such love does not transcend" (Miranda, cited in Fox, 1979, p. 16). Fox tells me what I already know through my encounters with clients: that when I love the Other, I am involved in my greatest self-interest. Further, that my professional motivation can not be seen as altruistic, for this word supposes a separation between my client and I, that does not exist. I need not fear my love for clients, these writers assure me, while reminding me of the enormous task it involves.

To really love is to topple unjust structures, bringing down the principalities and powers of domination and control at all levels of human social relations.....To love you is to be pushed by a power/God both terrifying and comforting, to touch and be touched by you. To love you is to sing with you, cry with you, pray with you, and act with you to

re-create the world. To say "I love you" *means let the revolution begin!* (Heyward, p. 300-301).

It is from this vantage point that the kingdom of therapy appears rotten to me, for unless I am actively involved in "the marvellous dismantling" (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 62) that will help me create justice for my client, how can I defend my work as a counsellor? This is no easy task, for I still do not know how to challenge my own privilege and justify it at the same time; that is the double bind. Whatever the work of justice means for my future as a counsellor, I am sure of one thing. I do not want to hide my passionate love for clients to assuage my own discomfort and safeguard my privilege. Neither do I want to deny it to keep myself insulated from the overwhelming task of confronting the oppression that keeps so many coming to our doors.



While writing my stories, I diminished the impact of my gender. I saw it, how could I miss it? It now seems ironic, if not unbelievable, how determined I was to turn a blind eye to my gender given the impossibility of keeping my own experience as a woman out of my autobiographical account. But I persisted in telling myself the experience of living in a woman's body did not really share equal space with this other, altogether more mystical, reality. Although I have not hesitated to identify myself as a feminist, I believed I could, and should, keep my perspective as a woman offstage, and that doing so would enhance the value of this study. I did not want to be exclusive. I did not want to threaten anybody. I did not want to undermine my own scholarship. Heaven forbid.

How I maintained the illusion of separation between the mystical and the physical, between that which heals and that which hurts, even as I was writing stories that made me quake, now seems remarkable. But I was adamant, and believed I could separate the story from the story teller. When I started piecing the chapters together, I even used a different type face for the anecdotes, and quarantined them on pages separate from my other writing to maintain the illusion of distance, and difference. Here inside the process of my own writing, I was still maintaining the very gap I wanted to bridge.

Despite my inability to see it, a significant convergence was occurring. As I acknowledged the central importance of my experience as a woman to my exploration of mystical experience and my role as a counsellor, I felt a sense of resolution and revelation, that was previously lacking. A sense that something unexpected and wonderful was taking place. Heilbrun

(1988) might suggest I was trying to create a new story for myself, without even knowing what I was doing. Most remarkable is the extent to which I feel my own life has been changed by this process.

Although I am using the word convergence to describe the final stage of this study, I might also describe it as transformation, coming home, finding my own voice, the other side of terror, or simply: conversion. I feel like a convert, for I do not see the world, or myself, as I did at the outset of this study. Mystical experience is not the stranger it once was, but has become an orientation to life, like true north on a compass. As a counsellor this experience has helped me recognise the extent of my privilege, and the blessing my relationships with clients offer me. In particular, this blessing enabled me to see with clearer eyes and to admit with less constraint, the oppression of women that is too often diagnosed and treated as pathology. What I know is how poorly women are served by a profession which, as it is presently constructed and practised, continues to re-victimize the innocent, and to benefit from the injustice. I know this as a client, I know this as a counsellor, I know this as a woman in the world.

### **Lady**

For years Simpson's was located on the Spark's Street mall in downtown Ottawa and was a minor fact in the economy of our household. My mother and I bought my patterns and fabric there when I was learning to sew. Red and white boxes printed with Simpson's signature would turn up with predictable regularity under our Christmas tree. When we shopped there, mother and I usually went to the lunch bar on the

"mezzanine" for a sandwich or a Coke during a day of shopping. Even after I started going downtown on my own as a teenager, I continued to frequent the place. It was central, and the food was cheap and fresh. Eventually I came to appreciate it as the best place in town to people watch while I enjoyed salmon salad on brown bread, washed down with ice cold chocolate milk.

I usually sat at the bar because I liked watching the waitresses. The grey haired women who served there all wore fine hair nets, and looked like they'd spent their whole lives raising kids. They moved with a hurried grace that stung me a little, and would always ask with kind eyes how I was today in a way that made me believe they really cared. I could see they were tired, could see the worn heels on their foam treaded work shoes, the cheap brown uniform dressed up with a frilled white apron. I could hear the small sigh of fatigue express itself in the 5 seconds of physical rest when one of them stopped long enough to jot someone's order on her little pad.

The place was always thick with cigarette smoke from a clientele ranging from mink coated women with back combed hair, to the occasional drunk who would sit there hiccupping through a sandwich and coffee. But I remember the bag lady the best. I was sitting at one of the small tables drinking coffee, near closing time one day, when I spotted her sitting across from me at the bar a few yards away. Her presence surprised me because I'd never seen a bag lady in this kind of environment, nor had I ever had the chance to observe one up close. I could tell how poor she was, could see the filth under the nails of the tapered fingers on her small

hands. Greasy strands of grey hair straggled from the bun hanging like a dead mouse at the nape of her neck. I thought about Anastasia, the only daughter of the Czar and Czarina of Russia who reputedly had escaped death and who, at least in the movie, was later found in rags and half mad, living on the streets. But in the title role, Ingrid Bergman is rescued, restored to sanity, to her proper social position, and even taught to waltz, by the smouldering Yul Brynner. Maybe this woman was someone like that for I could tell, from the bone structure of her face alone, that this woman's plight was someone else's mistake. Other women might fulfill the role more appropriately than this lovely old thing who's demeanour spoke to me of creamy chintz, rose wood, and calla lilies in a sunlit sitting room.

Her face, open and relaxed, was taking in the surroundings with an air of calm appreciation suited to a socialite lunching al fresco on the French Riviera. I watched as she raised the heavy white porcelain coffee cup to her lips and gently set it back down on the saucer. Then she bent down to the shopping bag sitting at her feet to retrieve a small package wrapped in plastic and secured with two wide elastic bands. With a measured pace she removed the elastic bands, unfolded the plastic bag, reached in and withdrew a black wallet, opened it, and counted the bills inside. Her movements were unhurried, as though there was a certain pleasure to be gained by taking time to do the task properly. Once satisfied, she reversed the process, and as precisely as she had unpacked her wallet, she proceeded to wrap it back up, making sure to adjust the elastic bands so they lay flat. Then, she bent down to put her wallet back in her shopping bag, sat back

up, and took another sip of coffee, before bending down again to retrieve her wallet, and repeat the ritual exactly as before.

I felt like a field researcher watching the behaviour of an unknown species I'd only read about in books. I'd heard of people who wash their hands compulsively and wondered if her behaviour was similar. Maybe she was crazy. She completed her ritual at least four times before I got up from my table, very casually, to move closer. I sat down on a stool away from her, feeling my heart accelerate as I continued sipping my coffee. *I'm going to do this. It's a chance I don't want to miss. She'll never know.*

My purse lay on my lap, hidden from her by the counter, and I opened it, trying not to look down. Quickly I extracted a 20 dollar bill, palmed it and slipped it into the left hand pocket of my suit jacket, the side nearest her, and waited for an opening. I didn't have to wait long but it seemed long. I was a little breathless, and could hardly wait to accomplish my goal. *There, she's bending down again. Don't rush. Don't let her see you.* I fished the crumpled bill out of my pocket, put it on the stool between us, then picked up my coffee cup in both hands so she could clearly see they were occupied.

Halfway through the unwrapping process I spoke to her. "Warm in here isn't it?" She looked at me for the first time and smiled. Yes it was, she agreed. *Why isn't she noticing the money?* We exchanged a few brief pleasantries and I started to gather my things in preparation to leave. "Oh, you seem to have lost some of your money," I said in a tone of surprised innocence, and neighbourly concern. I looked at the bill sitting on the stool, raised my face to meet her level gaze, and waited with delight for



Even as a 20 year old I felt connected to the women who served me in Simpson's lunch bar, and to the woman who bore her poverty with such immense dignity. I cared about them, they touched me and taught me more than I could fully appreciate. What I missed, of course, was the oppression and its far reaching implications. This bag lady was Anastasia incognito, not an obscene fact of my culture and my world, where few women are strangers to poverty. I meant well, was eager to help, and so pleased to have the chance to make a difference. But I could not really see this woman. In my urgency to give her money, and my subsequent deep humiliation, I was unable to appreciate the tenderness with which she appeared to challenge my privilege and forgive me, in the same act. All I could see was her enormous need, I really did not notice my own.

