

“SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS”

**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN
THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF YOUNGER WOMEN IN
CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Kim Hudson

ABSTRACT

In current discussions about contemporary forms of spirituality, consideration is given to the question, ‘what is spirituality?’ and to exploring the range of associated beliefs and practices. Common to most discussions is the acknowledgement that the term spirituality is ambiguous and does not represent any one finite quality or thing, but rather, is a wide and somewhat identifiable set of characteristics. Some commentators suggest that contemporary spirituality, characterised by its separation from institutional forms of religion, and represented by the hallmark expression “*I am spiritual, but not religious*”, is an increasing phenomenon in Australian society. In view of this, there are several debates about the merits of a spirituality without explicit links to religion (in particular Christian traditions) and whether a personal spirituality can hold any real depth or purpose, or whether it just perpetuates a superficial, narcissistic focus of the self. This kind of critique pays little attention as to how spirituality, and the associated beliefs and practices, are developed and applied in an everyday sense, and how this impacts on the lives of those who subscribe to their own sense of spirituality.

In this thesis, I shift the focus from analysing the merits of a personalised spirituality to exploring in depth some of the lay understandings and purposes underlying contemporary forms of spiritual practice. The primary concern of my thesis is to describe this phenomena of spiritual life as experienced by eleven younger Australian women aged 18-38 years inclusive, who considered themselves ‘spiritual’ women, yet do not necessarily identify with a particular religious denomination. At its core, and as a

phenomenological study, the thesis undertakes a theoretical exploration of consciousness and the apprehension and formation of belief, meaning, and identity. Held central, and alongside the phenomenological methodology, is the feminist notion that every woman is the centre of her own experience, that any interpretations and understandings of women's spirituality, must start with the personal. The empirical stages of research therefore focus on an exploration of the women's personal understandings, experiences, interpretations and translations of spirituality to uncover the location and application of spirituality in everyday life.

A primary factor explored throughout the thesis is the intersection between emotional experiences, meaning and purpose, and notions of spirituality. It is my contention that grief, crisis and trauma, and the more general emotional experiences arising from everyday life, can be a driving force to embark on an exploration of the spiritual; inform personal constructions of spirituality; and provide a basis for the articulation of that spirituality, with a central purpose of alleviating emotional pain. Thus, my main thesis contention is this 'new' form of spirituality, as experienced and practiced outside of religious institutions, was expressed by the women in this research as a conscious and pragmatic resource applied, and developed in relation to, the various events and experiences of everyday life, and in relation to the ongoing process of developing and locating a sense of self and identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Speeding down the road, dodging other cars, lights flashing: 'I have to get there - get there before he goes – I have to say goodbye'. His death is imminent now, not long to go. It has been slow and painful – it is time to move on: Heart constricted, blood pumping, knotted gut. Hang on - please hang on until we can be there for you: Screaming sideways to park – sprinting inside.

He is gone. I am too late. We were all too late.

History and memory now holds her story, her life: Her spirit, her essence, is free. For us, though, those left behind, much grief and many questions remain.

- Author's own

In-roads to the research

'Spirituality' is a subject of increasing interest in contemporary Western society. My own interest in spirituality and the impetus for this thesis, stemmed from a series of questions that I wished to explore at both a personal and academic level. Allow me to briefly elaborate. For a significant period, prior to undertaking this research, I was confronted by some complex emotional experiences, of either my own, or of those closest to me. These experiences included illness (terminal and chronic), disability, career change, relationship difficulty, death, infertility, and of course, through all of this - dealing with the full gamut of emotion - anger, grief, joy, frustration and so on. In short, this was a sustained, emotionally intense period. The compounding nature of these

experiences kept dragging me (kicking and screaming) to find some kind of meaning and sense of purpose in which to frame and make sense of these issues. It was through these experiences that I became observant of many things. I began to wonder and note how other people dealt with intense life experiences and how their particular beliefs supported them (or not) during these times. My first research directions therefore developed around life's challenges, and within that, dealing with grief and loss.

As I started to ponder this theme, I became acutely aware of some of the epithets that people use during times of crisis, either to comfort themselves or others. These epithets were usually in the form of one-liners that I call "Tag Philosophies", that when delivered, are supposed to impart wisdom and bring clarity and emotional peace to the distressed. They infiltrate our everyday language, and to name a few, include well known sayings such as 'the world works in mysterious ways'; 'the universe will provide; 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' and 'things always happen for a reason'. To my mind these 'tags' held, at least, some truth; but I wondered where they came from. Were they philosophical, theological, or based in personal experience? What did they really mean to people? I also wanted to know whether these kinds of statements were linked to a broader worldview that embodied certain beliefs and values about the world and the purpose of human existence. I wondered whether and how they translated into action in everyday life, and/or rendered everyday experiences meaningful in some way. Essentially, my queries concerned: how people dealt with difficult periods; how they explored their world materially and non-materially; what they came to believe in; and,

how all this translated to their everyday lives. And so my journey to writing this thesis began.

In more concrete terms, and as far as my thesis was concerned, my initial question was whether grief and/or challenging circumstances are important elements in a person's resolve to undertake a spiritual journey; And - if this was the case – whether and how 'spirituality' assisted in providing meaning and purpose to a person's everyday life. In considering this, I realised that people, particularly those within my own age group (35-40), are often reticent in talking about spirituality, particularly in traditional religious terms. 'Religion', in so far as it is taken to mean an institutionalised system of belief, seemed unable to speak to everyday experiences and the meanings we attach to life. However, the dribs and drabs of 'Tag Philosophy' lacked any real depth and did not provide an adequate framework either. Hence, in undertaking this research, the term spirituality seemed to provide an alternative and hopefully fruitful springboard for discussing personal experiences, beliefs and meaning.

In early discussions with academics and friends, it became clear that the word 'spirituality' evoked a certain amount of thoughtfulness. While some people were merely curious to know what was meant by it and whether or not it was associated solely with religion, others made clear links to certain kinds of spiritual practice such as yoga or meditation. Most people, even if they did not consider themselves 'spiritual', often mentioned they knew of people they would call 'spiritual', and who could discuss their sense of spirituality further. This indicated that spirituality, and what constituted being a

‘spiritual person’ was meaningful and fluid, thus constituting a space where people might be willing to engage, explore, and to talk about both their worldly, and sometimes ‘other-worldly’, experiences.

In the event, a small group of women (aged between 18 and 38) who did embrace the term spirituality, and who, at some level, considered themselves to be spiritual, became the subject of my empirical research. With them, I was able to explore the range of questions that had come to interest me. What does it mean to be a spiritual person? What role does spirituality play in dealing with grief and searching for personal meaning and purpose? What do people mean when they say they are spiritual or are interested in spirituality? Herein is the essence of my research: an exploration of the meaning ascribed to ‘spirituality’ and its enactment in everyday life.

The research process

To manage the task of researching this uncertain terrain, I separated my research process into two basic stages. The first was devoted to exploring spirituality as an abstract concept and to lay some foundations for conceptualising a contemporary spirituality as understood outside of institutional religion; and the second, to exploring a more personal and embodied spirituality enacted in daily life.

Establishing the research terrain

In the first stages of research, I explored notions of spirituality and the relationship to religion, placing them particularly within the contemporary context. Undertaking this

task significantly informed my initial research approach. As I focused on the many definitions and understandings of spirituality, I grappled with its ambiguous nature and noted the many dimensions, interpretations, and associations present in most attempts to define spirituality. These understandings and issues are explored in detail in Chapter One. However, I wish to highlight here, that it was in the process of searching for an adequate definition for spirituality, one that I could use during the course of my research, and in particular, one that could be used in the empirical stages of research, that I found myself – at the earliest of stages – in a state of paralysis. The indefinite nature of spirituality and the difficulties inherent in defining the word meant that it was impossible to adopt a definition that would satisfy all points of view. Yet having some clear starting point was critical to explaining and developing my research. After consideration, I decided to adopt a neutral position where instead of forging a definition of spirituality to which all of the information collated could be compared, I would highlight the many descriptions contained in the literature and let them speak for themselves. This decision linked firmly to my developing ideas about methodology, and my intention to ask future research participants to talk about their everyday lives and their spiritual dimensions. Taking a neutral stance on the definitions and interpretations of spirituality created a space in which I could invite participants to articulate their own personal version of spirituality within the areas of their lives they considered relevant. Hence, when I report the fieldwork it is the participants' understandings of spirituality and the practices and processes attached to that understanding that forms the main reference point for discussion.

As part of my preliminary work, I also wished to locate spirituality in the Australian context. I was mindful of the shifting nature of religion in Australia and the possible social interrelationships that could inform and shape contemporary understandings of spirituality. Thus, in exploring the Australian context, I began by looking at the current literature on the social trends and patterns impacting on factors such as belief and church attendance. It was from this that I made the early decision to concentrate on a particular age group (18-38 years) in the empirical part of the research.

My rationale followed from the well-documented significant changes in religious activity during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was characterised by a significant move away from the traditional form of Christian worship (Kaldor, 1987; Mol 1985; Wilson 1983). Demographically this move, which consolidated a more secular identity for Australian people, was a feature of the ‘baby-boomer’ generation (then aged somewhere between 20-40 years). Further, and more current, the National Church Life Survey NCLS (2001) showed that for church attendances in Australia, the 20-40 year age group continued to rank the lowest in church participation (with the most significant absence noted in the 20 – 29 year age group). The same survey suggested that people aged 15 to 29 years of age made 28% of the total population, yet represented only 14% of church attenders (Bellamy & Kaldor, 2002). The median of this age group, born in the 1960s and 1970s, loosely represents the generation born to the baby-boomers. The religious characteristics ascribed to this age group seemed similar to relationships in my own personal world, which, as I suggested earlier, was an influence in the formation of my research directions. There was also a second consideration to the age delineation;

that is, I had noted through my readings there was considerable interest in the particular belief patterns of younger people. Hence, I wanted to consider some stories that could be linked with the ‘youth’ population (the Australian Bureau of Statistics recognised the category of ‘youth’ as people between the ages of 12 – 25 years), yet keep the established theme of adulthood. With the final consideration being that the legal age of adulthood is eighteen years of age, I chose to delimit the age group of participants to 18-38 years inclusive as a category of ‘younger adults’.

I found that while there was considerable literature on the general trends in religious identification and patterns of church attendance, there was very little on personal forms of spirituality not connected to a particular religion. Nonetheless, several authors had commented on the notion of an Australian spirituality (Hughes, Thompson, Pryor & Bouma, 1995; Malone 1999; Kelly 1990) and the presence of a ‘new’ spiritual movement (Tacey 2003, 1997; Kohn 2003; Spohn 1997), with some suggestions made about the possible social causes and effects of this ‘new’ spirituality. A number of these views I discuss later in this thesis. However, in order to gain more in-depth insights into some of the discussions on contemporary Australian spirituality, and to assist in shaping my empirical research, I decided to interview a select group of authors and public commentators interested in this ‘new spirituality’. To this end, I interviewed seven Australian “commentators” from academic and media sources (Associate Professor David Tacey, Professor Tony Kelly, Geraldine Doogue, Hugh Mackay, Rae Lindsay, Associate Professor Lynne Hume and The Rev (Dr.) Nancy Victorin Vangerud) in this first stage of the research process. Obviously this was only a small selection of those

talking about spirituality in Australia. However, they were people fairly accessible to me and willing to participate in this type of research.

The information collated from these interviews stands as an additional resource to the published material I accessed, and is interspersed throughout relevant parts of the thesis. They contribute most significantly to Chapter One, where I discuss notions and definitions of spirituality and locate the characteristics of a contemporary spirituality in the context of Australian society. The quotes I use from these interviews are referenced as 'Interviews, Commentator Series 2003' (e.g., Tacey Interview, CS 2003). More detailed comments on how I selected participants and organised the interviews are discussed in Chapter Four of the thesis.

The gender question

In my early reading I found that the general literature on contemporary spirituality did not comment in any comprehensive way on whether women were identifying and experiencing this form of spirituality, more than, or differently from, men. In parallel, most of the commentators I interviewed concentrated on spirituality in relation to traditional or institutionalised religion (and the ramifications thereof) but neglected the possibility that there might be differences between male and female spirituality, in that females may be more likely to be interested in the new form of spirituality than males. Against this, the feminist literature on spirituality placed gender at the centre of their concerns. In particular, I was captivated by the early work of Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979) in *Womanspirit Rising*. This book provided a feminist critique of

mainstream religions and a push for women to abandon what was considered a purely 'masculine' and hierarchical form of worship, a seemingly nice tie to the previously discussed shifts in church attendance. Feminists of this era (late 1960s early 1970s) called for women to reclaim their personal and feminine sense of spirit by exploring and creating alternative women-centred forms of spirituality and spiritual worship.

Hence at the very same time, when many of the baby-boomer generation were making the decision not to attend church, feminists of the second wave were systematically critiquing the patriarchal structures of the mainstream church and mostly Christian churches as institutionalised forms of religion. Furthermore, some of the more radical feminists were calling for women to express their spirituality in an alternative manner, that is, - outside of the confines of church. Given this, I increasingly felt that women's spirituality, and its link to the emergence of the 'new' spirituality, was a crucial issue that had been almost entirely neglected in the Australian dialogue. I thereafter decided to focus my empirical research on the spiritual lives of the younger age group of women as previously described.