Blind as I was to the oppression of the women in this story, I was also blind to my own, and my vision would not improve enough to change me for another two decades. As I plowed through this study, my attempts to deny the impact of my gender on the whole question of mystical experience were finally eroded by a troubling question I tried to shake off for months, but that never went away. How can it be, I asked myself, that this experience, this flowering of beatific love, leads me to the same conclusions about counselling and my role in the world, as my own feminist beliefs and the outrage I feel as a woman in this culture? How can these two seemingly opposite poles converge? I avoided answering this question, and regularly defended myself from a supportive colleague who urged me to read literature on feminist spirituality for some insight. "But this experience is *apolitical*, I'm not writing about women." I would argue.

"It's universal. This experience is available to both men and women, I don't want to confuse the issue with political agendas."

In desperation I came up with an amulet to protect my pristine experience of divine love from being contaminated by my grief and rage as a woman. "Mystical experience is the only one that cuts across all politics and that makes it possible for me to love even my oppressor." I wrote this on a cue card, and read it whenever the fog rolled in. This reminder was supposed to stave off the fearful encroachment of gender politics on the main focus of my thesis, and was successful for a while. But finally neither my rationality, nor my fear, could help me sustain the pretense that it was useful or necessary to compartmentalise my experience in this fashion. Finally the blood flowed through. Finally I was able to name the injustice with greater willingness and clarity than I ever had. I also stopped trying to pretend I was not among the casualties, and that the cause of my devastation was not my own body.

### **Bonsai Tree**

It was early evening and I was in the car driving to a choir practice in the dark, listening intently to a woman tell me about myself from the speaker of my car radio. I'd never met her but she knew me, and I could tell she was a woman who'd walked the distance. She was wise, fearless, terrifying and her voice, so relaxed, so reasonable, seemed to shake the ground beneath me. This was a woman I imagined, who stood on clouds hurling thunderbolts at the world. One of them impaled me when I heard her compare women to bonsai trees. "We are bonsaied," she said.

The word catapulted from the radio speaker and hit the mark, splitting

me open in an instant of illumination, like lightening striking a tree. I was bonsaied. I was a giant cedar tree living in a litre of soil, potted in a hand made, sky blue, porcelain bowl, sitting on a window sill. Every inch of me groomed, snipped, clipped, fashioned, miniaturised with relentless and conscientious care. I stopped at the light, accelerated smoothly, swallowed hard and fumbled in my bag with my right hand for a pen. She was now speaking even more personally to me, her voice crawling inside me on spider's legs. I scrawled her name on a scrap of paper and felt relieved.

The interview continued, backdrop sound to a split screen docudrama unreeling in my mind; an education video for bonsai artists everywhere. *First, you have to get a healthy tree, a young tree, from virgin forest. It's time to bind her feet, carefully, carefully. Use only the best silk, only the finest. She'll stop crying soon. Take extreme care in removing the seedling from the ground to avoid damaging the root system.* I know she's just a baby, I know it's wrong, but she'll never remember. I can't help myself, it feels so good, and I don't do it often. I never hurt her, look, she she doesn't even cry. *There, a perfect little tree, ready for the clippers.* The razor is quite sharp and will only take a second to remove that little part, that not nice part, you'll hardly feel it, and you'll be so proud. We'll all be so proud. Now you mustn't cry. *Before you actually place the tree in the container you decide to use, examine the root system carefully, get familiar with it.* Who had you first? You're not a virgin, at least not since the last time. I know you're up to something you whore. Stop provoking me or I'll hit you again, and you'll really have something to cry about. *After the tree is planted you will start to know intuitively how to prune your little*

*beauty so it will maintain a nice shape. "What do you mean he raped you? What did you expect? You're disgusting. It's ancient history! Oh stop crying for God's sake, you asked for it!" Place small stones in the bottom of your container and fill it half full of soil to provide good drainage, otherwise the root system will die. What's wrong with you? Why are you so distant, so unresponsive, so bitchy, so goddamn depressed? You think too much. You need a shrink. Look at you, you're a mess! Place the prepared seedling in the container, fill it with soil and pat it down gently. In two or three weeks you should see some new growth at which time you will have new decisions to make about shaping. Use the clippers judiciously, but don't be too afraid to hurt your masterpiece. There are always more seedlings waiting in the forest.*

My hands were frozen around the driver's wheel. A finger of pain bored through my shoulder and up into my neck. I told myself to breathe, *breathe*. I did a shoulder check before passing the car in front of me, and raised my hand automatically in acknowledgement to the driver who gave me the right of way. But my mind was elsewhere. I was thinking of a bonsai tree, of the gnarled beauty, the twisted cords of delicate bark on a writhing trunk, the perfect asymmetry of the splayed branches, and the defiant root system, trapped in porcelain, that dared to stay alive. That somehow, incredibly, kept on relaying the message from earth to sky: "DON'T STOP! Now we'll grow a needle, now a branch, now another layer of veneer on the trunk. Don't worry about the scissors, or the knives, don't despair the darkness, or the drought. Think about the giant you are, like the one in the forest, the one that hasn't been found yet, the one that



describes it, "Re-membered."

For a long time I did not recognise my desire to write from my own experience as a political move. Nor was I aware until I was well into this work, that autobiography is pivotal to feminist research (Barclay Brown, 1991; Geiger, 1986; Heilbrun, 1988; Reinhartz & Davidman, 1992). I even failed to include so much as a single feminist reference in my thesis proposal, despite my reading of feminist fiction and non-fiction throughout the course of the Master's program. These books somehow did not count even though they mirrored my own experience. They were my sustenance between the meals of "legitimate" books and papers, written mostly by men, which I willingly consumed to back up arguments in my own academic writing.

When challenged by a committee member for my omission, I was devastated. The Counselling Psychology Department was mainstream enough to make my work look like flotsam from the radical fringe, was it not? What would happen if I went further? But I did go further and I found the connections between my passion and my politics, my love and my rage, my body and my spirit, (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Estes, 1992; Heyward, 1989; Lorde, 1989; Spretnak, 1982; Wildung Harrison, 1989). Until I intentionally admitted my gender, and by extension my feminist politics, into the discussion, I could not see how inextricably linked mystical experience and my gender really were. The paradox, of course, is I have known this sacred connection in my "ovarios" (Estes, 1992), and in all parts of my body, for a very long time.

Although I have found reasonable reflections of mystical experience in

recent mainstream literature, they lacked the context, life themes, physicality, and passion, that I have found in abundance in women's exploration of their own spirituality. Women's words have helped me to acknowledge the central importance of my body to this experience, and to claim its immense wisdom. Far from being at opposite ends of the spectrum, I have found mystical experience and my feminist politics not only converge, they are indivisible. Together they compel me to speak from my experience, and to act from a place of fierce love that seeks to transform injustice to communion. Speaking from experience has been the hardest part, but I am finding my voice, and already I wonder what I will say in the months and years ahead. I want to know just how free my voice will be then.

### **Singing with a Free Voice**

A free voice is the one you sing with when you're all alone, and completely unselfconscious. It's like the voice in the shower, the one that warbles and reverberates, generous as a child's laughter, unafraid, yes, and perhaps imperfect, but without a hint of apology. A free voice states its truth, like it or not, without constraint, like the roar of a lioness at sunrise. A free voice is what every singer struggles to achieve, because singing for others can be paralysing.

I wanted to sing professionally as a young woman, and was recognised for my singing voice, although it was untrained. Singing nourished me, and while I never sang with a free voice in public, I came very close a few times. I was always singing whether I was at home, waiting for the bus or riding it, walking through the halls of the university, around a

department store, or down the street. When I was 8 years old I knew the entire score to *My Fair Lady*. Musicals were my favourite, probably because I cut my teeth on them. *Carousel*, *The King and I*, *The Sound of Music*, *Brigadoon*, *Finnian's Rainbow*: "I can be mannish-ish or mous-ish, I can be a foul or fish, but with thee I'm Eisenhow-sish, please accept my propo-sish." Some memories are stuck in my mind forever like pink bubble gum on hot asphalt, and songs like these are among them.

Saturday mornings when my parents were grocery shopping, I'd play their records at full volume and sing my heart out. Somewhere in my late teens I started playing Maria Callas and Giuseppe di Stefano on our beat up copy of *La Boheme*. Opera was different, less accessible and troubling. I didn't take to it immediately but something inside persevered, made me play it over and over, reading, then singing along with the libretto, until I was hooked. Oh Mimi, how I loved you, how I wanted you to live! I would wail every time she died in the final scene, when Rudolpho goes to her bedside, to make sure she's comfortable, to smile at her perhaps, to cover her feverish body.