In brief, then, it was in the 'revolutionary' period of the 1960s and 70s when second wave feminists were challenging the masculinist nature of religion, that the baby-boomer generation jettisoned traditional Christian religious tradition and Australian churches experienced a significant decline in church attendance. The female participants in this research thus represent the next generation, the children of the dissident baby boomers, as well as the age group with the current lowest rates for church participation.

The research approach

The considerations I have given so far to establishing the research terrain – that is, dealing with the ambiguity of spirituality, delineating the age range, and focusing on younger women – are held firmly within the phenomenological methodology that informs and guides the development of this thesis. As part of every stage of the research, including the interviews with the commentators, understandings of spirituality arise from the data. Varying perspectives are presented in an attempt to unfold and hopefully broaden understandings of contemporary forms of spirituality.

Feminist approaches to data collection informed the way research participants were approached and interviewed and how the spiritual stories of the women participants are presented within the thesis. Particular consideration was given to each woman talking about spirituality from their own unique perspective. The phenomenological methodology and the feminist approach to data collection are detailed more thoroughly in Chapter Four.

Thesis structure

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first, ‘Foundations for Exploring Contemporary Spirituality’ provides some theoretical and definitional frames for exploring spirituality in the contemporary context and explicates notions of spirituality as discussed in the academic literature and by my seven commentators. The second, ‘The Women’s Stories’ provides detailed narratives of the personal sense of spirituality as expressed by the

women in the study. The first part consists of chapters one to four. The second part is formed by chapters five to eight.

In Chapter One, I explore, in the main, the definitions and context of contemporary forms of spirituality and highlight some of the dominant shifts in religious participation in Australian society from the mid 1960s to the present. I consider the key terms - religion and spirituality – highlighting the commonalities and differences associated with each. This allows me to identify several fundamental themes underlying the thesis, namely: ‘consciousness’, ‘experience’, ‘meaning and belief’, and ‘self and identity’. These themes form the basis of the theoretical exploration undertaken in Chapter Two where I consider aspects of the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber relevant to the sociology of religion. In that chapter I also consider phenomenological notions relating to the subjective construction of meaning and the nature of consciousness.

Chapter Three outlines feminist critiques of religion and explores the notion of a woman-centred and personalised spirituality. Here I suggest how the gender experience of social dislocation influences, filters, and shapes women’s consciousness, and therefore must translate to a personal and specifically female spirituality.

Chapter Four extends my phenomenology and feminist lines of inquiry and introduces some methodological considerations for exploring spirituality in the everyday lives of women. It details the processes and procedures for undertaking both stages of empirical

data collection – interviewing the commentators and talking to women about their sense of spirituality.

The second part of the thesis explores spirituality in the lives of my women research participants. It maps each participant's personal spiritual story with the intent of locating and naming the processes and practices that underpin the creation of that story. In the 'Preface' to the women's stories, I spend some time in locating the characteristics common to each woman's description of herself as a basis from which to map each story and to demonstrate the overall application of the spiritual element to that story. Chapter Five explicates how personal difficulty and the experience of pain are foundational to the spiritual search. Chapter Six identifies the process of searching for, and engaging in, various forms of spiritual practice. Chapter Seven introduces the notion of re-storying the self and expands on the process of establishing particular beliefs, meanings and purpose and how this relates to perceptions of the self as being spiritual. In the 'Postscript' to the women's stories I use symbolism to highlight the various applications of spiritual language and to locate and articulate a personal spiritual identity.

Chapter Eight brings together these reflections and demonstrates the gendered nature of the women's experiences and the gendered application of spirituality to their lives. Here I reinforce the central thrust of my thesis, namely that the personalised forms of spirituality, as represented through the stories of the women, is shaped through a conscious and pragmatic response to the difficulties of everyday life, which attempts to

mitigate the emotional pain attached to those experiences and to thus serve as a basis for understanding and ascribing meaning.

THESIS PART A: FOUNDATIONS FOR EXPLORING

CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

CHAPTER ONE: CONTEMPLATING SPIRITUALITY

Introduction

When I first started my research and when I mentioned ‘spirituality’, most people wanted to know what I meant by the term. Did I mean religion? Did I mean New Age practices? Did I mean spirituality in relation to health and healing? Did I mean psychic things, or clairvoyants like John Edwards in ‘*Crossing Over*’? Did I mean Indigenous spirituality, nature, spirits, dreams, and so on. The answer for me was yes, yes, yes - I was interested in all of these things, and I did not want to restrict my research to any one particular understanding of spirituality. Instead, I wanted to understand how other people described the spiritual dimension, how they connected to their sense of spirituality, and what impact it had on their everyday lives. In order to do this I needed to gain a more systematic insight into various understandings of spirituality and its associations.

The process I undertook to do this was two-fold. First, I investigated contemporary understandings of spirituality and their location in terms of the broader Western, and more specifically Australian, culture. This helped me to identify the particular ways that spirituality is understood in different settings (e.g., from the vantage point of traditional religion, environmental groups, or the new age movement). Secondly, I attempted to

unpack different understandings of spirituality, and to identify several components common to them, components that link to the core of my research interests in everyday life, personal experiences, and the construction of meaning.

I now elaborate on these twin investigations through discussing the general and contemporary context of spirituality, the demographics of belief, and various definitions and interpretations of spirituality.

The context of contemporary spirituality

In advanced societies, the tradition of the Church ceases to be a public reference for society but becomes the private possession of individuals who speak predominately of their personal spirituality and their private spiritual quest.

Russell (1986, p. 37)

Writers on spirituality consider it to be separate, or becoming increasingly separate, from its historical association with religion, and more simply to do with the need to connect with others and the eternal search for the meaning and purpose of life (Erricker, J. 2001, p. 225; Inglehart & Baker 2000). The trend of personal spiritual exploration, and having a sense of spirituality outside of the confines of traditional religion and church practices, appears pronounced in countries like Britain, the United States, Australia, West Germany, South Korea, Italy and the Netherlands (Tacey 2003, p. 30; Inglehart & Baker 2000). Tacey (2003) argues that contemporary trends mark the end of the ordered religious world and a transition to something new, unformed, and as yet, unknown.

Whether or not this is the case is argued by many. However, those who do acknowledge this shift believe that the separation of religion and spirituality is, in part, due to broader cultural shifts in Western society involving shifting values and beliefs and a general dissatisfaction with the 'church' itself. Such propositions place contemporary spirituality, as characterised by this separation from religion, as a response to social forces and cultural shifts.

In this context, it is suggested that the movement away from religion is co-extensive with the on-going move towards 'rationality' and the 'material' world and faith in the capacity of science to provide truth and meaning. The transposition of rationality and reason over spiritual experience and understanding has according to, Tacey (1997; 1995) and Johnston (1997), brought with it a denial and suppression of the intangible, spiritual and mystical side of human life – a dimension which, in their view, is an essential part of being human. They describe how in the church itself the practices of mysticism have generally been lost to the more 'rational' and 'literal' biblical interpretations and the practice of preaching. Hence Tacey reads the rising interest in spirituality as a "change of moral climate in the wider community" (2000, p. 9). This change, he believes, contains anti-material, anti-rational sentiment, but most importantly re-embraces a sense of the spiritual and mystical dimensions previously suppressed by a secularised society.

Secularisation is generally agreed to have taken place over the past century in Western societies (with the exception of the United States). Over this period, however, there has also been a proliferation of sects which, Bottomore suggests, "may reflect an

‘individualisation’ of religious belief, which should perhaps be considered along with secularisation as an outstanding feature of the religious situation in industrial societies” (1972, p. 244). Criticism of secularisation and individualism, Bouma (1992, p. 163) suggests, usually points to a decline in religious orientation and a lessening of belief and practice. Further, religion becomes a private matter with life segmented and only partly related to religion.

Certain authors link the privatisation of religion and the growth of new spiritualities with the ‘postmodern’ ethos commonly ascribed to contemporary western society – i.e., the substitution of the certainties of the Enlightenment with fluctuation and changing realities. In this way, Okundaye, Gray & Gray (1999, p. 374) point to a transition from an Enlightenment-based ‘reality’ to a “postmodern” or holistic and relational view of reality”; they argue Descartes’ notion of existence “I think therefore I am” has been replaced by, “I relate, therefore I am”. In the same way, Rae Lindsay proposes that postmodernism has contributed to the contemporary characteristics of spirituality by freeing “the notion of ‘God’ from the constraints of rational philosophy and the need to justify belief in rational terms” (2002, p. 25). Added to this, the sense of dissatisfaction with religion and the associated feeling that church attendance is meaningless are in and of themselves important factors in shaping contemporary spirituality. On this, Lindsay points out that many people are suspicious of religious dogma and no longer view it as an adequate pathway of personal spiritual expression:

While interest in spirituality within the west originally arose within religious traditions, a coherent system of belief and complex language about the nature of God are no longer presumed to be necessary for a fruitful spiritual journey. Religious doctrines appear to many to be eccentric options with no natural spiritual consequences (2002, p. 24).

Given that religion has traditionally played a strong role as the social guardian and teacher of moral codes, it is not surprising that the ethical and moral content of the new spirituality is subject to considerable debate. As part of this we find assertions that spirituality is too vague and can hold no real meaning or practical content; that the ‘new spirituality’ promotes an extreme form of individualism and a self-indulgent narcissism; and that those who practice the newer form of spirituality outside of institutional religion are hiding from themselves and others by not engaging socially in community (see for example, Caplan 2001; Wolf 2001; Kelly 1990). Central to these critiques is the suggestion that there is no real social concern or social responsibility enacted in the language of the new spirituality. It is said, for example, that the separation of spirituality from traditional religious foundations has ensured its separation from “its theoretical underpinning and its ethical implications” (Lindsay 2002, p. 23); that the personalised spiritual experience is “in danger of becoming separated from a social or public vision of ethics” (Sheldrake 1998 in Lindsay, 2002, p. 24). This criticism is often linked to a critique of consumer society, which predisposes people to see spirituality as “a form of commodity that is available at will and easily accessible as a product that can be included in one’s lifestyle” (Erricker & Erricker 2001, p. xviii). This transactional perspective on spirituality is something which Erricker and Erricker strongly refute.

The rise of consumer culture is also seen to be linked to the growth in spirituality – both by creating a dissatisfaction with the “emptiness” of a material type lifestyle and, paradoxically, creating the market opportunities whereby that dissatisfaction can be expressed (Caplan 2001; Kelly 1990). As Wuthnow reflects “markets give opportunities for exchanging new ideas and information, yet markets also impose their own expectations, encouraging people to take everyday reality for granted rather than questioning it too much, and drawing more and more people into vicious cycles of working and spending that leave little time for reflection on higher values” (1998, p. 43). Against this, and given the traditional link between religion and spirituality, it might have been anticipated that a shift away from religion could also involve a corresponding decrease in spiritual concern. However, Inglehart & Baker suggest that this is not the case. In fact, they say that “in most industrial societies, a growing share of the population is spending time thinking about the meaning and purpose of life” and where “allegiance to the established religious institutions continues to decline, [...] spiritual concerns do not” (2000, p.6). Schneiders (2003) points to an increase in interest in books and writing, research, business, and health amongst many other areas. Thus, the increasing interest in spirituality is seen as a response to the anxiety caused by a rapidly changing society, technological change, uncertainty, and by a shift towards diversity, multiple truths and choice.

In relation to the view that personalised spiritualities are a response to the anxieties created by the modernisation of society and secularism, it is important to recognise these factors have also prompted the resurgence of fundamentalist religious movements (Tacey

2003; Lindsay 2002). Tacey (2003, p.5) points out that there has been a 'rising tide' of religious fundamentalism since the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11 2001, particularly within the three monotheisms of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Critically, he suggests that religious fundamentalism and spirituality are at the opposite ends of a cultural spectrum, yet are interrelated in that they are caught up in the same phenomenon – the emergence of the sacred as a leading force in contemporary society. He suggests that they act as a counteracting force to one another where certain sets of social circumstances predispose one over the other within a particular place or time, or might in some cases come to balance with the two opposing energies forming a status quo. The differences found between the two, he argues, manifest in their varying characteristics:

Spirituality seeks a sensitive, contemplative, transformative relationship with the sacred, and is able to sustain levels of uncertainty in its quest because respect for mystery is paramount. Fundamentalism seek certainty, fixed answers and absolutism, as a fearful response to the complexity of the world and to our vulnerability as creatures in a mysterious universe. Spirituality arises from love of and intimacy with the sacred, and fundamentalism arises from fear of and possession by the sacred. The choice between spirituality and fundamentalism is a choice between conscious intimacy and unconscious possession (2003, p.11).

There are many contradictions and nuances contained in the broader social context, and as a result Lindsay acknowledges that “any new interpretation of spirituality must encompass the fact that human experience is *plural* and *diverse*” (2002, p. 24; emphasis

original), accepting that we can really only understand spirituality within a given context and point in time (Lindsay 2002).

The Australian move away from institutional religion

In Australia research into religious affiliation and church attendance saw a marked decline in the number of people identifying with Christianity from the mid 1960s through to the 1970s, and a movement of people away from the formal structures of religion (Mol 1985; Wilson 1983). The statistical work of Hans Mol in the early to mid 1960s showed Australian society as fairly static where “almost everyone believed in God, where almost everyone was baptised, married and buried (or cremated) with religious rites, and where about one-third of the total population attended church each Sunday” (Wilson 1983, p. 12)¹. Wilson points out that Mol’s study was completed just short of the main movement away from religion, which occurred from about 1966 through to the end of the 1970s. After this, he says, “the static became dynamic” bringing about a “major upheaval of Australian religious beliefs and behaviour” (Wilson 1983, p. 13). This movement away from church participation was thought to highlight an increasing pattern of ‘irreligion’. Excluding the rituals of baptism, marriage and funerals, “over three quarters of the population went to church at least once [in 1961], but by 1976 over half the population had not attended a service at all” (Wilson 1983, p. 18).

During the same period, there was a significant increase in the number of people who identified themselves as having ‘no religion’; hence the question, whether ‘God’ could

¹ Wilson points out that the statistical information provided as part of Mol’s sociological study came into question, however, he holds the view that it is still an accurate the overview of Australian society for this era.

survive in Australian society (Wilson 1983). This trend has continued (at a slower pace) into the present. The 1993 National Social Science Survey (NSSS) showed that “a little under a quarter of Australians see themselves as religious and attend church, while another quarter see themselves as religious but do not attend church. The other half do not see themselves as religious” (Kaldor et al 1994, pp. 8-9). A comparison of figures for church attendance for 1996 and 2001 by the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) showed a continuing decline across mainstream denominations. In 1996 the proportion of population attending church in a typical week was estimated at 9.9% with figures in 2001 reflecting a decline to 8.8% in all Anglican, Catholic and Protestant churches (Bellamy & Castle 2004). While there were some denominations showing increased attendances (Pentecostal and Protestant denominations) they were not significant enough to offset the large continuing declines, mainly within Catholicism (NCLS 2006a). Concurrently, the number of people identifying with Christian denominations dropped from 71% in the 1996 Census to 68% in 2001 (Bellamy & Castle 2004) offset by a 1.5% increase to non-Christian religions and a 0.2% increase in the categories nominating ‘no religion’ and ‘not stated’ (NCLS 2006b).

Younger Australians show the most significant shifts away from traditional religion. The 1979 Gallup Poll showed that weekly church attendance was over three times lower for younger adults compared to older adults (Wilson 1983, p. 18). More recently, the 1996 Census recorded that while people of all ages were found to be attending church, younger people were significantly under-represented, with young adults between the ages of 20-29 years the most underrepresented. The survey data showed “while 19% of the Australian

population is aged between 20 and 29 years, only 9% of church attenders are in this age grouping". This 'under-representation' includes people up to the age of 40 years. Further, the Census found that "among people aged 15 years or over in the community, nearly half are under the age of 40 years. By comparison, less than a third of church attenders are under 40 years" (Kaldor, Dixon, Powell & NCLS team, 1999, p. 13). These lower participation rates were also reflected the 2001 Census where "the post war group actually covers an increasingly wide spectrum of ages. No longer can we simply say 'young people' are missing from the churches; those under 40 years are underrepresented (NCLS 2006c).

While overall more women than men attend church, this appears the most pronounced for the older age categories. In the younger age categories female attendances at church were marginally more than males yet still reflected declining participation rates of all church attenders (Kaldor, 1987). Importantly, "it has been shown that in Australia women engaged in full-time work have the same low church attendance levels as men in full-time work" (Kaldor et al (1999, p. 18).

In accounting for some of the shifts and changes in church attendance, Kaldor et al (1999, p. 38) suggest that switching denominations is an important factor and is particularly characteristic of younger attenders - mainly the 30-39 year age group. There has also been a substantial increase in the diversity of religious identification with Muslims and Buddhists increasing to more than 1% of the population, and a smaller but still noticeable rise in the Hindu, Sikhs, and a variety of orthodox Christian groups (Bouma 2000, p.

393). While migration patterns and the growth in religious diversity partially accounts for the proportionate decline in the major and traditional Christian denominations, Bouma suggests that it “also flows from a culture which values and encourages individuality, creative expression and novelty” (2000, p. 396). In this context, Wilson claims that “even bishops talk about ‘the post Christian era’, representing “a basic shift in beliefs and attitudes” (1983, p.12).

In this ‘post revolutionary’ era (Tacey 2003), the most common reason for not attending church is ‘boredom’ (Bellamy, Black, Castle, Hughes & Kaldor 2002, p. 13; Kelly, 1990). Church is also considered ‘irrelevant’ and ‘unfulfilling’ (Bellamy et al, 2002; Wilson, 1983) or ‘hypocritical’, meaning that what is preached in the church is not what is practiced by the church or its leaders (Wilson, 1983, 1987; Kelly, 1990). Some point to a crisis within religious institutions themselves involving a broad failure to engage the interest of the general populace, something that was once before, almost guaranteed (Tacey 2003; Hume 1997). One of the commentators, Geraldine Doogue, suggested that the situation may have come about because churches have not really kept pace with a rapidly changing society and social and economic factors affecting people’s everyday lives (Doogue Interview, CS 2003).

Younger Australian people, the post baby boomers (also sometimes called Generation X) Ruth Webber points out, have been witness to large scale social changes “like marriage breakdown, alternative family structure, changing sexual patterns, rises in unemployment, delayed marriages and loneliness” (2002, p. 40). She suggests the

churches do not seem to have provided them with solutions to these issues (ibid). Further, Bellamy et al (2002, p. 56) found that conflicting views over sexual issues appears a main reason for not attending church. David Tacey (Interview, CS 2003) suggested that for institutional religion, the revolutionary era “really was the last straw [...] because religion already wasn’t keeping pace with social change”. This analyst added that the churches were now trying “decades too late to actually have a women’s revolution, or a homosexual liberation” (ibid).

While there has been some movement away from the churches, and with only a minority of Australians still actively involved in churches, Kaldor et al (1999, p. 10) point out that most Australians still hold religious beliefs of some kind. The Australian Community Survey (1998) claims that two-thirds of Australians feel that spiritual life is important to them, with 74% believing in God, a higher power or life-force (NCLS 2006d). However, of those, around 35% believe in a personal God and 39% in a life-force of some sort (Kaldor et al, 1999, p. 9). More Australians believe in God than attend church and while 20% attend church at least monthly, 33% pray or meditate weekly, with 43% feeling a personal connection to God (ibid). While belief in God (as well as life after death and heaven) appears to persist Bouma points out “there has been a change in the images of God selected by Australians” (2000, p. 396). This includes representations and understandings of ‘God’, (or whatever alternate name is used - for example, the Universe or the Goddess), as well as the beliefs embodied therein. Further, approximately 18% of Australians often or occasionally engaged in other non-Christian practices such as seeking guidance from horoscopes, using crystals, or engaging in psychic healing or

Eastern forms of meditation (Kaldor et al, p. 9). Reflecting on these changes, and speaking for many others, Tacey (1999) considers that socially there has been a ‘death of the sky God’, and a resurrection of understanding ‘God’ through the land and nature, a point to which we shall return.

Reflections on the dimensions and consequences of change

Australia’s contemporary religious practices are postmodern in that there is an acceptance of diversity. No longer do most persons presume that there is a single over-arching worldview, nor do they accept a single organizational commitment

(Lindsay 2002, p. 44).

There is broad-brush agreement that Australia, like other Western countries, is experiencing significant change in the character of its spiritual explorations. As previously indicated, these changes are underpinned by an upswing of spiritual interest outside of the confines of the major religions and churches (Tacey 2003; Malone 1999), and can be characterised by the statement ‘I am spiritual, but not religious’. One of the commentators suggested that this “personal searching outside of all structures” is “quite new”, forming a key characteristic of a contemporary Australian spirituality, and arising because “formal worship is perceived to be out of date, and largely is out of date in its forms” (Tacey Interview, CS 2003). Lindsay felt that Australians are no longer drawing on religion for life meaning and truth, given that many find traditional religious rituals alien to their own lives and experiences. They thus seek a new language to express and

locate their personal experiences in a way that is symbolic and relevant (Lindsay Interview, CS 2003). She also pointed out, however, that those who remain within the church are also actively scrutinising their religions for truth, meaning and relevance to their everyday lives (ibid).

This interest in spirituality tends to contradict those who interpret Australian culture as cynical and laconic. Kelly (1990) sees Australian culture as young, superficial and lacking any real spiritual depth. As Bouma (2000) points out, secularism is regularly assumed to be a characteristic of Australian society and can be taken to denote both the decline of religion and its significant separation from other aspects of public life like education, politics, law, health and morality (Bouma 2000, p. 390); Against this, and given the rise in fundamentalist religions, the increasing interest in Eastern religious traditions, and the developing interest in spirituality *per se*, Tacey (1995) and Malone (1999) challenge the accuracy of the term 'secular' to describe Australian life in the new millennium.

Spirituality, according to Hughes et al (1995, p. 10), is "pursued along a wide front using a variety of practices to achieve ends which the person defines rather than conforming to the expectations of this or that religious organization". The kinds of spiritual exploration thought to be occurring in Australia include the 'new age' and personal growth movements, interest in Indigenous spirituality, the 'Goddess' movement, 'wicca' practices, tarot and psychic readings and other occult related practices. Both Lindsay (2002) and Bouma (2000) note a growing diversity of spiritual expression with Bouma

pointing to the growth of earth-based religions, Spiritualism, and Paganism during the 1990s, as well as a general increase in the numbers of people choosing ‘other’ or ‘other Christian’ census categories (2000, p. 394). These forms of spirituality have appeal, Bouma suggests, as they are not tied to traditional organisational structures, are more enabling of women’s spirituality, are related to ecological issues, require a more flexible time commitment, and are more available through a variety of mediums such as the internet, shops, markets, and at special events, festivals and retreats (ibid).

In the commentator interviews, Nancy Victorin-Vangerud suggested that one of the defining properties of the new spirituality was the understanding that spirituality is part of the ordinary world (Interview, CS 2003). It is, in other words, not about “rising above [the] ordinary world, [rather] it’s about seeking to move in love wherever one is.” As well as being a quality of the ‘new’ spirituality, this commentator believed this move also affected parts of the Christian church where it was acknowledged that “there is a social connection to spirituality and a very practical dimension as well”, she called this “practical divinity” (Victorin-Vangerud Interview, CS 2003).

A number of writers and commentators also observe that contemporary Australian spiritualities are closely linked to nature and the environment. Lindsay observed that many Australian authors, from David Tacey to Tim Winton, make this link, with people expressing “a sense of spirituality through their environment; [...] the desert – vast arid places, versus the sea and Australians love for the sea and the coast. I think that’s actually strong in contemporary spirituality” (Interview, CS 2003). Hume (1997) alongside others

such as Tacey (2003; 2000), Kohn (2003) and Malone (1999), argue that nature-based spiritual expression, or 'eco-spirituality', has strong links with the conservation movement and the growing concern about the environment and declining ecologies.

In her discussions on the growth of paganism in Australia, Hume (1997) suggests that one of its main attractions is that its rituals are dependant on both nature and participation from members. This is important, she says, because "people *want* to participate and they *want* to experience" (1997, p. 232). In Paganism, participation and experience are joined through nature and the natural environment, with rituals and worship centered on the cycles of the moon, tides, and seasons. Malone (1999, p. 18) suggests a similar rationale for the development of 'pub church', or 'spirituality of the pub'. Here people choose a more informal setting, embedded in Australian culture, to discuss spiritual issues. Against those who like Tony Kelly (2003 CS Interview), generally view Australians as not very good at talking about things like spirituality, Malone contends the 'pub church' demonstrates that Australians do like to communicate and talk about religious and spiritual issues and do seek participation and social cultural engagement. Perhaps like the pub, 'nature' is embedded in Australian culture where it is represented through images of sun, surf, bush and desert, the exterior and the interior. Partially connected to this some Australian writers call for the development of a new 'Australian theology', one that reflects Australian Indigenous heritage, ecology and landscape, and provides an avenue for a 'meaningful' and directed spiritual exploration (Tacey 2000, 1995; Malone 1999; Kelly 1990).

As previously indicated, there are considerable concerns about this newly characterised spirituality. Some believe that they are marketed to give us a “quick fix that fits into our fast-paced insular lifestyle” (Wolf 2001, p. 362), and that removed from any public conversation, spirituality risks becoming exotic or faddish. Thus Kelly, for example, believes that “bored young [people] ‘leave the church’, to whose radical imagination they were never introduced, only to apprentice themselves in the mystic lore of the East. Gurus proliferate, often with a capitalist eye on the ‘stress management’ market” (Kelly 1990, p. 9). These critics warn of the dangers of spirituality without established links to religious tradition in that it can lead to an isolated, personalised spirituality that is unguided and deceptive, superficial and lacking in both spiritual and ethical depth (Tacey 1995; Malone 1999; Kelly 1990). On this, Spohn (1997, p. 109) “wonders how such people are able to assess their spiritual experience without the intellectual and moral criteria that have been honed in religious communities”. In this sense, the call for a new Australian theology can be seen as a move to bring back some of the more established directions thought to be lost in the movement away from institutional religion.