He stands beside the bed looking down at her, leaning closer, then the silence, the awful silence punctuated by his muttering, "No...no... it can't be, she's only sleeping, she's only...." I'd be rapt, huddled on the floor beside the speaker with my knees drawn up to my chest, hardly breathing, waiting for him to get beyond the safety of his denial. "Miiiiiiiiiii!" he'd cry, like a child on an empty beach watching his mother drown. "Miiiiiiiiiii!" he'd roar, as he went in after her, his voice breaking like a wild surf that swept me with him out to the rip tides of despair. I was in

heaven.

In University the possibility of a musical career began to take shape. I'd acted in plays throughout high school so the first week of university found me auditioning for the Drama Guild. I was immediately cast as a blind singer in a play by Indian poet Rabindranth Tagore; an allusion I would appreciate more in another 20 years. By the end of my undergraduate degree I enjoyed a modest reputation as a gifted singer in the theatre department, and was encouraged by peers and a few professors to take my music more seriously. I graduated, went to Europe, came home to Canada and began a job in the federal government, promising myself daily to stop smoking cigarettes and do something about my voice.

I even sang at night in dreams that became more intense as I moved into my mid-twenties. In one of the most astonishing of these dreams, I watched myself singing, like a spectator observing someone from a distance. I saw my head thrown back, eyes closed, mouth open wide, oblivious. My body looked supple, boneless, as though the sound of my own voice was melting me as it poured out. Her voice - my voice - was so exquisite and harmonically complex, it seemed to spiral like a thousand voice choir through a gothic cathedral. I woke up crying for the beauty of a sound I could make only in a dream, and for the plea I know my soul was delivering to me: *Sing. Please sing.* "Yes, yes, I will, I will."

I was always trying to find out how old a singer might be, age was very important. "She looks at least 30! Lena Horne's still singing isn't she? How old is she, do you know?" The older the singer was when she began performing, or when she retired, the less I had to worry about, there was

still time I kept on telling myself. But there wasn't. That dream was the last of its kind which shouldn't surprise me because I had the distinct sense soon after, that some part of me, like an unrequited lover, had simply stopped trying to get my attention.

As the years passed, singing slowly disappeared from my life. The erosion of my voice became more evident to me and others as my addiction to nicotine, and a studied indifference to the needs of this unloved beauty, stripped its lights away. However, even my willingness to orphan this part of myself never managed to kill the dull ache accompanying me like a mourning cello on those increasingly rare occasions when I sang with the radio. How could I have known my singing voice, and the one I use to speak, were the same? How could I not?

Three years ago when I started to "express" the secrets I'd only ever dared whisper to myself - and even then so quietly I could barely hear - my singing voice emerged again. I now sing in the car, on the street, in my home, and every Wednesday night with a 130 women in a choir. I quit smoking a year ago. Next I want singing lessons so I can learn how to sing solo; unprotected and unmasked by the voices of others standing beside me on the risers. I want to close my eyes, throw back my head, open my mouth, and give birth to the sound rising from the well of my own soul and overflowing my borders, knowing it is the best I can offer, and offering it without hesitation.

Singing isn't quite like writing. You can edit a paragraph for a day and half until it gleams, the welds can be hidden, and no one is going to know how long it took you to craft the thing. But a song? A song is different.



serve You.

My future attempts to fulfill that service may well yield fresh doubts, and new questions. For now I can only gaze back in gratitude at the more obvious changes this study has provoked since I first sat down to write my description of the Third Thing so many months ago. I was changed the moment I articulated my desire to make this experience the fulcrum of my entire existence, because that happened. I was changed through the process of returning to memory to track the emergence of this mystical experience. Then, as I recreated my life on paper, and read my words in a trembling voice to a few loved ones, I was changed again. This exercise in terror increased my volume, and fortified my resolve as a writer and feminist. I was also changed as I grappled with the irreconcilable gap between the passionate love at the heart of mystical experience, and what I perceive as the abusiveness of mainstream counselling. The result is a growing desire to focus my work on community building, and to use my skills to bring others together. I can no longer condone keeping this experience to myself within the therapeutic relationship. The final change occurred when I welcomed my own body into this process. Having found her in every story throughout this study, I could no longer deny her rightful place at the centre of my mystical experience, or anywhere else in my world.

Beyond these changes I am not sure what awaits me, but that does not matter right now. The Re-remembering matters, and the celebration, and the gratitude. Yes, and the work too, there is much to be done. But first, and last, and always, there is the Beloved.

### Beloved

I had a secret fascination for years with the name Mother Theresa of Calcutta uses to identify her god. Beloved she calls him. Beloved. She sees him in the tormented and dying faces of the lepers and the poorest of the poor she has chosen to care for as her life's work. That's what she says. Perhaps I intuited her meaning before I could fully understand it, perhaps I envied her the vision I could not share. But I wondered about the intimacy of this endearment with a longing that knew its own home, even if I could not name it.

You see, I assumed I was incapable of knowing this Beloved because I could not call myself a Christian or a sinner. Because I supported free choice for abortion, equality for women, and because I never believed Christ was more than a man; or at most a gifted shaman. Perhaps my childhood exposure to Anglicanism somehow convinced me Christianity was the only "legitimate" path. That this "Beloved" was the monopoly of the kind of men and women who thronged Billy Graham rallies, eager to "turn their lives over to Christ."

I never understood what Christians were talking about when they spoke of their "personal relationship" with God. It usually struck me as spiritual posturing, or just plain metaphor: "Hey, God and I are on a first name basis, we hang out together!" "Yeah sure, and Mary Magdalene and I are pen pals." It seemed this Beloved could only be found in church, and the price of this reward was the sacrifice of my own free will. How did I come to believe this? I suppose Christianity was the only context I knew in which love for God is expressed with an intimacy

usually reserved for lovers.

I couldn't make the connection or the distinction between what I perceived to be blind religious faith, and my first hand experience of this nameless joy. Then finally "I got it." Finally it happened, not very long ago in the early fall, for no particular reason or simply because it was time. My time, at last. I woke up, went to bed, ate, walked, swam, bathed, rejoiced, grieved, shared, wrote, and read with my Beloved for days into weeks, into months. Mostly I rejoiced, mostly celebrated. There was no commitment required by this knowledge, no sacrifice to be made, no politic to be renounced, no church to be adopted, or religious conversion to be made. It was free.

"What will I call You?" I asked one evening at dusk as I walked in a swoon of happiness around Steveston's Garry Point. "Who are You, what is Your name?" "It doesn't matter Catherine," came the small interior reply, "It doesn't matter." For weeks I reviewed my history through the soft lens of this glory, recognising all the moments of gasping beauty and weeping joy that had knit my life together with hands of infinite compassion in a pattern of peerless beauty, from earliest memory onwards. I experienced my Beloved everywhere, in everything and everyone. I was in love, pure and simple, but without the niggling fear a silent phone evokes for nervous lovers, without worrying how or if I would be found wanting. I belonged and knew the fulfillment of yearning, knew what it was to be loved, utterly, and to live radiant and secure in the experience. I was also aware this bliss would wax and wane, and it did wane as slowly and imperceptibly as it had emerged, but not without

leaving a train of gifts shimmering in its loving wake.

The most precious gift came in moments of illumination when I was lost in reverie, ecstatic and amazed. But once, and only once, did I experience this gift in the shadow of immediate fear. The incident occurred on a hot bright afternoon in mid September over a year ago, and if you were to ask what I would give to go back and live that afternoon over and over for the rest of my life, I would have to answer "everything."

I was sitting in my room working at my computer, and the sun was beaming its spotlight directly into my face making it necessary for me to bend closer to the monitor so I could read the screen. Plodding through my work, I felt like a bored kid on a Sunday afternoon being nudged by a demon to quit my chores and come out to play. To catch perhaps the last day of summer. *It might be the last one. Go! Your last swim. Go!*

I put on my bathing suit, packed a towel and headed down to the car, feeling a small tightness in my solar plexus because daylight would be over soon. Dusk was coming earlier in these first weeks of fall, and I knew the beach might be empty because it was midweek. Checking my watch a few times as I drove, I wondered why I would travel so far for a swim this close to sunset. It was risky. "I don't care, I'll be fine, it's hot, I'm going."