Reflections on generational change

In relation to younger people, Hugh Mackay notes that his research reveals that it is mainly younger Australians who talk about being ‘spiritual but not religious’. He finds that younger people:

Want to draw a very sharp distinction between religion and spirituality. In fact, most typically, when we explore this sort of subject and we explore it with Australians of all ages, but particularly the young people are at pains

to say ‘look I’m not religious but...’, and then they talk about their interest in spiritual questions and ultimate questions and metaphysics and so on, and really they talk about what older Australians would describe as religious topics but they don’t want to have that label attached to it (Mackay Interview, CS 2003).

In the interviews Mackay, Tacey, and Kelly all suggested that the younger generations were responding to the choices made by the baby-boomer generation (Interviews, CS 2003). As Hodge (2001, p.35) claims, “spiritual and religious beliefs are often significantly shaped by family influences [...]. Family of origin continues to inform beliefs and experiences, regardless of whether individuals negotiate a place for themselves within their family’s tradition or exercise their right to convert to another faith tradition”. Mackay (Interview, CS 2003) suggests that the baby-boomers’ move away from institutional religion indeed impacted on their ‘offspring’ and this, in part, explains the younger generation’s separation between religion and spirituality and interest in diverse spiritualities. Reflecting on this he said:

The baby-boomers were the great iconoclasts. They were the generation who really [...] were the last generation to go to Sunday school or mass and they were the generation that really presided over the free fall in church attendance. So part of their iconoclasm was to reject their parents moral and spiritual frameworks and to say ‘that’s all part of the culture that we are moving away from’. This was the generation that the term ‘generation gap’ was invented for because their parents got such a shock that they turned away from their parent’s values (Mackay Interview, CS 2003).

Although they were iconoclasts, the baby-boomers took an interest in Eastern practices and forms of religion. Cousins (2000 in Erricker & Erricker 2001 p. xi) comments that:

After a long slumber, spirituality was awakened in the West by the arrival of spiritual teachers from the East in the 1960s. Ashrams and Zentos appeared on the horizon. Hindu gurus, Buddhist masters and Sufi sheiks began awakening Westerners from a bland secularism.

There was also an interest in practices such as yoga, meditation, and silent retreats (Driedger, McLelland & Kar, 2001). Roof (1993) observed that, “those more exposed to the counterculture movements of the 1960s” were “much more likely to have more spiritual or mystical beliefs than conventionally religious or theistic leanings” (cited in Bullis 1996, p.2). He also asserts that seekers and active mystics of this generation were more likely to believe in “reincarnation, psychic powers, ghosts, and meditation” (ibid).

Despite these developments, Mackay, Kelly and Tacey, (Interviews, CS 2003) all thought that one of the key influences on younger people’s beliefs in Australia today is the fact that the ‘boomers’ did not pass on a religious tradition to them thus leaving a space or a void to be filled. Kelly referred to this as a kind of cultural “amnesia” (Interview, CS 2003) while Tacey described how he has detected a feeling of deprivation, among his students. In this context he spoke about a “sense of deep loss and nostalgia that society used to be governed around the sacred, and it no longer is” (Tacey Interview, CS 2003). To illustrate the lack of heritage that goes with this he spoke of a student who, in reference to a poem about the second coming, asked “what was the first coming”? He felt

that this kind of lacuna was more evident in the younger students than those in the mid-to-late twenties, yet both were distinguishable from their older counterparts:

[Those][...] who are 38 now, are probably feeling – well religion held society tightly for so long that we are now breathing a sigh of relief about getting rid of it. But by the time you get to the kids who are 17-18, for whom religion is just a rumour, they don't even know the first thing about it [...] That made me realise that this new generation are so without religion they haven't a clue of what religion is being all about. There's many, many in that category now and I detect in them, not a kind of thank God religion is finished, that feeling you get from people in their 40s, but this kind of oh – we are bereft, we are without a cosmology that provides life with meaning (Tacey Interview, CS 2003).

Mackay (Interview, CS 2003) thought that a large part of what young people were doing with their interest in spirituality was “filling in the vacuum. Their parents gave them a vacuum so they have to fill it with something”. In part parallel, Doogue (Interview CS 2003) attributed the personal spiritual search or ‘new’ spirituality to a sense of discontent or boredom, or even, “counter-intuitively, because of affluence – an inability to find meaning amidst plenty”. Ruth Webber (2002, p. 40) notes an anti-authoritarian sentiment where younger people believe authority, such as that held by the church (and even parental authority) must be earned. Others noted an anti-material, anti-rational, anti-work type sentiment. Mackay, for example, referred to an American researcher who talked about “post material values” and suggested this is “quite a nice way of saying, in a tentative way, what the kids themselves are calling spirituality” (Mackay Interview, CS 2003). Lindsay noted that many younger adults “don't want to be trapped into this kind of

world which is dominated by work which they see their parents and the older generation being trapped into. And they are looking for alternatives where they can have more control over their own lives and can have more time to enjoy life and not have money as the overriding thing” (Interview, CS 2003). Moreover, commenting on the literature that she reviewed for her book she noted that “there were lots of things that said that people are sick of modernism if you like, of sort of everything if you can’t measure it, it doesn’t exist really, and there’s a whole swing away from that” (ibid). On the other hand, while Mackay concedes there is an anti-material sentiment in the contemporary interest in spirituality, he also argues “that this [has not] made them anti-material – they seem to be both” (Mackay Interview, CS 2003).

Commenting specifically on younger parents, Lindsay went on to say that:

There is a few of them who have come back to our church and brought their children because they are now probably in their thirties and they can’t find another church that is what they think a church should be. There’s a few that have gone into other churches, there is some who have dropped out, I wouldn’t think their spirituality is any less then it was then – but they can’t find a happy home for their spirituality or they are too busy with other things. But there is a group of them that have gone into quite evangelical, if not fundamental type churches (Lindsay Interview, CS 2003).

Kelly (Interview, CS 2003) agreed and suggested that it is this ‘looking for’ that holds the key for many of the generational shifts. He suggested that this search is in some ways due to “the terrible state of education [...]. That people have been deprived of their history – they have no sense of history and all of the great spiritual traditions that have nourished

it". Given this, he thought "it is little wonder that some kind of do assert their spirituality, their personal freedom and search". The common thing, he says, "is that people are looking for something and the challenge is [...] [to] say why are they doing that, what forms is it taking and how it is in some form a protest against the culture" (Kelly Interview, CS 2003).

Younger adult women

Both Tacey and Lindsay (Interviews, CS 2003) suggested that there are gender differences in how spirituality is approached. Tacey commented that he originally thought that, "women more than men were interested" in spirituality. However, upon reflection he now thinks that men just approach the topic differently to women. In his university classes (roughly 50/50 of each gender), he has noticed that, "young men often come in with a kind of problematical ambivalence, in other words, some of them come in and announce themselves as atheists" (Interview, CS 2003). His view was that this is "quite typical of young men", who will, perhaps, approach the topic in a defensive manner, and justify their interest in the course by saying, for example, "they want to find out what you people believe" or "they'll make some sort of defensive gesture so as not to make themselves vulnerable" (ibid). However, despite this it is clear to Tacey "that those young men are also on a journey and that sometimes their journey can be quite urgent". By this, he means that:

They come across as rough and ready and very resistant, but underneath there can be a real hunger [...] and I think men, both young men and old men are less in touch with their feelings, this is a gender difference. But

men seem to be no less interested at the end of the day in spirituality, even though they are less connected with their feelings (ibid).

Lindsay agreed that men and women approach the topic differently and said she has observed a gender difference between their belief patterns in both her own research and the American study she replicated. She thought that more males than females adopted the belief that “there is a personal God of transcendental existence and power whose purposes will ultimately be worked out in human history”, whereas females were more likely to believe that “there’s transcendent or divine dimension found in all manifestations of nature” (Interview, CS 2003).

A number of authors have suggested that one of the reasons for the growth in alternative spiritualities is that they are more enabling of women’s spiritualities (Bouma 2000; Hume 1997; Lindsay 2000). Hume (1997) also claims that concern for the environment and recognition of the current ecological crisis helps explain the growth of nature religions and esotericism more generally and movements which also embrace the worldviews of feminism and re-value the feminine, spiritually, emotionally and importantly, physically. She argues that this feminine dimension was previously denied, and de-valued, by the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of mainstream religions. While I explore feminist critiques of religion in detail in Chapter Three, I mention the issue here to draw attention to the fact that interest in the occult (wicca, witchcraft, ghosts etc) appears more peculiar to women and to the younger age groupings.

In understanding the changes so far discussed we need to be clear about what we mean when we talk about spirituality. This is also important for the empirical stages of research. This next part of the chapter is devoted to some closer definitional work.

Describing Spirituality

One day it dawned on me that spirituality is for me, now spending the rest of my life trying to understand the meaning and significance and the call [...], or responsibility of [...], a shared breath [...]. Spirituality as the search, the journey, to realising the significance - the deep, deep, significance - of what that gift of life is and what that means for me as a person in this incredible world that I share breath.

- Nancy Victorin Vangerud (Interview, CS 2003)

Describing spirituality with reasonable precision is a difficult task. Common to most efforts is the recognition of its essential ambiguity. Most writers (e.g., Tacey 2000; Lindsay 2002; Spohn 1997; Kelly 1990; Erricker & Erricker 2001) and the Australian ‘commentators’ interviewed for this research, regardless of their own beliefs, agreed that the meanings attached to spirituality are elusive, subjective and highly contentious, with the term embracing a variety of belief systems and worldviews. Both understandings and practices of spirituality appear to be becoming more diverse and all encompassing, while spiritual expression and practice is also diverse, multifaceted and personalised (Tacey 2003). Accompanying this, spirituality is now acknowledged in many professional areas such as social work, business, psychology, health, environmental science, community services and education. Tacey suggests “spirituality is now for everyone, and almost

everyone seems to be involved, but in radically different ways” (2003, p. 38). In view of these changes Lindsay points out that any contemporary understanding of spirituality needs to consider “diverse ‘spiritualities’”; whether they be those of the great world religions or of native peoples whose rich spiritualities are being increasingly acknowledged within western societies” (Lindsay 2002, p. 23). Given this diversity, I explore three ways in which describing spirituality can be approached: etymology; religious associations and experiential interpretations. Finally, in completing the chapter, I turn to consider some of the practical and everyday applications of spirituality.

Etymology

Tracing the term spirituality to its etymological origins without reference to a particular context or belief system provides a useful starting point. Lindsay (2002, p.21) for example, explores the Latin roots of the word and suggests that, “spirituality derives from the Latin, *spiritualitas*, literally meaning ‘breath of life’”. In pointing out the variable properties of spirituality she notes that while the Encarta World Dictionary describes the word ‘spiritual’ as “‘relating to the soul or spirit, usually in contrast to material things’”; it goes on to open up various interpretations by offering “several very different meanings for the word ‘spirit’” (2002, p. 21). Using a similar form of analysis, we find that the Oxford Compact Dictionary and Thesaurus (1997) offers definitions of spiritual (the adjective of the noun spirituality) that are equally open to interpretation. Here words such as ‘of spirit’; ‘religious’, ‘divine and inspired’; ‘refined and sensitive’ are provided. These words in turn, embrace further terms, and in this sense, serve to contribute to a

thematic or generalised understanding of spirituality – a collation of characteristics that taken together serve as some kind of definitional framework.

While the word ‘spiritual’ stems from Latin roots, some suggest that the specific use of the word ‘spirituality’ developed later within the Christian tradition, and in particular, the Catholic denomination (Lindsay 2002; Spohn 1997; Kelly Interview, CS 2003). Lindsay (2002, p. 22), for example, notes that the noun spirituality, as opposed to the adjective spiritual, “did not appear in Christian writing until the fifth century”. She suggests that the original use of the term emerged from attempts to “translate the Greek noun for spirit *pneuma*, and its adjective *pneumatikos* as they appear in the New Testament Pauline letters” and that the word was used to denote “whatever was under the influence of the ‘Spirit of God’ (2002, p. 22). It wasn’t until the seventeenth century that spirituality was used “to express a personal, affective relationship with God” (Lindsay 2002, p. 23). Kelly (Interview, CS 2003) also noted that spirituality had biblical roots in the notion of *pneumatikos*, leading to a Christian interpretation of the spiritual person as one “who is possessed by the holy spirit and all the gifts of the spirit, faith, hope, love. So that kind of a whole realm of new life which involves you and comes from living in Christ [...], not spirituality in the abstract sense, but the person who is transformed in this way” (Interview, CS 2003).