Tswwassen's Centennial Beach was a find I happened on accidentally only two years ago after living close to 15 years in Vancouver. The beach tends to be isolated, and the water is clean and always warm on bright summer days when it floods in with the tide over miles of hot sand near the close of day. I felt a quiver of excitement from the daring of my spontaneous decision, and the sheer anticipation of sea water on my

overheated body.

The place was deserted. "You were right, no one's here, the parking lot is empty, there's no one. No one." My beacon snapped on. I swept the beach with my eyes, sniffed the air like a small animal before it ventures out from the underbrush, scanned my body for any confirming tension in my gut, in my knees, in my throat; any quickening of my heartbeat. I listened intently for the inner voice I've come to trust for messages about my safety. "Is it okay? Is it okay?" My body was poised like a divining rod, ready for the slightest alarm, but none came. The only reply was the silent, silver water shining back at the universe the dancing stars of late afternoon sunlight, and the whispered trails of cirrus cloud floating in the dome of an aquamarine sky. *Yes, it's okay. Come see for yourself. You're safe. Look, the water is waiting for you.*

The water was the colour of lapis, seamless and vast, like those wide deep lakes I recognised from recent dreams. Dreams in which I swam alone, beyond the edge of land; buoyed, cooled, and fed soul deep by water that cherished me with its silken touch and a promise of eternity. I walked over the scalding sand to a log, looking again towards the seductive water. "There's two guys there. Look, there's only two guys, and me in a bathing suit on this beach. Maybe I should forget it, this can't be safe." *You're fine, You're fine. Go in the water. Go in the water.*

Though clearly not in immediate danger, I could not deny my precarious position as a woman, alone, near sunset, going for a swim at a beach populated by only two men. No one even knew where I was. This was foolish, irresponsible. Yet I found myself fearless, relaxed and puzzled

to be so, like a wide eyed child who waddles with open mouthed delight through her first self propelled steps into the world.

"I am not afraid, I am not afraid." I thought to myself. As this observation became more believable, I tested the words out loud to see if they were true. *I'm not afraid, there's nothing to fear.* "Are you sure? Is it safe?" *What might happen, tell me what?* "They might come in after me. Or someone else might arrive, someone big, someone who could hurt me. Or it might not be safe for me to be swimming alone without a buddy." I approached the water listening to the dialogue filter through my mind, exhorting me, trying to steer me back to the log and my towel, then quickly to my car and home again. But these remonstrations were powerless. I was not afraid, could not be afraid. What might happen after all? What was the worst? What *was* the worst?

Walking carefully over the sharp stones to the shore line, I waded into the water. Then I dove in recklessly, like a sea creature anxious to return home after too long a stay on land, and swam straight out towards the misty horizon. I had fins, I was a dolphin, I was an orca, I was a mermaid with golden scales and a song. I was alone yet embraced in my lover's arms, swimming far and free out to deep water, leaving gravity behind and bursting with a knowledge that erupted within me like a breaching whale in a calm sea.

"You mean...you mean?" *Yes*, came the reply. "But... it can't." *Why? Why not?* I stood up, shaking my head in disbelief. I looked back at the empty beach, to the two men still sitting with their backs propped against the log. I looked over at Mount Baker's gleaming peak, alive and joyful as

a laughing Buddha, then down at my own smiling reflection, and dove back in again. I was at the centre of a blue sunlit jewel with 360 degrees of unobstructed view that proclaimed the same miracle from every vantage point. "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Yes it's true, it doesn't matter." *That's right. It doesn't.* Everything was so clear, so simple. "You mean that's the worst, the very very worst?"

Each time I stood up with the intention of heading back to shore, I would stop myself, and fall backwards again, like a rag doll, with a splash, hooting my pleasure, revelling in my discovery, singing, kicking the water high in the air just to watch the droplets hang for a millisecond like scattered diamonds in the fading sun. Oh the rapture, the impossible freedom that was mine as I swam in this crystal cocoon of safety beyond all fear, baptised and born again each time I stopped to inquire: "You mean the worst I have to fear is death? Only that? Nothing more?"

Somehow, and I still don't know how, death was a gnat compared to all this, it didn't matter, had no relevance, was simply unimportant; less significant than yesterday's lunch. There was nothing standing between me and my life, not even death itself. If death was to come suddenly, or brutally, even today on this solitary beach at the hands of some haunted soul, I *knew*, and it was enough. Knew I was part of this poem, this towering rhapsody, this cloud fragment, this sea water dripping like flames from my fingertips in the heart rending glow of a setting sun. I knew no matter what, that I was loved and lover too. Never alone, never alone and always beloved.

## Part Two: Background

### After Words

As a counsellor in training, this experience first emerged in practice with other students, and later with clients assigned to me in my clinic and practicum placements. It also occurred between myself and the individual who supervised my practicum. The encounters I had with people when this experience emerged were arresting, mysterious, significant, and marvelously beautiful. This experience had gradations of intensity, or perhaps my sensitivity to it was more heightened at some times than others. Such differences may also indicate a continuum of mystical experiences. For example, Rowan (1990) identifies nine qualitatively different mystical experiences ranging from peak experience to "the ultimate."

In its milder form, this experience has evoked that sense of deep empathic connection (Rogers, 1967), or effortless flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) characteristic of the peak experience (Maslow, 1962, 1964, 1971). Here I had a sense of confidence and ease, of being "touched" by the client and "in touch" with our process. This was the signal that therapy was happening. During other sessions, however, I experienced a sense of awe so overwhelming, I felt I was in the presence of something divine.

Before undertaking the initial work for this thesis, I was convinced this experience was at the core of "therapeutic change;" the kind referred to by mainstream clinicians like Kanfer and Goldstein (1991). But nothing in my training, or the theory, ever prepared me for the enormous, extremely personal experience of confronting the sacred in a counselling session. I had and still have no adequate "professional" frame of reference for this experience. It is discussed in mainstream psychological literature, but from a

safe and theoretical distance that allows psychologists and counsellors to remain as hidden to each other as they typically are to their clients.

Humanists like Maslow (1962) and Rogers (1973) were discussing this issue years ago and identified the losses we incur, both professionally and culturally, by clinging to our scientific respectability; our power. Maslow, even described how a peak experience had quickly helped him resolve conceptual problems he had struggled with for years. As a result, he had completely rewritten a "professorial" presentation which he ultimately never shared because he was too afraid to reveal himself:

Our journals, books and conferences are primarily suitable for the communication and discussion of the rational, the abstract, the logical, the public, the impersonal, the nomothetic, the repeatable, the objective, the unemotional (p. 202).

His observations are still fresh among mainstream practitioners, still relevant to me, and certainly relevant to the academic environment where I received my training. Our theory and professionalism do encourage us to hide from ourselves, from each other, and from our clients; in sum to prevaricate.

We must make explicit..... that our kind of work is often felt deeply and comes out of deep personal grounds, that we sometimes fuse with the objects of study...that we are usually profoundly involved, and that we must be if our work is not to be fake (Maslow, p. 202).

Maslow also states that the solutions towards which we struggle as scientists and counsellors are "in principle, self therapies." How many counsellors would willingly tell their clients that they were in the business for their own healing process? Rogers (1973) was equally frank: "Why is this whole idea of

another reality so threatening to psychologists?" (p. 386), he asked his peers at an APA convention:

The possibility of a lawful reality...not open to our five senses in which present, past, and future are intermingled...space is not a barrier and time has disappeared; a reality...known only when we are passively receptive, rather than actively bent on knowing. It is one of the most exciting challenges posed to psychology (p. 386).

Today this challenge is being embraced by growing numbers in the field of mental health. However, the secular mainstream remains largely unaffected (Goldberg, 1994). As a product of this mainstream, I can attest to its intimidating influence. When I began my work on this thesis, I was afraid of speaking from the heart, of describing the profound emotions evoked by my clients through this experience.

I am not alone in viewing this experience as the most wonderful (Maslow, 1962, 1964, 1971; Otto, 1950; Stace, 1960; Underhill, 1911), and the one towards which we all move, consciously or not. Through it I gain immediate experiential knowledge about the "connectedness" of all things; the sanctity, or "thouness" (Buber, 1970) of all life. This experience can be triggered in many ways; through sexuality, music (Maslow, 1971), nature, religion, drugs (Hood, 1977), artistic expression (Yeagle, Privette, & Dunham, 1989), and communication experiences (Gordon, 1985). This experience is also pursued as a discipline through various meditative techniques and religious traditions (Golman, Smith, & Dass, 1985; Schopen & Freeman, 1992; Stace, 1960; Underhill, 1911; Walsh & Vaughn, 1993; Weldwood, 1984).

Does this "thing" represent subjective perception or objective reality? Is it

"in here," "out there," or both? Is it more accurately identified as relationship or deity? What are the differences? These are among the stickiest issues for scholars and critics of mysticism (Friedman, 1992; Katz, 1978) and were initially very intimidating to consider. However, these questions are losing their ability to undermine my belief in the legitimacy of this experience, or the reliability of my perception. I have become increasingly sensitive to its presence in my daily life, although I can not pinpoint a single cause, nor be sure to what extent the convergence of dialogue, reflection, personal exploration, and research have created this change.

In sum, this experience has led me to doubt my professional education, my work, and the counselling paradigm as a whole. While sometimes paralysing, this doubt provoked me to examine what I was doing, and what I believed as a counsellor. It also compelled me to ask questions that continue to threaten the career I just trained for, and my dream of a nice little counselling practice somewhere. Still, the results of this study have yielded more than I anticipated, and I trust will contribute something of value to a profession that is slowly, but certainly, losing its secular edge.

## Literature Review

This study is supported by an increasing body of literature acknowledging spirituality, including mystical experience, as an important aspect of our mental health that has, until recently, been ignored or misunderstood by psychology. The study is also strongly indicated by a virtual absence of qualitative literature reflecting therapists' own mystical experiences

In the following review, I examine the relevance of such a study from a number of perspectives. These include the tendency of therapists to avoid discussing their own spiritual experience, and the problems of lexicon and interpretation related to mysticism. Also included is a synopsis of current studies related to therapists' experience, and a brief discussion of the American Psychiatric Association's recent acknowledgement of spiritual and religious problems as "normal." Other trends supporting and reflecting a growing interest in the connection between spirituality and mental health, are also discussed.

Many studies that I came across in the process of my literature review dealt with the correlates of mystical experience. Several of these are briefly discussed to support the view that mystical experience is a healthy aspect of our humanity. Further, that the spiritual process may bear some resemblance to the objectives and process of psychotherapy itself. This discussion is followed by a brief look at issues related to problems of definition as they relate to current literature.

### Why Therapists Are Not Talking

Mystical experience is coming into its own within the field of

psychology, and challenging some of its most deeply entrenched convictions (Lukoff, 1985; Lukoff & Lu, 1988; Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1992; Lukoff, Turner, & Lu, 1992; Lukoff, Turner, & Lu, 1993;). Historically this experience is fraught with conflicting definitions, unsavoury overtones of religious excesses, and psychopathology that date back to the time of Freud and beyond (Hood, 1975; Lukoff, et al., 1992, 1993; Peterson & Nelson, 1987). Despite its emergence in contemporary psychological literature, the experience poses many difficult questions.

#### What Will We Call It?

"How then to define spirituality if one person's religion is another's non-religious spirituality, a third's secular values, and a fourth's pathology?" (Goldberg, 1994). The answer is unknown. A major complication is that mystical experience crosses many boundaries of scholarship including psychology, theology, comparative religion, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, medicine, semantics, linguistics, physics, mathematics, and the arts. Lexicons and interpretations compete with each other even within the same field. This is why someone reporting a mystical experience to their psychologist could conceivably be referred on to a psychiatrist for suspected psychosis, or alternatively, reassured of their progress as a self-actualising individual. Lukoff's (1985, 1985) articles offer an in-depth discussion on the importance of differentiating psychotic from spiritual experience, and the difficulties this task involves.

Terms appearing to represent similar meanings, such as I and Thou (Buber, 1970) and empathy (Rogers, 1967), may stem from very different

orientations and practices, as the public debate between Buber and Rogers illustrated (Kirschenbaum & Land Henderson, 1990). Additional difficulties can be encountered by the novice looking for connections between personal experience and academic theory.

Here, for example, are some of the words found in psychological literature related to mystical experience: schizophrenia (Hunt, 1984; Runions, 1979), mystical experience with psychotic features (Lukoff & Everest, 1985), hallucinogenic drug state (Cowling, 1985), self-actualisation (Maslow, 1962, 1964, 1971), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), transcendence (Hood, 1977; Walsh & Vaughn, 1993), transformation (Goleman, Smith, & Dass, 1985), the numinous (Jung 1972, cited in Lukoff et al., 1992; Otto, 1950), illumination (Stace, 1960), psychoreligious experience (Lukoff et al., 1992), psychospiritual experience (Lukoff et al., 1993), and praeternatural experience (Nelson, 1989). This list is not exhaustive, nor inclusive of related concepts found in other fields of scholarship. The experience could also be called god, goddess, holy spirit, cosmic consciousness, divine love, community spirit, satori, enlightenment, ecstasy, bliss, creative muse, and inspiration. There are simply no ready made answers and, as the literature repeatedly states, definition is one of the most problematic issues.

#### Other People Have Mystical Experiences, Not Me

As therapists we are suspect and vulnerable when we use the word "mystical" to identify our own experience. Stace (1960), a mystical philosopher often quoted in recent psychological literature, admitted his own discomfort with the word because it "suggests misty, foggy thinking, mystery and hocus pocus, and is also associated with religion" (p.15).

Although Maslow (1964) used the term "peak experience," he understood our desire to distance ourselves from this experience because of its power to frighten us. As he explains, the experience itself could be interpreted as a "kind of insanity, a complete loss of control" by individuals with "rational, materialistic, or mechanistic" (p. 22) views of life. Maslow also noted that such individuals tend to discount or fight off the experience because of its overwhelming emotional impact.

Even the more spiritually sensitive tend to discount this experience, if not to themselves, then to others. Despite North America's current fascination with spiritual matters (McDonald, 1994), we are still constrained when it comes to expressing any passion related to our spiritual lives. As Maslow (1971) explains, we are too embarrassed and ashamed to disclose our "transcendent ecstasies" (p.175) because they are so unscientific. A recent study (Davis, Lockwood, & Wright, 1991) exploring why individuals hesitate to report peak experience, supports these observations. In a group of 246 undergraduate students, the top three reasons for not reporting were (a) that it was too intimate and personal, (b) that others would not value the experience or would put it down, and (c) that it could not be described in words.

In sum, our secular training and practice do not provide the framework, or impetus for the assessment of our own, or our clients' spiritual needs and experiences (Peterson & Nelson, 1987). The science that is supposed to serve us also makes us fearful of speaking from our personal experience and knowledge.

Admittedly a shift to a more spiritually centred psychology is occurring.

There is also a growing emphasis on qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) that is creating a more accepting environment for the type of exploration I propose. Further, transpersonal psychology continues to grow in popularity, and spirituality and mystical experience are emerging, albeit slowly, within mainstream research. Still, the stories, perceptions and interpretations of our own deeply felt mystical perceptions, including those we experience with clients, are missing from the literature. Because many studies do not identify their methodologies, they are difficult to locate in a computer search (Lukoff et al., 1993). There are, no doubt, some personal accounts to be found on therapists' experience, but likely very few. None are cited in the current literature I was able to find, although I did locate one account written by a Vancouver therapist (Fodchuk, 1992) who told me about her work when I contacted her. The article is based on her Master's thesis, and describes in compelling detail, the experience and effect of a mystical encounter she had as a young woman. Fodchuk does not discuss this experience in the context of her work with clients. Still, it is a courageous article, and illustrative of the depth of emotion and honesty I propose for this study.

#### Some Studies on Therapists

In extensive reviews on mystical experience (Lukoff & Lu, 1988), psychospiritual, and psychoreligious dimensions of healing (Lukoff et al., 1992, 1993), only four studies focus on therapists, and these studies are quantitative. The qualitative studies in these reviews were unrelated to therapists' experience. These four studies explore and confirm the spiritual sensitivity and interest of mental health practitioners (Allman,

de la Rocha, Elkins, & Weathers, 1992; Bergin & Jensen, 1990; Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Together, they tend to refute and elaborate previous findings (Lukoff et al., 1992) revealing mental health professionals as much less interested in traditional religion than the general public they serve. More significantly, they indicate the need for mental health practitioners to consider how their religious, spiritual, and mystical beliefs impinge on their practice of psychology. Although these are not qualitative studies, I include them for discussion along with a fifth earlier study (Ragan, Malony, & Beit-Hallahmi, 1980), because there is so little available on therapists' spiritual and mystical experience.

To begin with the problems, these studies represent a mix of philosophical orientations, populations, methodologies, and conclusions. They use a diversity of scales ranging from the more conservative Religious Orientation Scale (Bergin & Jensen, 1990), to a scale developed specifically by the authors to determine the degree to which a therapist would interpret a client's mystical experience as psychotic (Allman et al., 1992). None of the studies have been replicated, two operationalize a frame of reference relevant to this inquiry, and only one is specifically related to mystical experience (Allman et al., 1992).