As well as expressing a personal affective relationship with God, spirituality was sometimes used negatively in the seventeenth century to describe ‘mystics’ who were considered elitist in that they were “too refined, too rarefield, and separated from

ordinary Christian life” (Lindsay 2002, p.23). Spohn notes that while spirituality “originally referred to living according to the Spirit of Jesus in response to God” (1997, p. 112), this meaning gradually shifted towards an elitist description indicating that spirituality was “the special concern of ‘souls seeking perfection’” rather than as a reflection of “the common experience of all Christians” (ibid). Lindsay claims it was a commonly held suspicion of mystics that led to the term disappearing from the religious vocabulary of Catholics in the early eighteenth century, only to reappear in French writings in the early part of the twentieth century. The term spirituality was then “often associated with attempts to distinguish between dogma and the study of the spiritual life, as well as with an increasing emphasis on religious consciousness and the experiential. In short, it had come to denote the interior life of the Christian who was striving for perfection” (Lindsay 2002, p. 23).

While Lindsay (2002, p. 23) thus claims that ‘spirituality’ originated in the Catholic context, she also observes that more recently the term has been adopted by some Protestants, other religious scholars, and even secularists and Marxists. It is only in the past two decades, Spohn (1997) suggests, that the kind of elitism associated with mystical spiritual expression has been rejected in favor more inclusive definitions.

Religious associations

As demonstrated through the work of Lindsay and Spohn, spirituality has been traditionally associated with religious and mystic understandings of human existence, and connections with a higher being or power. In a contemporary sense, Erricker and

Erricker, (2001: xvii) note that, “the meaning of the term *spiritual* is transmutable. It does not have a set definition but is understood according to its relationship with other conceptions with a similar fluidity of meaning, notably religion, culture and identity”. While religion and spirituality are sometimes treated as synonymous, most writers (e.g., Canda, 1997; Carroll, 1997) characterise them as “overlapping but distinct constructs” (Hodge 2001). Hodge (2001, p. 36) makes a distinction whereby spirituality is “an individual’s relationship with God (or perceived transcendence), while religion is defined as a particular set of beliefs, practices, and rituals that have been developed in community by people who share similar existential experiences of transcendent reality”. In short, Hodge suggests that, “religion is essentially the organized communal expression of individual spirituality” (ibid). A corresponding definition of religion is found in Bullis’ statement that “religion refers to the outward form of belief including rituals, dogmas and creeds, and denominational identity” (1996, p. 2). Similarly, Wolf describes spirituality “as more inner directed; [whereas] religion turns outward” (2001, p. 365).

Many others express this kind of dichotomy where spirituality represents the interior world of the self in relation to the transcendental whereas religion represents the exterior world of the self in relation to prescribed practices and beliefs. This links with a corresponding distinction about the core of each dimension; in religion, it lies in the claims inherent in each faith; in spirituality with the qualities practiced by each person. In his writings on contemporary spirituality, His Holiness the Dalai Lama makes such a distinction:

Religion, I take to be concerned with faith in the claims of salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or *nirvana*. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, ritual, prayer, and so on. Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit - such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony - which bring happiness to both self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with questions of *nirvana* and salvation, are directly connected to religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however (cited in Erricker & Erricker, 2001, p. 81).

For Tacey (2003), this separation highlights a significant shift in interpretations of spirituality and a movement away from religious associations and spirituality's historical roots. He suggests that, "spirituality now refers to our relationship with the sacredness of life, nature, and the universe, and this relationship is no longer felt to be confined to formal devotional practice or to institutional places of worship" (2003, p. 38). In a similar vein, Sermabeikian suggests that spirituality, while expressed through religion, is also expressed through philosophy and culture and "transcends ideologies, rituals, dogma, and institutions" (1994, p. 180). She points out that it was Carl Jung more than anyone else who postulated that a universal concept of spirituality exists which, when explored, enables us to see beyond differences in religious beliefs and philosophical viewpoints (1994, p. 178). Further, she suggests that spiritual views are often based on theistic, atheistic, or humanistic values and that "a hypothesis of God as existent or nonexistent, as an entity or a force remains one of the eternal ultimate reality issues in religion and philosophy" (1994, p. 180).

Experiential interpretations

As far as religious orthodoxy is concerned, spirituality should remain linked to religion, while for others there is an acceptance of more broadly defined conceptual and experiential understandings. Sermabeikian (1994) suggests that these broader understandings can be used to bridge differing belief systems and provide some common ground and can encompass “the search for more universally accepted concepts” relating directly to human needs and aspirations (1994, p. 180).

Many writers suggest that thematically treating spirituality is the only way to circumnavigate some of the difficulties associated with its vague properties. As a remedy for the difficulties in offering a precise answer to the question “what is spirituality”, Tacey proposes that we should “talk around the subject and provide some hints and descriptions” (2000, p. 17). His hints include the suggestion that spirituality is “a desire for connectedness, which often expresses itself as an emotional relationship with an invisible sacred presence” and that “to those who experience this relationship, it is real, transformative and complete” (ibid). Using O’Brien (1992) as example, Canda (1997, p. 304) suggests that, “it is not necessary to arrive at universal agreement about a precise definition as long as a cluster of related themes are evoked by the use of the concept”. As the following citation illustrates O’Brien’s themes are broad ranging:

Morality; the meaning and purpose of life; integration and wholeness; creativity and intuition; altruistic service; mystery; traditions; rituals and myths; virtues; transpersonal states of consciousness and experiences; openness; willingness, surrender and receptivity; freedom and

responsibility; wisdom or revealed knowledge; prayer, meditation and contemplation; understandings about suffering and death; relation to ultimate reality; relations with non-physical reality; the path to enlightenment or salvation; and a sensitive awareness of the earth and nonhuman world (ibid).

Illustrating a similar multi-dimensional definition, Sermabeikian (1994) points to the nine related dimensions of spirituality developed by Elkins et al (1988): “transcendent dimension, meaning and purpose in life, mission in life, sacredness in life, material values, altruism, ideals, awareness of the tragic, and fruits of spirituality” (p, 180-181).

Notions of transcendence and transformation are important to many writers in describing spirituality (Kaldor, Black, Hughes & Castle 2004). Erricker & Erricker (2000, p. xviii) propose that spirituality concerns itself with transcending the individual and the ontological insecurities that characterise the postmodern world. Bullis (1996, p. 2) defines spirituality “as the relationship of the human person to something or someone who transcends themselves” with the transcendent person or value taking a variety of forms. Further, spirituality for Bullis refers to the “inner feelings and experiences of the immediacy of a higher power [...] rarely amenable to the political formulations of creedal statements or to theological discriminations” (1996, p. 2). In this sense, he claims spirituality is by nature eclectic and inclusive. (ibid). Lindsay similarly suggests that transcendence can transform the personal and notes Bradford’s (1979) observation that it refers to something ‘other’ “which may, paradoxically, be both ‘within’ and ‘beyond’” (2002, p. 26). Tacey (2003) also emphasises the transformative element of spirituality and refers as well to the capacity to cope with uncertainty, indicating that in his

understanding of spirituality, there is an element of faith. Contemporary spirituality, he suggests, “seeks a sensitive, contemplative, transformative relationship with the sacred, and is able to sustain levels of uncertainty in its quest because respect for mystery is paramount” (2003, p. 11). Doogue (Interview, CS 2003) suggested spirituality is about “admitting a sense of mystery into your life” and that it is “anything that defines the quest for other than the utterly rational in people’s lives. So that it is a sense of search for what you would say the numinous, the God, the transcendent”.

This sense of transforming the self through contact with the unknown or numinous was often couched in terms of a personal ‘journey’ or ‘quest’. Tacey (Interview, CS 2003) for example, sees “spirituality is an essentially personal thing, it is a personal relationship with the sacred or perhaps less definitively than that, a personal quest or adventure for a relationship with the sacred values, sacred meanings”. Similarly, Mackay (Interview, CS 2003, personal communication) noted that when people talked about spirituality “they are talking about the ‘inner life’ the sort of ‘inward journey.’” Part of this journey, he suggested, is that “people often talk about ‘discovering themselves’ - that spirituality is about ‘finding out who you really are’”. Later he reflected that “if you are religious, you act in these ways, but if you are a spiritual being, then it’s a much more laissez-faire approach to how you might act because it’s all about your inner state and your personal journey” (Interview, CS 2003).

Canda’s (1988) notion of spirituality, while still including a transcendental element and personal relationship with a sacred being or God, also involves elements of meaning and

purpose. From this perspective spirituality is regarded as “the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the non-human environment, and for some, God” (1988, p. 243). It is notable that he thus also incorporates interpersonal relationships and relationships with the environment as part of spirituality. Victorin-Vangerud (Interview, CS 2003) suggests that “spirituality is a vitality, a living thing, a very deep hunger and thirst for life in its fullness and its breadth and its right relationship with other people”. Similarly, Erricker & Erricker (2001, p. xviii) understand “the spiritual to be an act or process of relationship: with others, the divine, the natural world, which places the emphasis on growth, reflection, responsibility, altruism, and even denial. In this, there is a sense of not just subjectivity but intersubjectivity”. More simply, Kaldor *et al.* (2004) say that spirituality incorporates “the different ways in which we make sense of the world and seek to find our place in it” (2004, p. 2).

Canda (1990a, p. 13 in Canda 1997, p. 302) provides an extensive statement about spirituality, distinguishing its general meaning from the particular ways in which it may be experienced and expressed:

I conceptualise spirituality as the *gestalt* of the total process of human life and development, encompassing biological, mental, social, and spiritual aspects. It is not reducible to any of these components: rather, it is the wholeness of what it is to be human. This is the most broad meaning of the term. Of course, a person’s spirituality is concerned significantly with the spiritual aspect of experience. In the narrow sense of the term spirituality, it relates to the spiritual component of an individual or group’s experience. The *spiritual* relates to the person’s search for a sense of meaning and

morally fulfilling relationships between oneself, other people, the encompassing universe, and the ontological ground of existence, whether a person understands this in terms that are theistic, atheistic, notheistic, or any combination of these.

While Canda thus distinguishes spirituality from religion, he sees the merits of this approach as being inclusive of diverse beliefs and behaviors. He notes, however, that broadening the notion of spirituality in this way might not be “accepted in many particular religious traditions or in the academic field of religious studies” (Canda 1997, p. 304). He also acknowledges, importantly for my purposes, that “the notion of spirituality as the wholeness of the person is so encompassing that it may be difficult to operationalize for research purposes or to distinguish it in practice from other aspects of human experience” (Canda 1997, p. 304). I take up this point as a methodological consideration in Chapter Four.

In contrast to those sympathetic with broader notions of spirituality, some suggest that its vague properties render it inadequate to describe the sacred dimension of people’s lives. Kelly (1990, p. 6), for example, believes that it resonates “rather too abstractly and prettily to communicate something about real life and radical imagination”. In considering criticisms such as this, Canda (1997) suggests that it is the ‘mystical’ quality of many current definitions that contribute to this ambiguity. The mystical, he says, goes “beyond the limitations of concepts and reason to direct experience of the ground of our being on forces considered to be sacred” (1997, p. 304). Similarly, Dupres (1987) (cited in Canda 1997, p. 304) described five characteristics of mystical experience:

- It is ineffable – that is, deeply private and incommunicable except by symbols or metaphor.
- It is noetic – that is, infusing life with a sense of all-encompassing order and integration.
- It is often experienced passively, as an undeserved gift, even if prepared for by disciplines.
- The experience usually has a transient and fluctuating course.
- The experience may result in a sense of profound, transpersonal communion with a higher, deeper, or more complete level of reality than one has in ordinary experience.

Bishop Spong recognises the limits of our ordinary language in describing the spiritual experience and suggests that spirituality “points to a presence that is assumed to be real but cannot be easily described. It speaks to a discontent rising out of the human situation that compels us to venture into the unknown. It carries within it hints of transcendence or limitlessness, a destiny perceived but never fulfilled or a reality acknowledged but never proven” (1998, p. 101). This corresponds directly with Canda’s suggestion that the mystical aspects of spirituality are often “indirect, metaphorical, imprecise, and even paradoxical. Mystical experience is not irrational, but rather transrational and transpersonal” (1997, p. 304).

Spirituality and everyday life

Life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death whirs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct

- Irvin Yalom 1980 (cited in Angell Dennis & Dumain 1998, p. 619).

Despite the emphasis on mystery and transcendence, one of the key characteristics of contemporary spirituality is the emphasis on moving beyond abstract conceptualisations to understanding spirituality as a practical resource for everyday life. Several of the Australian commentators noted how feelings of a personal void in one's life often prompted people to embark on a spiritual search (Kelly; Doogue; Mackay; Interviews CS, 2003). This, in its turn, was related to the decline of religion and the uncertainties of postmodern living (Lindsay; Tacey; Interviews CS 2003), as well as the emptiness of consumerism (Kelly Interview, CS 2003). There are also a range of personal circumstances that can provide the grounds for spiritual change and growth, often stemming from changing life circumstances. For example, Hodge (2001) suggests that the salience of spirituality increases with age, while Lindsay (2002) talks more broadly about lifestage and the quest for spiritual meaning. She suggests that it is accelerated in childhood and old age, as well as in times of existential crisis (2002, p. 8).