Although these studies do not deal with mystical experience of therapists within counselling practice, one of the studies does ask the respondents if they have ever had such experiences (Allman et al., 1992). Of the 285 participants involved, a significant 50% indicated they had. Less clear is how the respondents defined "mystical." Drawing on the work of

Stace (1960), Hood (1974), and Conger (1985), the authors constructed what seemed to be a reasonable definition based on current literature:

Mystical experience (is a) transient, extraordinary psychological event marked by feelings of being in unity and harmonious relationship to the divine and everything in existence, plus one or more of the following effects: noesis, religiosity, loss of ego, time and space alterations, ineffability, affect change during the event, transformation effect, and passivity; i.e. experiencing no control of the event (Allman et al., p. 565).

However, the operational definition that was actually sent to respondents, was in the form of a vignette describing how a client might report such an experience (see Appendix B). Despite my biases, and a reasonable grasp of current definitions, I was incapable of judging the experience as mystical with any certainty. Nor could I assess the emotional well being of the client based on the very limited information provided. From my perspective, the ambiguity and brevity of this vignette compromises the validity of this statistic.

Despite these and other inadequacies, the studies shared a number of similar findings. First, here is a high interest in matters both religious and spiritual among mental health providers, and a virtual absence of training related to these matters. Second, participants in general saw their religious/spiritual convictions as being relevant to their work and inseparable from it; the greater the degree of religiosity/spirituality, the greater the relevance. Third, therapists dealing with such issues do so from a subjective perspective. So, whether a client's spiritual or religious

issues are validated or not "is based on the personal rather than the clinical orientation of the psychologist" (Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984; p. 239). Moreover, spiritually minded therapists were more empathic of their clients' mystical experience than those who did not have this personal orientation. Those without it were more likely to ignore or pathologize their clients.

Bergin and Jensen (1990) also note that it is not uncommon to hear of secular therapists discouraging their clients' religious beliefs and practices, on the grounds that it will enhance the therapeutic process. As these authors indicate, such interference with clients' core beliefs is harmful. The ethical implications of this issue are considerable because so many are reporting mystical experience. Allman et al. (1992) for example, found that 4.5% of the therapists' clients had reported mystical experience in the 12 months preceding their study. Indeed, the numbers being reported, therapists' significant interest in this subject, and the subjective framework from which we work with these issues, suggests a need for a closer look at our own personal process. The present study is dedicated to this purpose.

### The Trends

The American Psychiatric Association (APA), recently decided to recognise religious or spiritual problems under the V code classification in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 1994). The code indicates an absence of pathology, although such problems may still be a focus of clinical attention. In the 1987 version of the Manual, all 12 references to religion in the Glossary of Technical

Terms were linked to psychopathology (Lukoff et al., 1992). This recent shift by the American Psychiatric Association is, therefore, a remarkable turn of events which may be signalling psychiatry's growing understanding, and respect for mystical experience (Goldberg, 1994).

On a more cynical note, this powerful organisation may be more willing to soften the pathologizing party line to avoid discouraging paying clients from taking their business elsewhere. Given the number of Americans who are turning to alternative medicine, and the billions of dollars involved, it is certainly in psychiatry's best interest to do so. A study of 1500 Americans, for example, found that one in three use unconventional therapies (Eisenberg et al., 1993). Anxiety and depression were included in the 10 medical conditions most frequently reported. Spiritual healing, imagery, energy healing, hypnosis, prayer, and exercise were among the most popular therapies. The out-of-pocket dollars spent for such therapy in 1990 was estimated to be only \$2.5 billion *less* than the \$12.8 billion spent that year for all hospital care in the United States. This quest for spiritual alternatives to health care is further underscored in a paper documenting the large number of Americans who turn to their clergy for mental health service (Larson et al., 1988). These authors recognised the strong connection between our emotional and spiritual lives and conclude that there is a profound need for linkage between the clergy and mental health care givers.

The connection between mental health and spirituality is also being reflected in increasing numbers of professional presentations, and training addressing religious and spiritual issues (Maher & Hunt, 1993). At the 1993

annual American Psychiatric Association Annual Meeting, for example, there were a considerable number of workshops, courses and symposia in the scientific program that were related to spiritual concerns (Lukoff et al., 1993). Titles included: "Transpersonal Psychiatry," "Existential and Spiritual Issues in PTSD Treatment," and a "Practicum on Spiritual Issues in Treatment." The media is also bringing greater awareness of spiritually oriented healing paradigms to all sectors of the population through such well received productions as Bill Moyers five part television series on "Healing and the Mind."

#### A Closer Look at Mystical Experience

The empirical evidence. Mystical experience is a particularly compelling subject for qualitative research because it seems to be related to the goal and process of counselling itself. Hood (1974), for example, has shown that people high in psychological strength are more likely to report intense religious experience than those with lower psychological strength. Later work indicated significant correlations between a measure of mystical experience and a measure of self actualisation (Hood, 1977). Individuals reporting mystical experience were also found to be more tolerant, creative, more socially adapted, and less likely to accept simple solutions to problems (Hood, 1979). A study by Spanos and Morretti (1988) supported Hood's findings (1975) that positive mystical experience is not related to measures of psychopathology. Such positive findings are consistent with the theoretical and philosophical work of Stace (1960), Otto (1950), Maslow (1962, 1964, 1971), and Underhill (1911).

These theorists also support empirical findings that a crucial

characteristic of mystical experience is absorption, or a loss of a sense of self; the feeling that one is being absorbed into a larger whole.

Interestingly, various studies have found significant correlations between one's ability to become absorbed and the occurrence of mystical experience. Hood (1977) found that introspection was listed as a major trigger for both high and low self actualisers. Spanos and Moretti (1988) identified a significant relationship between an individual's ability to become absorbed, and their tendency to have mystical experience. In a recent study by Nelson (1989), absorption was identified as the single most important predictor of mystical experiences.

Psychotherapy or secular mysticism? Our professional training in the art of focussed listening and concentration bears a strong resemblance to absorption; a key component of the mystical experience. Such absorption is reflected in theories and techniques of attentional development used in many meditative practices (Epstein, 1984). Indeed, these ancient techniques are described by eastern and western mystics alike, and form the very foundation of mystical discipline (Epstein, 1984; Stace, 1960, Underhill, 1911; Walsh & Vaughn, 1993).

Mystical experience may have more in common with the practice of psychology than might be suspected (Levenson, 1976). Walsh and Vaughn (1993) clearly illustrate the point in their description of the elements shared by a broad range of religious and spiritual traditions. These include: "ethical training, concentration, emotional transformation, redirection of motivation, refinement of awareness, and cultivation of wisdom" (p. 2). It could be argued that these elements reflect both the highest ideals and

process of psychotherapy itself. If we, as I suspect, are unwittingly practising a mystical discipline, it seems important that we bring our own personal perspective into the discussion.

### The Problem of Definition

To itemise the various aspects of the experience is misleading; they work together as a whole. Still, the type of fragmentation that definition requires enables us to describe the experience from various perspectives. A sampling of recent psychological literature on mystical experience provides definitions that are diverse, ambiguous, overly simplified, and in my view, sometimes arbitrary (Allman et al., 1992; Becvar, 1994; Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Goldberg, 1994; Lukoff et al., 1992; Rowan, 1983, 1990; Thorne, 1990).

One contentious issue is whether to categorise this experience as religious or spiritual. Lukoff et al. (1992) admit there is no consensus as to where the boundaries really lie. Peterson and Nelson (1987) define religiosity as anything to do with formalised dogma and institutions, and spirituality as some form of relationship with a higher being or power. Allman et al. (1992) include religiosity in their definition of mystical experience. Other researchers abandon the word "mystical" altogether in favour of broader concepts like spiritual (Elkins et al., 1988), or religious experience (Hay, 1979).

In this study, mystical experience is viewed as inseparable from religiosity and spirituality. The experience of Christian mystics like Theresa of Avila, Hildegarde of Bingen, or Francis of Assisi (Runions, 1979; Stace, 1960; Underhill, 1911), for example, was pivotal to their

Christianity. Conversely, the experience of those unaffiliated with a recognised religion does not diminish the significance of their own mystical experience (Stace, 1960).

Lukoff and Lu (1988) note that most current researchers relate their definitions to the work of mystic philosopher William Stace (1960). His theory, which is the foundation for Hood's (1975) Mysticism Scale (see Appendix A), has doubtless been popularised by the many studies the scale has prompted on religiosity and spirituality (Caird, 1988; Cowling, 1985; de Groot, Gwynn, & Spanos, 1988; Friedman & Harris, 1983; Hood, 1975, 1976, 1977; Hood, Hall, James, Watson, & Biderman, 1979; Spanos & Moretti, 1988).