In relation to periods of crisis, Balk notes that bereavement “challenges one's assumptions about human existence and provides the grounds for spiritual change” (1999, p. 485). Hume (1997) adds to this spontaneous metaphysical experience. Elaborating on this, she suggests many people who turn to spirituality “have had supramundane experiences and intense feelings of a personal nature which they have been unable to explain, such as a feeling of being linked with all of nature, or a sensation of ‘something which is difficult to describe but can only be felt’” (Hume 1997, p. 170). Further:

Sometimes, but not always, an out-of-body experience is brought on by a near-death experience and is sometimes mentioned as the catalyst for the personal spiritual quest. After such an experience there is often a change in the individual's way of thinking and a shift in religious conviction (Hume 1997, p. 171).

Because people may be left with the feeling that the experience was vivid and more real than ordinary life, the event is imprinted on the mind as outstanding and they speak of their "feeling of sacredness, or of witnessing something transcendent" (Hume 1997, p. 195-196).

Importantly, Griffin & Tobin point out that the experience of grief can extend to general everyday life experiences and beyond the times of bereavement. They note "we can grieve also for the loss of things – possessions, expectations, styles of life, parts of our bodies, hopes and dreams - if those things have been important for our living" (1997, p. 29). There is a body of literature that develops these issues further, and talks about personal experiences of grief and loss and their catalytic effects in relation to the spiritual search. Angell et al (1988, p. 623) suggest that "significant losses often serve as turning points in individuals lives and lead to new perspectives on the meaning of what is important in living". For them, spirituality contributes to our capacity to deal with death and grief as it informs our beliefs about why things happen in the larger scheme of things. In this way "our understanding of meaning and purpose in our lives guides what sense we can make of the loss [...] as we bridge the past, live with present and find our path to the future" (1988, p. 619). However, Balk asserts that life crisis alone is not sufficient to

engender spiritual change and three conditions need to be present for it to occur: “The situation must create a psychological imbalance or disequilibrium that resists readily being stabilized; there must be time for reflection; and the person’s life must forever afterwards be colored by the crisis” (1999, p. 485).

More broadly, a growing body of social work literature suggests that spirituality can be used to “develop viable strategies to both meet basic needs and maintain mental health” (Sermabeikian 1994, p. 178). Hodge lists a growing body of research on spirituality as a mechanism of resilience and path for recovery for a plethora of social and personal issues: mental health, coping ability, self-esteem, realising personal strengths, recovery from divorce, homelessness, sexual assault and substance abuse (2001a, p. 204). Larson & Larson (2003) add to this emotional illness, suicide, depression, coping with surgery and medical illness, health, and dealing with negative outcomes. On this, she suggests that “instead of seeing themselves as isolated individuals, overwhelmed by life’s circumstances, clients see themselves as under the providential care of god. Disempowering discourses can be altered by such insights, opening up new possibilities to address problems” (2001, p.43). Spirituality has also found particular practical application among practitioners in dealing with addiction (Tangenburg 2001; Hodge, Cardenas & Montoya 2001; Hodge 2001a). Thus DiLorenzo, Johnson & Bussey (2001) contend that “spirituality is one of the essential foundations for the remediation of an addictive disease” (p, 258). The 12- step program used by alcoholics anonymous is a frequently cited example of a spiritually based recovery program.

Concluding reflections

Despite its ambiguity, and whether or not it is associated with religion, it is clear that spirituality in the contemporary context is interpreted in a number of ways and holds some common and core characteristics. In Australia these characteristics are generally described with reference to the overall decline in mainstream church attendance and in relation to an affiliation with the natural environment and landscape. Spirituality in response to the broader and shifting cultural context is formed against a background of shifting beliefs and values, 'postmodern' diversity, individualism, consumerism, and a growing sense of anti-rationalism and anti-materialism. Hence the rising tide of spiritual interest can in a sense be located as a response to the anxieties caused by a changing society. Spirituality in connection to nature and the vastness of the Australian landscape, and away from a secularised society, shapes an earth bound, mystical, experiential and participative sense of 'other'.

Some key themes emerged from the literature and comments reviewed here in relation to the impact of spirituality on individual lives. Here it was characterised in terms of its capacity to transcend ontological insecurity, transform the individual, define relationships and relationship behaviour, and to assist people to deal with grief and crisis; with all of these being directly related to meaning and purpose. Of particular interest to this thesis, however, is the practical application of spirituality to everyday life events in finding meaning and broader existential purpose. This relates to the way in which beliefs are shaped in the context of broad scale social change and competing interests. This query

informs the basis of the next chapter where I explore sociological theory in relation to religion, consciousness, the apprehension of meaning and its location in the realities of everyday life.

CHAPTER TWO:

FUNDAMENTAL THEMES AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The individual soul touches upon the world soul like a well reaches for the water table. That which sustains the universe beyond thought and language, and that which is at the core of us and struggles for expression, is the same thing. The finite within the infinite, the infinite within the finite.

Yann Martel - *Life of Pi*

Introduction

Historically, religion and spirituality, and the beliefs and values contained within, have played a key role in society, and amongst individuals, in dealing with grief, loss, and pain; ascribing purpose and meaning to life; and providing a sense of place and belonging in the world. The sociology of religion has held, as its core, an interest in the role of religion in human affairs and has attempted through various means and methodologies to understand these social roles and the broader social realities and relations within which it exists. Within the discipline, with its emphasis on structural and functional concerns, religion tends to subsume notions of spirituality. Because of this sociological discussions specific to religion may not allow for distinctions to be drawn between the more traditional forms of religious phenomena and other non-traditional belief systems (Jary & Jary 2000). As a result, these particular theoretical perspectives are not necessarily helpful when it comes to the dimensions of a personalised spirituality. Nevertheless, some of the classical theorists more generally considered the hub of the sociology of religion - Durkheim and Weber, and to a lesser extent Marx - still offer a useful pathway

to explore the social nature of spirituality in relation to religion. I therefore use their insights as the foundation for the first part of this chapter.

Throughout this discussion, and the thesis more generally, I purposely de-emphasise the prominence of the religious versus spiritual distinction and the various considerations of what is religion, and what is spirituality, and what is not. In doing so, I rest with an underlying assumption that religion and spirituality do possess some core and common characteristics through particular beliefs and belief systems, and it is on these commonalities that I focus in this chapter. This allows me to leave behind the entrenched dialogue, on the rightness and wrongness of religion versus spirituality. To judge between them is not the purpose of this thesis, rather – as I have suggested – it is to bring to light the ways in which younger women in Australia themselves understand spirituality, and how this shapes, and is shaped by, their everyday lives.

In my initial discussion, I pay particular attention to notions of ‘consciousness’, ‘meaning’, and ‘belief’, as this allows for a deeper and richer exploration of the spiritual dimension and its location in the everyday contemporary world. This exploration takes place on three separate, yet interrelated levels which are of core interest – society, spirituality, and the individual - and relates to an assumption I touched on in the introductory stages of the thesis regarding this interrelationship. In more detail, my suggestion is that beliefs stand as the product of a triangular relationship between ‘society’ (in this case, the broader Western social context); the available religious and spiritual forms in a given culture (the particular traditions, codes, and practices available);

and individual biography (personal accounts and life experiences). It is to the intersections of this triangle that I devote most of my attention in this chapter with the awareness that ‘meaning’ and the construction of ‘meaning’ are critical touchstones in all corners of this triangle.

As indicated, the main limitation of using classical theorists is that they do little to illuminate the more personalised nature of spirituality. Weber says more about the individual/religious nexus than either Marx or Durkheim. Relevant here is Psathas’ (1973, p. 2) point that many see Weber’s approach to be “prephenomenological” because of his focus on the interpretative understanding (*verstehen*) of social action. In exploring social action Weber emphasised the subjective meanings attached to action by the acting individual. How the individual apprehends meaning is a primary concern of this thesis. Accordingly, later in the chapter, I focus on phenomenological theorists, Berger and Luckmann, whose notions of the universe of meaning provide a useful foundation to understanding this process. They are particularly useful for this thesis because their phenomenological approach incorporates the influence of a range of the more macro-sociological insights as well as embracing the compatible aspects of symbolic interactionism from theorists such as Mead and Cooley and Simmel. These micro-sociological theorists all see society as an unfolding cultural process with the individual and society closely interrelated. In my exploration of Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality*, I pay particular attention to the development of self and identity, personal experiences, and social expression. The apprehension of meaning takes centre stage as I illuminate the ways in which prevailing cultural discourses infiltrate and

influence the life and language of the individual.

The classical foundations

Sociological approaches to religion operate on the assumption that religion is a response to the uncertain forces of nature and experiences of living. In Marxist-allied perspectives, it may also be assumed that religion exists as a means of social control and as a way of instilling socially desired moral behaviour. As far as the first of these is concerned, religion can be seen either as a response to the human condition or, as a contributing cause and interlocutor in the creation of meaninglessness. Contemporary conditions such as industrialisation, modernisation, capitalism and secularisation are considered important in producing a state of disruption at a social and individual level, creating conditions of dislocation and meaninglessness. The classical theorists thus introduced terms such as ‘anomie,’ ‘alienation’, or ‘meaninglessness’, to describe various characteristics of modern society. Thus, Marx discussed the alienation of the worker from labour and product, leaving routinised and boring jobs. Durkheim used the term anomie to describe a lack of meaning in life for people not anchored by social values and institutions, while Weber considered increasing rationality and the tendency towards systematic and routinised order to create a disenchanting society and one with an entrenched sense of meaninglessness and loss of wonder and spirituality (Bulbeck 1995, p. 313).

In further discussing these theorists my interest rests primarily on what they held to be the essence of human nature and their respective notions of ‘spirit’ and its expression. In

exploring these questions, I start by offering a brief introduction to each theorist and their key points on religion.

This discussion of Marx, Weber and Durkheim needs to be prefaced by an acknowledgement of the gender blindness² characteristic of the time and of their work. It is also important to remember that Durkheim was writing from “a profoundly Western, Judeo-Christian lens (Erickson 1993, p. 9). Weber, while rejecting his Protestant past, centres much of his analysis on Protestant asceticism. And while Marx declared himself an atheist, he was initially baptised as Christian and earlier descended from a long line of Rabbis in the Hebrew tradition (Raines 2002).

A brief introduction to Marx, Durkheim, and Weber

Marx’s views on religion are often cited as ‘irreligious’ - a point which he himself acknowledges: “The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man” (Marx 2002, p. 171; emphasis original). His views had a residual Darwinian evolutionary perspective also resonant in Comtean sociology. Comte viewed religion as intellectual ‘error’ - a stage of thought in the development of humans that would eventually be superseded by the advances of science and technology (Morris 1991). At the same time, however, Marx insisted on basing his theory in the actual material reality of people’s lives. Commenting on this in *The German Ideology*, he wrote that:

² Classical and earlier contemporary theorists use the word ‘man’ as the representative term for both men and women. As a women-centred thesis, this reference is inappropriate. However, I have kept all quotes in their original form in the interest of fluency and urge the reader to make note of the disjunction.

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, or imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men and on the basis of their real life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process (Marx 1977, p. 164).

Marx made an important theoretical departure from other and earlier theorists in that he presented religious doctrine as a form of structural ideology for maintaining class oppression. Under this view, religious doctrine both validates the position of the rich and deifies poverty thereby suppressing any revolutionary impulse that may be contained in the poorer and working classes (Haralambos et al 1996). Interestingly, though, Marx also took a more psychologistic point of view on the origins of religion. In a similar way to Freud, who saw religion as an illusory mass neurosis constructed by humans for their self-protection, Marx thought that religion originated in the emotions, namely the fear and anxiety provoked by natural phenomena (Wilson 1982). Echoing Comte, he believed that this response would ultimately disappear with its falsity uncovered by intellectual development. This was to be marked by a return to 'true' consciousness and a life based in its material reality (Bottomore, 1972).

While Marx's materialism suggests that economic forces influence all forms of social and cultural expression, including religion, his overall epistemology is in fact concerned with uncovering the essence of human nature and is aimed at spiritual emancipation (Fromm 1996). Marx believed human nature to be grounded in biological, anatomical,

physiological and psychological factors as well as being modified in each historical epoch (Fromm 1966). For him, human nature consisted of three basic qualities: the connection to body, the connection to nature, and the intellect. It was consciousness – the experience of the intellect - that he considered the essential element of ‘being’. Consciousness, for Marx, is decidedly social:

Consciousness is [...] from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all. Consciousness is at first, of course, merely consciousness concerning the *immediate* sensuous environment and consciousness of the limited connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious. At the same time it is consciousness of nature, which first appears to men as a completely alien, all-powerful, and unassailable force (1961, p. 86; emphasis original).

He believed that consciousness was an expression of spirit – the essence of humanity: “Spirit alone is the true essence of man and the true form of spirit is thinking spirit, logical, speculative spirit” (Marx 1977, p. 100). This capacity for thought separates human beings from animals, and is the means through which individuals interact socially. For Marx, because consciousness is social, the individual must be, firstly, a social being as this is what expresses the essence of our – ‘*species-being*’ (1977, p. 101). It is through consciousness that the world is apprehended and comprehended, thus, making it real.