Stace, along with Hood (1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1979), and Underhill (1911), have largely influenced my decision to call this experience mystical. Their theories, and philosophical orientations, are sympathetic to my own. These "authorities" on mystical experience do not represent any specific religious doctrine, but do imply a belief in an ultimate reality. For them, mystical experience is not just as an event, but also a life process; an orientation, a way of life, a skill, a vocation, and a choice.

To my mind, the most meaningful and enigmatic impulse that this experience inspires, is an overwhelming desire to give; to extend myself to the other. Maslow (1971) offers an overview of motivations and "gratifications" (p. 308) of self actualised people which illustrate my meaning. For example, he notes that self-actualisers enjoy doing good; that they tend to express their gratitude; that they love the world as it is while wanting to improve it, and that they enjoy watching happiness, and

helping to bring it about. These individuals "are devoted to some task, vocation, beloved work 'outside themselves'" (p. 301). Underhill (1911), however, is even more pointed in her analysis of this motivation:

The business and method of Mysticism is Love.... It is the eager outgoing activity whose driving power is generous love....in its deepest fullest sense; as the ultimate expression of the self's most vital tendencies...the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its Source (p. 85).

### Summary

There is a growing interest in spirituality, including mystical experience, that is slowly changing the face of psychology. No longer resigned to the fringes of organised religion, nor pathologized to the extent it once was, this continuum of extraordinary experiences is being recognised as a significant aspect of our existence. Mystical experience is reputed to transform lives; of providing a deep sense of meaning and well being in the world, of inspiring joy, creativity and openness to life, and a greater sensitivity to the needs of others (Maslow, 1971; Otto 1950; Stace, 1960; Underhill, 1911).

More significantly, therapists are expressing interest in this phenomenon, and the general population is turning to spiritual alternatives for their mental health needs in record numbers. Still, the personal experience and perspective of counsellors has not been documented. It is focussed primarily on the client, on theory, or on the type of quantitative studies discussed earlier in this proposal. With the link between mental health and spirituality being endorsed even by

mainstream organisations like the American Psychiatric Association, the dearth of qualitative research on mystical experience needs to be addressed.

### Method

My decision to write this thesis autobiographically emerged out of a process that took place over the course of a year and a half, and continued for another year during which time I produced the thesis itself. Given the different stages and discoveries that grew out of my decision to write this work autobiographically, I would like to discuss my method from 2 main perspectives: the history and the process.

#### History: October 1993 - February 1995

The first step leading to my decision to write autobiographically occurred when I wrote my lengthy description of the Third Thing, which comprises most of Chapter One. By far, this was the single most exciting writing experience I had enjoyed during two years of academic courses, which in itself was a revelation. Academic writing had never felt this rewarding. Writing the document and having it witnessed by a professor made mystical experience real for me; suddenly it became legitimate and I was able to take it seriously, probably for the first time in my life.

Even as I began to think about the qualitative methods that would be best suited to my purposes, I knew I wanted to write in my own voice, but I had no frame of reference for such an approach. I tentatively queried my first supervisor on the possibility of doing a personal study, and his response confirmed my fears; a self reflexive study would not carry as much academic weight as a more traditional piece of qualitative research. If I was contemplating applying to another university for entrance to a Ph. D. program, I would probably want to consider doing a more conventional study. I did not want another degree, but neither did I want

to put a lot of myself into something that would be viewed as insubstantial, or academically questionable. At that point, a reflexive study looked worthless. I was unsure how to proceed, and decided a hermeneutic study on mystical experience, with half a dozen participants, would be a reasonable alternative. My intention was to track down counsellors who had experienced mystical encounters with their clients, and to do several interviews with each one.

I wrote my first proposal in December of 1994, for my thesis preparation class, and jumped through another few hoops of fear as I made my interest in this subject more public to my peers. I was surprised and relieved to find people genuinely interested in my subject. I changed supervisors in February 1994, and promptly stopped all work on the thesis for six months. On September 1, 1994 I met with my third and last supervisor, (bless her), Dr. Bonnie Long. At last, I had found someone who provided me with the kind of support I needed to explore this issue, and who was willing and able to help me follow a dream I could not yet articulate.

Bonnie and I met almost weekly for close to six months trying to hammer out the best method for me to use. During much of that time the experience itself began to infiltrate my life, and affect me in a very powerful way. This is the period of time I allude to in the story Beloved. During these months I did a great deal of reading about mystical experience, and I wrote copiously, in an attempt to understand the conflict that this experience provoked in me as a counsellor. I was also disturbed because I could not make up my mind whether this experience was really about some ultimate reality, or simply my own perception. I had a horror

of my thesis being reduced to a question of whether my experience was "objective" or "subjective." I had seen this happen to another student at a master's thesis defence on mystical experience, and that was not going to happen to me. A profound loneliness also pervaded this period of time because I could not share my experience of the Third Thing with others. I was acquiring a new lexicon, and learning to talk about my experience. I also felt physically and emotionally overwhelmed much of the time by the experience itself. At one point I described what I was going through to a stranger who laughed and told me it sounded as though I was going through a religious conversion. I could not disagree.

Method continued to be a major issue and I was becoming clearer and more determined about my desire to write in my own voice. Still, autobiography was always the last option because it fell so far outside the boundaries of standard academic research, because this type of work was not being done in our department, and not least, because of my own terror. The second last method my supervisor and I considered for the thesis was a single case study. We decided that it could take place over the period of several months, to a year, and that I would need to find a counsellor who had experienced mystical perceptions with his, or her own clients. But how would I find a research subject - I wanted it to be a woman - who could illuminate my own experience, who would interpret and react to it the same way I had, and who would come to the same conclusions as I had about counselling? Where would I find such a person? My problem was absurd. Clearly I wanted a mouthpiece for my own experience, so why not write it myself?

An important shift occurred when I attended an informal lecture by Joanna Wisewoolf (1993) who had written a thesis on the experience of childhood sexual abuse through poetry and drawings, in the Faculty of Education. Here was a template from my own faculty; a personal thesis could be done, it *had* been done. Jo's was the first thesis I ever read cover to cover in one sitting. It was alive, riveting, disturbing. As a counsellor and a student trained in an academic research style, I was enthralled with the power of this writing to break through the wall created by traditional scholarship. I was no longer convinced that writing about my passion in my own voice was an unworthy endeavour for a thesis. My determination was reconfirmed by Dr. Kathryn McCannell from the Department of Social Work, who I requested to be on my committee. Kathryn was so relaxed and matter-of-fact about my subject, and my desire to write autobiographically, that I was initially confused by her response. There was a whole field of research - feminist research - to which I had not yet been exposed, that recognised the importance of women's autobiography as valid research (Geiger, 1986; Heilbrun, 1988; Reinhartz & Davidman, 1992; Richardson, 1993; Sangster, 1994). In February 1995 my supervisor gave me her blessing to write my study in my own voice, and I raced home and wrote Lourdes; the first story that came to me.

Process: February 1995 - March 1996

Once the decision was made, I wrote one story after another for several months, and was constantly astonished by the process. The stories wanted to be written in a certain order. They decided the order, not me. Often I did not want to write what came to me, and I would try to steer myself in

another direction, but not usually successfully. The insistence of some stories was particularly evident the day I wrote Bonsai Tree. This story really distressed me, but the compulsion was so strong that I wrote it - I bled it - out and another step was taken. Bonsai Tree was a major turning point for it forced me to acknowledge that the oppression I lived with as a woman, as a student, as a client, and as a brand new therapist, was profoundly connected to the terror of using my own voice in my study.

Between February and June 1995, I wrote my stories, rewrote my proposal for my defence, and located my third committee member - an author and specialist on alternative reality - Dr. Leonard George (1995). I could have continued writing the stories for a very long time, but I had to stop if the thesis was going to be finished. I was just not sure what to do with them at this point. In June I sought the advice of Dr. Thomas Blom, from the Department of English at UBC, who was kind enough to read a few of them, to give me pointers on my style, and most importantly, to explain how to knit them together.

What he suggested was essentially the process used in all qualitative research. I was to look at the details of the stories, to pull them apart to explore their meaning, to see the connections they had to other stories, and to the major points I wanted to make in the the thesis. Doing so would reveal the minor and major themes of the work, and allow me to pull them together in a cohesive whole, instead of leaving the stories as a group of disjointed anecdotes.

Following our meeting, I went through the stories and through a year's worth of personal writing I had done on the issue of mystical experience,

and started to analyse the data in a manner similar to Georgi's (1985) four step method. First I read and reread the material to get a sense of the whole. I then went through the text looking for what Georgi refers to as "meaning units" related to my subject matter, and wrote these out on some 400 index cards. I did not use his third step of transforming my everyday language into psychological statements to describe the phenomenon. Since this was my experience, I did not feel the need to reinterpret it in psychological terms; the "meaning units" conveyed the message quite clearly. Here is a sample of how disparate these meaning units were: 1) a licence plate: God is coming and is she pissed, 2) my experience tells me there is no difference between the giver and the receiver, 3) can this experience result in the counsellor hanging onto the client? 4) scream, 5) we are afraid because we have no context for this love.

The last step, which is to synthesize the meaning units into a unified whole, was a process that took a few months. First, I laid the cards on the living room floor and lived with them for several weeks. Moving them around on the floor and putting them together in different constellations, the main themes of the study started to emerge. They suggested various chapter headings which I wrote on a white board and played with daily while I began to piece the the stories into what was essentially a very rough draft. The following are a group of headings/chapters from early in this process that I include here to illustrate my shift since then:

Introduction, Third Thing, Counselling Paradigm, The Body, I'm a Feminist, Born Again, Singing with a Free Voice, Questions, Terror, Beloved, How do I Love You, Convergence.

I also wrote down the titles of all the stories and held each story up to the various chapter headings to find the best place for each one. Did Bonsai Tree belong in the chapter on terror, or the one about the body? Placing the stories was particularly difficult because each one was related to more than one major theme. Moreover, my desire to see the separation between the various stories got in the way of my process for a few months. By the end of August 1995, the thesis was not complete as I had hoped it would be. One big problem was the timidity I felt about creating bridges from one story to the next. These bridges, which are like seams on a garment, had to create continuity and allow me to exit and enter without being noticed, like a stage hand behind the scenes. The bridges also allowed me to underscore those themes I wanted to highlight or discuss further and are, in my view, as important as the stories themselves. Bridging has been the most technically challenging part of this thesis and I have had to give myself permission to be creative.

It was quite late in the development of my thesis before I allowed myself to focus on feminist research, but doing so certainly helped me crystallize my process. Perhaps the most influential book was Heilbrun's (1988) Writing a Woman's Life. Really, it was Heilbrun who explained to me what I had been doing in this thesis. Her simplicity and clarity were dazzling, and the feeling that I had been building a little lean-to somewhere in the wilderness gave way to a much broader vista. Far from being alone in telling my story and voicing my concerns, I was able to see that I was surrounded on all sides by women, from the past to the present, who were toiling in their own way to confront the unacceptable truth of

their lives and to bring it to light. I was only one of many women trying to re-write history. I was getting free.

## Questionnaire

The following questions may be of interest to counsellors wanting to examine their own mystical or spiritual experiences as professionals. These questions are neither exhaustive, nor necessarily pertinent to your own experience. However, they are suggested by my own perceptions, and the process described in this thesis.

### The Counsellor

- What is the most thrilling experience you have ever had as a counsellor in a one-on-one counselling session? What made it that way?

- What were you feeling in your body when this experience occurred? For example did you feel weepy, elated, butterflies in your stomach, stunned, heaviness in your chest, throat lump, other? What was particular about your experience.

- What knowledge or wisdom do you feel you gained or "glimpsed" as a result of this experience?

- Were you prepared for this experience when it happened, or did it take you by surprise?

- Have you ever felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude, humility, and love for a client? How did you explain that to yourself, or to the client?

- Have you ever had the sense that a divine or sacred presence was in the counselling room with you and the client?

- Do you know what triggers such experiences for you?

- What have you tended to call such experiences? Spiritual? Mystical? Transcendent? I Thou? Peak? Love? Empathy? Other?

- What has prompted your decision to name your experience in this way?

- How did you feel about the client during or after this experience?

- Did you have any feelings of conflict, confusion, or fear during this experience?

- Did you ever wonder if your feelings were appropriate within your role?

- Did you wonder if you might be imagining things?
- With whom did you share this experience, and did you feel safe doing so? What aspects, if any, did you leave out of your description? Why?
- Can you remember when you first had such an experience ?
- Have you ever tried to stop or interrupt this experience? Do you know why?
- When you consider other experiences of this nature that you have had, what are the similarities between them?
- What would you say to a counsellor who came to you for advice about an experience like this? Why?
- Do you avoid talking about loving your clients? What kind of language do you use?

#### The Client

- Did you ever think that this experience was pivotal to the client's progress?
- Did you tell your client about this experience? Why? Why not? How much detail about your own feelings did you share?
- Did you refer the client on, or did you continue the counselling relationship? If you referred on, what reason(s) did you give yourself or your client?
- Did you wonder if you might be experiencing counter transference, or if you were projecting onto the client? What other concerns did you have, if any?
- During the experience itself, did the client appear to change in any way? If so, in what ways?
- Did you want to touch or make some physical contact with the the client when this experience occurred?
- Did you ever wonder, or ask the client, if she or he shared your experience?

- Have you ever found yourself hoping this experience would occur with a client?
- Have you ever tried to make this experience happen, or prolong it when it did occur?
- If you have such experiences with clients, how often do they occur?

### Counselling

- In your view, would such an experience be more or less appropriate if the client shared your experience? Why?
- Did this experience cause you to see the counselling paradigm, or your role as a counsellor, in a new light? How?
- Do you think this experience has any significant role in the counselling relationship and if so, what is it?
- Has this experience ever prompted you to doubt your work as a counsellor, or the value of counselling?
- What are your major concerns about counselling?
- What, if any, changes have you made to your own counselling approach as a result of an experience like this?
- Did you receive any training as a counsellor that might prepare you for such experiences?
- Have you ever sought counselling assistance for an experience of this nature?
- What should the role of spirituality be within the mainstream counselling paradigm?
- What role does spirituality in general have for you in the context of the counselling paradigm?

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## Appendix A

Hood's M-Scale:

- (1) I have had an experience which is both timeless and spaceless.
- (2) I have never had an experience which was incapable of being expressed in words.
- (3) I have had an experience in which something greater than myself seemed to absorb me.
- (4) I have had an experience in which everything seemed to disappear from my mind until I was conscious only of a void.
- (5) I have experienced profound joy.
- (6) I have never had an experience in which I felt myself to be absorbed as one by all things.
- (7) I have never experienced a perfectly peaceful state.
- (8) I have never had an experience in which I felt as if all things were alive.
- (9) I have never had an experience which seemed to be holy to me.
- (10) I have never had an experience in which all things seemed to be aware.
- (11) I have had an experience in which I had no sense of time or space.
- (12) I have had an experience in which I realised the oneness of myself with all things.
- (13) I have had an experience in which a new view of reality was revealed to me.
- (14) I have never experienced anything to be divine.
- (15) I have never had an experience in which time and space were non-existent.
- (16) I have never experienced anything that I could call ultimate reality.

- (17) I have had an experience in which ultimate reality was revealed to me.
- (18) I have had an experience in which I felt that all was perfection at the time.
- (19) I have had an experience in which I felt everything in the world to be part of the same whole.
- (20) I have had an experience which I knew to be sacred.
- (21) I have never had an experience which I was unable to express adequately through language.
- (22) I have had an experience which left me with a feeling of awe.
- (23) I have had an experience that is impossible to communicate.
- (24) I have never had an experience in which my own self seemed to merge into something greater.
- (25) I have never had an experience which left me with a feeling of wonder.
- (26) I have never had an experience in which deeper aspects of reality were revealed to me.
- (27) I have never had an experience in which time, space, and distance were meaningless.
- (28) I have never had an experience in which I became aware of a unity to all things.
- (29) I have had an experience in which all things seemed to be conscious.
- (30) I have never had an experience in which all things seemed to be unified into a single whole.
- (31) I have had an experience in which I felt that nothing is ever really dead.
- (32) I have had an experience that cannot be expressed in words.

(Caird, 1988)

## Appendix B

Imagine that a new client consults you and says that a month ago he or she had an episode in which the everyday sense of self-disintegrated and seemed to expand and blend with everything in existence. Your client "saw a brilliant light" and "lost all sense of time and space.": Your clients states that words are "inadequate" to describe what happened, and tells you it was as if "unknown forces" overtook him or her by surprise and a "different reality" was entered. Your client reports feeling "changed" because of the experience (Allman et al., 1992, p. 565).