Marx’s concept of *species-being* and *species-life* are designed to draw attention to a number of relationships – person to self; person to person; and person to nature (noting that Marx considers the economic world a natural state and a primary influence over the

first two relationships). In all of these relationships, Marx suggests that humans only realise their *species-being* by their productivity, by what they create. He states; “the real, active relationship of man to himself as a species-being or the manifestation of himself as a real species-being, i.e. as a human being, is only possible if he uses all his species powers to create” (1977, p. 101). In relation to this he also observes that “man is a species-being not only in that practically and theoretically he makes both his own and other species into his objects, but also, and this is only another way of putting the same thing, he relates himself as to the present, living species, in that he relates to himself as to a universal and therefore free being” (Marx 1977, p. 81). The first step of objectification, he suggests, is an awareness of life or things outside of the self, and an awareness of the self in relation to that object.

Marx argues that alienation occurs when man is estranged from his essence as species-being, whether in terms of labour, other people, or self. He argues “in general, the statement that man is alienated from his species-being, means that one man is alienated from another as each of them is alienated from the human essence” (Marx 1977, p. 83). While his primary emphasis is on alienated labour as far as capitalism is concerned, he suggests religion can produce a similar effect:

The more the worker externalises himself in his work, the more powerful becomes the alien, objective world that he creates opposite himself, the poorer he becomes himself in his inner life and the less he can call his own. It is just the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself (Marx 1977, p. 78-79).

While Marx believed religion contributed to the spiritual dislocation of humans, he also recognised that it could be an expression of real distress. Here he commented that:

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people (Marx 1844 in Marx and Engels 1957, p. 42; emphasis original).

While recognising that religion could be both an expression of, and protest against distress, his main point remains – namely that religion contributes to the experience of suffering because it does nothing to change its causes and therefore does not, and cannot, provide a pathway for true happiness and fulfillment. Because capitalism ensures that people become isolated from their species-being during the process of production, Marx believes that only revolutionising the social order will achieve true emancipation. The pathway to meaningful existence thus demands radical change of the economic past and the jettisoning of religion (Marx 1977, p. 64).

Like Marx, Durkheim identified religion as “an eminently social thing” (Fields 1995, p. xix), one that is founded and based in reality. He also excluded the idea of god and transcendence from his work and as Wilson suggests viewed the concept of a deity as “an unconscious attempt to represent, and to objectify in symbolic terms, society to itself” (1982, p. 8). He argued, however, that no religion could be considered false, as all belief systems meet the needs “that are part and parcel of human life” (Fields 1995, p. xviii). From his functionalist viewpoint he argued that if religions did not express and construct

social reality, they would not survive (Fields 1995). Concurrently with this, he argued that religion expressed the collective consciousness.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim described how in primitive societies, religious mourning rituals play a major role in dealing with the personal and collective experience of grief. Thus in relation to the Australian Aboriginal communities he studied, he suggested that common religious beliefs and rituals served to assist the community to deal with the inevitability of death, and to express grief, anger and fear (Durkheim 1995 p, 397; 400-401). He was very clear that this was something social which bound and obligated the individual:

Mourning is not the natural response of a private sensibility hurt by a cruel loss. It is an obligation imposed by the group. One laments not simply because one is sad but because one is obligated to lament. It is a ritual façade that must be adopted out of respect for custom, but one that is largely independent of the individual's emotional states (1995, p. 401).

Obligations such as these are sanctioned by mythical and/or social penalties. Thus, for example, if the relative of the deceased does not properly carry out the appropriate mourning ritual “the soul of the deceased dogs his steps and kills him” (Durkheim 1995, p. 400-401).

Durkheim (1995) found the idea of the soul important for theorising about human life. He dismissed Tylor's (1871) notion that the soul was invented to explain the experience of dreaming, arguing that this was too trivial to explain an idea as complex as the

‘individual plus something else’, which is fundamental to most notions of the soul. Instead, he postulated that the idea of the soul was fundamental to the everyday problem of death and continuity of life:

Belief in the immortality of souls is the only way man is able to comprehend a fact that cannot fail to attract his attention; the perpetuity of the group’s life. The individuals die, but the clan survives, so the forces that constitute his life must have the same perpetuity. These forces are the souls that animate the individual bodies, because it is in and by them that the group realizes itself. For that reason, they must endure (Durkheim 1995, p. 271).

Because he found the idea of the soul was absent from totemic religion, Durkheim surmised that the soul was not necessarily a religious belief, and was instead a notion more contemporaneous with humanity (Durkheim 1995, p. 242).

Somewhat similarly to Marx’s notions of consciousness and self-consciousness, Durkheim (1995) hypothesised that, as society constitutes itself, human mentality also (simultaneously) constitutes itself. This suggests the entrenchment of the individual in the social realm and the fundamental social nature of consciousness – the *Conscience Collective*. Religion, Durkheim suggests, is “first and foremost a system of ideas by which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it” (Durkheim 1995, p. 227). In this way, Durkheim regards human nature as essentially religious. It is through shared mental constructs (*Representations Collectives*), “that human beings collectively view themselves, each

other, and the natural world” (Fields 1995, p xviii). This means that society precedes the individual with the social group being “the source of all higher values, and of culture, and no individual can affect them directly” (Jureidini 2000, p. 25). Society has integrity, functions as a whole, and is more than the sum of its parts - it has a reality of its own kind (*sui generis*) (ibid).

Durkheim (1938) asserts that social facts, or religious facts, “exist prior to, and function independently of, the individual who uses them” (in Abernethie 2001, p. 83). He contends that religion is not just a collection of individual beliefs and practices coming together, but rather, that religious beliefs and practices form and exist because of social relationships. Here he argues that:

The individual by himself would never have been able to form anything that resembled the idea of the gods, the myths and dogmas of the religions, the idea of duty and moral discipline, and so on. And what shows that all these beliefs and practices are not the simple extension of individual ideas is that they are invested with an ascendancy by virtue of which they impose themselves on the individual: proof that they do not derive from him but come to him from a source which is external and superior to him (Durkheim 1973, pp. 16-18).

Religion, then, “is a way of knowing and thinking about reality” that influences the individual and to which the individual succumbs (Erickson 1993, p. 5).

One of the pivotal ways in which we order our social worlds, and in particular our religious beliefs Durkheim (1975, p. 113) suggests, is by distinguishing between sacred

and profane. This, he suggested, involved a classification of the 'ideal' or 'real' which was characteristic of religious thought. The sacred and profane represent a radical dualism where we imagine 'a sort of logical void' between them and do not allow them to intermingle:

The sacred thing is preeminently that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity. It is true that this prohibition cannot go as far as to make all communication between the two worlds impossible; if the profane were prevented from entering into relations with the sacred, the sacred would serve no useful purpose (1975, p. 117).

It is our beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends that express the nature of sacred things through "the virtues and power attributed to them, their history, their relations to each other and to profane things" (Durkheim 1975, p. 113-114). Profane things are not vested with the same dignity and power as those considered sacred and may crudely refer to human beings in everyday life. However, different cultures influence which category presides over where – whether located as distinct from the physical universe, in the transcendental or idealistic realm or grounded in the material (1975, p. 115). Sacred, and what is considered sacred, does not have to be linked to the idea of a god or gods, as it is the admittance of the existence of sacred things and the practices based upon them that is the primary feature of religious thought and the basis of religion itself (1975, p. 114).

Like Marx, Durkheim took an evolutionary view of religion, where the role of religion would become increasingly limited and eventually defunct in modern society. He forecast that other agencies such as school and professional associations would eventually take

over from religion in meeting the functions of social order and cohesion (Wilson 1982). This evolutionary view can be linked, in part, to his notion of the changing forms of social solidarity. In the words of Morris (1991, p. 243):

In traditional societies with a low division of labour, the social structure consists of a 'system of homogenous segments' and integration was achieved by a common-value system, the collective conscience, individuals in the society sharing identical beliefs and sentiments. In societies with a high division of labour, social groups and institutions are heterogenous, and solidarity is the outcome not of shared beliefs but of mutual interdependence.

It is in mechanical solidarity that Durkheim views collective representations as essentially religious, meaning that the social and religious is essentially the same thing (Morris 1991). However, where there is a transition to organic solidarity and an increasing division of labour, Durkheim suggested that "individual personality develops" (Durkheim 1893, p. 171 in Morris 1991, p. 244), which means that the collective conscience of modern society stresses individuation, individual dignity and autonomy (Morris 1991, p. 244). This, he thought, paved the way to a loosening of religious ties, at least in the traditional sense.

Durkheim used the term 'anomie' to describe the lack of meaning experienced by people who were not "anchored" by the "values and institutions" of their society (Bulbeck 1995, p. 313). In broad terms, anomie describes situations or relationships where there is little value consensus and little moral regulation of social and individual life (Jary and Jary

2000). Because Durkheim viewed human nature as having no natural internal limits on desires, needs, and ambitions, he believed that anomie would result if society failed to provide a limiting framework of social norms. It was more likely to be prevalent in uncertain than certain times, including times of prosperity and periods bringing about “upward spiralling of social expectations” (Jary and Jary 2000, p. 20). However, rather than rely on religion as a response to modern anomie, Durkheim placed his faith in the development of education and professional agencies.

In his turn, Max Weber shared a number of Marx and Durkheim’s concerns about industrialisation and modern society. For him the processes of capitalism, bureaucratisation, and technological advancement, created disenchantment and demagicalisation (Erickson 1993). He used the term ‘rationalisation’ to describe this process, suggesting that it was accompanied and underpinned by bureaucratisation and the specialised division of labour, which reduced social and individual action to increasingly routine and unsatisfying dimensions. Erickson suggests that given this context, Weber believed people of his time were confronted by two choices: “(1) to go back to the old churches and therefore to abandon the intellect; or (2) to face the future with courage, meeting the fate of the times” (Erickson 1993, p. 69). Unlike Durkheim, Weber questioned the capacity of science to provide meaning and saw it as a contributing factor in the creation of a disenchanted society (Erickson 1993).

While he saw rationalisation as contributing to meaninglessness Weber also believed that it was, as it were, the only way out. While the non-rational animates human life,

rationalisation, according to Weber, focuses and directs the power of the non-rational (Swidler 1993). It is the rationalisation process, the ordering and unifying of systems of thought that Weber believed created the impulse for religious change by the inevitable awareness of discrepancy within the religious worldview. In the words of Swidler (1993, p. xv): “Rationalization increases the inner coherence of religious beliefs and thereby creates new, distinctively religious dilemmas”. An example of this kind of dilemma is the continuance of suffering in a world created by an all powerful and almighty God. Hence, “the more rationalized a religious worldview, the deeper and more pressing the contradictions it creates, and the stronger the impulse for religious innovation” (ibid).

Weber’s theoretical starting point was the idea that people pursue their own interests, and that ideas themselves were used to assist people in their struggles (Swidler 1993). In terms of religion he suggested that “the most elementary forms of behaviour motivated by religious or magical factors are orientated to *this* world” (Weber 1963, p. 1). He considered that because the end result of this kind of behaviour is predominantly economic, that “religious or magical behaviour or thinking must not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct” (ibid). As such he was interested in the way that ideas, and in particular, religious ideas, related to behaviour. More specifically he wanted to achieve “an *interpretative understanding* [...] of subjectively meaningful human action” (Jary & Jary 2000, p. 673; emphasis original), he was interested in how people’s actions are determined by what is meaningful to them, and the importance of the meanings that individuals give to their actions (Jureidini 2000). In this sense his work on religion was primarily concerned with uncovering meaningful action. For Weber (1971,

p. 76), social action is said to exist when a person considers another in some way and attaches a subjective meaning to the behaviour in question.

Weber argued that social institutions such as Church or State “are given reality because we confer reality upon them; they do not exist independently of our construction of them” (Jureidini 2000, p. 63). In this way he emphasises individual meaningful action and “shies away from the reification of collectivities (i.e. assuming they have a life of their own, or *sui generis*, as Durkheim suggests)” (Jureidini 2000, p. 63). He contends that individuals, not cultural systems create meaning and that religion is not meaningful in itself but is so when an individual confers meaning upon it. For example, “a collectivity such as the State is ultimately only an individual’s belief in the reality of the State. It is thus the individual (or individuals) who gives the State its reality, its meaning” (ibid).

Weber was less concerned with ethical doctrines according to theologians and more interested in them in popular form as they guide everyday behaviour (Bottomore, 1972). His most famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* examined the part played by Calvinist ethics in the development of modern capitalism. He demonstrated how the dogmas of Calvinism gave rise to a particular attitude to life and a specific form of behaviour - accumulation. However, as Bottomore points out, the posited relationship between ideas and economic affairs was contingent and enabling rather than deterministic. Weber, he said, suggested that:

The theological and ethical conceptions of the Protestants were influenced in their formation by various social and political circumstances, and further, they had no direct influence upon economic affairs. But ideas have their own logic, and they give rise to consequences, which may have a practical influence; thus the dogmas of Calvinism, established in the consciousness of individuals belonging to particular groups, brought about a particular attitude to life and a specific form of behaviour (Bottomore, 1972, p. 240).

Whatever attributes or behaviours became predominant Weber argued that these were ultimately shaped by economic interest or ideals. Interests for Weber are always part of shaping the development of religion, but ideas in turn shape what people's interests are: "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (Weber 1948, p. 280). In particular Weber was concerned with how religious meanings matter given that material concerns dominate life (Swidler 1993). He gave an in part historic answer in that he believed magic to be the elementary form of religion as people originally accepted help from magicians and others who claimed extraordinary powers. This he considered to be practical action aimed at achieving earthly benefits (Swidler 1993). As Erickson (1993) points out this kind of duality is also found in Durkheim's considerations relating to the impact of the division of labour on social solidarity where he queried how the "autonomy of the individual [could] be reconciled with the necessary regulation and discipline [...] required to maintain social order in modern differentiated types of societies" (Coser's introduction to Durkheim 1984 in Erickson 1993, p. 79).

Weber was also concerned with the “connection between religious doctrines and social classes” (Bottomore 1972, p. 242). He suggested that certain classes or social groups prefer particular religious imagery. In Swidler’s account (1993, p. xii-xiii):

Peasants, subject to an irrational nature, seldom become carriers of salvation religions; warrior nobilities resist religious demands which interfere with their sense of honour; urban middle classes develop rational salvation religions which link rewards and merit. The interests of rulers and dominant classes, [...] can have great consequences for the development of religious ideas.

Weber associated diversity of religious attitude with economic differentiation and saw this as related to the fact that different classes have different needs. He saw in the apprentice group, for example, an inclination towards various forms of unofficial religion of the sect type akin to lower middle class groupings. This occurred as a result of their workaday struggles with everyday needs, the fluctuations in the price of their daily bread, their quest for jobs, and their dependence on fraternal assistance” (Weber 1963, p. 100). Similarly, the economic position of the mid-lower bourgeois turned its members less toward heroic myths and more toward sentimental legend, with a tendency towards inwardness and edification. “This corresponds to the peaceableness and the greater emphasis upon domestic and family life of the middle classes, in contrast to the ruling strata (Weber 1963, p. 103).

Salvationist religions, Weber suggested, had their origins among socially privileged groups and were rooted in intellectualism. When and if such religions reach socio-economic groups less concerned with intellectual matters their content always changes (Weber 1963). The uptake of salvation doctrine by the masses, he posited, practically always results in the emergence of a saviour, or at least an increased emphasis on the idea of a saviour, and is a characteristic of popular soteriological forms of religion (1963, p. 102). He suggests that:

The notion of an impersonal an ethical cosmic order that transcends the deity and the ideal of an exemplary type of salvation are intellectualistic conceptions which are definitely alien to the masses and possible only for a laity that has been educated along rational and ethical lines. The same holds true for the development of a concept of an absolutely transcendent god (Weber 1963, p. 103).

Weber asserts that a key difference between religion of the disprivileged and the aristocracy is that the former allots greater equality to women. He also recognises that female religious symbolism does not necessarily imply that women have equal privileges. This can coexist with complete male monopolisation of religious activity of the priestly functions. Here Weber was referring directly to the religions of Christianity and Judaism and to a lesser degree, Islam and Buddhism. However, Weber also acknowledges that Christianity gained a great deal of missionary power as it attracted women and gave them equal status.

The underpinning psychological basis to particular religious functions is important for Weber as he believes it to be a universal phenomenon. In this respect he pointed to fundamental differences between the psychological needs of the elite and the disprivileged. For the elite “self esteem rests on their awareness that the perfection of their life pattern is an expression of their underived, ultimate, and qualitatively distinctive *being*” (Weber 1963, p. 108). Hence, and to varying degrees, he asserts that, “what the privileged classes require of religion, if anything at all, is this psychological reassurance of legitimacy” (Weber 1963, p. 107). Thus, to be happy is not enough; the *right* to happiness is needed, and must be legitimised. The individual must believe that happiness is earned as equally as misfortune is earned (Weber 1963). Weber points out this need for reassurance, that happiness is legitimate, is inherent in everyday life regardless of the fortune - success, love, money, health.

In contrast, for disprivileged groups, salvation religion rested “on some concealed promise for the future which implies the assignment of some function, mission, or vocation to them” and, particularly, the need “for release from suffering” (Weber 1963, pp. 106 -108):

What they cannot claim to be, they replace by the worth of that which they will one day *become*, to which they will be called in some future life here or hereafter; [...] Their hunger for a worthiness that has not fallen to their lot, they and the world being what it is, produces this conception from which is derived the rationalistic idea of a providence, a significance in the eyes of some divine authority possessing a scale of values different from the one operating in the world of man (ibid).

Thus Weber contends the social conditions of disprivilege, intellectual rationalism, and religious notions of divinity together emphasise an everyday pragmatism.

Marx, Durkheim and Weber all make the point that beliefs are, in the first instance, a social product and serve to shape our individual religious beliefs and spiritual orientations. Weber however, gave more credence to notions of agency in how we apprehend particular beliefs, codes and practices from available cultural content and how this in turn translates into everyday action. To explore further the individual/ religious spiritual nexus, and how we as individuals apprehend particular beliefs and give meaning to personal experiences, I now turn to Berger and Luckmann's (1979) phenomenological perspective.

The social construction of reality

Drawing from Schutz's work on the everyday life world (*Lebenswelt*), Berger and Luckmann (1966) focused on the development of consciousness, both social and individual, to elucidate the construction and apprehension of meaning. Like Weber, they argue that it is the subjective reality of individuals that produces social and religious consciousness. They also suggest a dialectical relation between the two, with the notion that the social world is the product of individual consciousness being central to their view (Ritzer 1988). In this way they provide insight into the subjective construction of reality and the processes by which individuals apprehend the social world, thus making it real.

While a number of contemporary authors have critiqued and extended Berger and Luckmann's ideas on the symbolic and cultural interpretation of reality (McCarthy 1996; Arbib & Hesse 1986), and have more generally developed varying theories on the social construction of reality (Searle 1995), in the following discussion I use Berger and Luckmann's original text to illustrate their approach from two intersecting perspectives: How individuals and intersubjective relations produce social and religious content; and how individuals, in-turn, take social and religious content and translate this into everyday reality. I focus on the latter, although some brief introductory points on the former remain pertinent for discussion.

In individual consciousness social reality is apprehended as a preexisting ordered reality, in a continuum of typifications from highly personal and face-to-face to increasingly anonymous relations. The social structure is the sum total of these typifications and the recurrent interactions in between. Social reality is perceived in this way because consciousness is intentional and always directed towards an object. Berger and Luckmann posit the existence of multiple realities is the reality of everyday life "*par excellence*". Everyday life imposes itself upon our consciousness directly – "this wide-awake state of existing in and apprehending the reality of everyday life is taken by me to be normal and self-evident, that is, it constitutes my natural attitude" (Berger & Luckmann 1979, p. 35).

Berger and Luckmann (1979) maintain that both an individual's subjective reality, how the individual views and experiences the self and their objective reality, and how the

individual views and experiences the social and natural world, are apprehended by the process of objectification, an externalising or expressing of subjective experiences. Subjective expression is objectified when it becomes part of the social realm and as such, is available to others for interpretation. They also outline a three part dialectical relationship between the individual and the social world through externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation. Externalisation is the outer expression of activity and objectivation the process by which the externalisation becomes objectified. Internalisation is how the individual apprehends the objectified social content into consciousness (Berger and Luckmann 1979, p. 78).

To comprehend how the individual apprehends social and religious realities, it is necessary to understand the central importance Berger and Luckmann give to language in the construction of reality, with the issue of how we form and use language also being of more general importance. I therefore preface this part of my discussion with some comments on the role of language in the production and apprehension of religious and spiritual realities.

Language

For Berger and Luckmann (1979) language is the most important sign system for self-expression, sharing of experience, and interpretation of experience. It has a crucial role in the process of objectifying subjective realities into the social realm whereby they both become open for interpretation and provide the order in which they make sense.

Berger and Luckmann (1979) argue that language originates and primarily makes sense within everyday life and the “taken for granted manner” of that reality. It conveys those experiences of “wide awake” consciousness and the pragmatic needs of that reality and provides them with order from the most immediate and relevant to those of the past and toward the future (1979, p. 53). It does this in an ongoing manner and throughout the course of life and so provides a ready made possibility for unfolding experiences (ibid). Language helps to confirm the reality of experience by its quality of objectivity and its encounter as an external facticity which allows experiences to be subsumed under broad categories where they become meaningful to both the self and others, and are thus both subjectively and objectively real.

Through the communicative process, language permits reciprocity in accessing both our own and each other’s subjectivities:

As I objectivate my own being by means of language, my own being becomes massively and continuously available to myself at the same time that it is so available to him, and I can spontaneously respond to it without the ‘interruption’ of deliberate reflection. It can, therefore, be said that language makes ‘more real’ my subjectivity not only to my conversation partner but also to myself (Berger & Luckmann 1979, pp. 52-53).

Further: “I hear *myself* as I speak; my own subjective meanings are made objectively and continuously available to me and *ipso facto* become ‘more real’ to me” (Berger and Luckmann 1979, p. 52). This extends beyond the verbal to other forms of language expression such as thinking, writing, and self-talk.

Berger and Luckmann expand on this through the notion of typification. They suggest that in a more personal one to one relationship, there is room for shared subjectivity and negotiating meaning between those concerned. However, with relationships that are less personal and/or involve relative strangers, a typification occurs: What is actually known about the other person through interaction and experience is replaced by ideas or suppositions about what the other person 'might' be like. In the same way that we may typify the other person, they typify us, and in turn, this is used to typify ourselves. To understand one's own subjectivity involves "turning off" these projections and reflecting back on oneself:

To make [such an understanding] available requires that I stop, arrest the continuous spontaneity of my experience and deliberately turn my attention back upon myself. What is more, such reflection about myself is typically occasioned by the attitude towards me the other exhibits. It is typically a 'mirror' response to attitudes of the other (1979 p, 44).

In other words, the window through which we view others is also a mirror to which we look to see who we are.

While language directly refers to the realities of everyday life, it also provides the means for transmitting other non-present realities. For Berger and Luckmann this capacity makes it capable of bridging spatial, temporal and social dimensions, and the realities of everyday life, thus bringing them into a meaningful whole:

Language is capable of ‘making present’ a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally and socially absent from the ‘here and now’. *Ipsa facto* a vast accumulation of experiences and meanings can become objectified in the ‘here and now’. Put simply, through language an entire world can be actualized at any moment (Berger and Luckmann 1979, p. 54).

Language is also capable of transcending everyday life altogether and providing meaning to experiences such as dreams. The process of dream interpretation takes the dream experience and makes it linguistically available to the realm of everyday reality and understanding and thus an enclave of the latter; “the dream is now meaningful in terms of the reality of everyday life rather than of its own discrete reality. Enclaves produced by such transposition belong, in a sense, to both spheres of reality - they are ‘located’ in one reality, but ‘refer’ to another” (Berger and Luckmann 1979, p. 55). Thus even though language primarily refers to the everyday it also refers to other realities – but “even then retains its rootage in the common-sense reality of everyday life” (1979, p. 53).

The capacity for detachability (bodily, spatially and temporally) from the subjective state, means that language acts as a large repertoire for meaning as it can accumulate an index of meanings beyond the present. In other words, meanings can be communicated beyond the subjective and into the objective. In this way:

I can speak about innumerable matters I never have and never will experience directly. In this way, language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience,

which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations (1979, p. 52).

Language is therefore the carrier of accumulated meaning spanning across time and through various enclaves of reality. To do this it requires a maximum detachment from the “here and now of everyday life” which allows it to move “into regions that are not only de facto but a priori unavailable to everyday experience” (1979, p. 55). Language thus constructs symbolic representations that “appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world” (ibid). For example, – religion, philosophy, art, science.

Functions of symbolism

Berger and Luckmann suggest that “symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and of the common-sense apprehension of this reality” (1979, p. 55). Here they suggest that the symbolic universe represents and contains all human experiences and associated meaning. It is “the matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place *within* this universe” (1979, p. 114; emphasis original). Importantly, the realities available to the individual, not included in the realities of everyday, are also encompassed in the symbolic universe where experiences like dreams, for example, “are integrated within a meaningful totality” that ‘explains’ them but might also serve to justify and ground them (ibid). Thus the meaning bestowing capacity of the symbolic universe “far exceeds the domain of social life, so

that the individual may 'locate' himself within it even in his most solitary experiences" (ibid). This process creates a whole world which transcends and includes all realities.

The symbolic universe provides a context for the apprehension of individual biographies where experiences belonging to different spheres of reality are integrated into an overall framework of meaning. It does this in three ways: integrating marginal realities; permitting the ultimate integration of discrepant meanings; and making possible the ordering of biography. The integration of marginal realities (such as dreams) re-establishes the paramount status of everyday reality and reduces the shock of passing from one reality to another. "The provinces of meaning that would otherwise remain unintelligible enclaves within the reality of everyday life are thus ordered in terms of a hierarchy of realities, *ipso facto* becoming intelligible and less terrifying" (Berger and Luckmann 1979, p. 115). This integration is important because marginal situations are a threat to the taken-for-granted realities which establish the norms of the 'real' and 'sane' world:

The thought keeps suggesting itself (the 'insane' thought *par excellence*) that, perhaps, the bright reality of everyday life is but an illusion, to be swallowed up at any moment by the howling nightmares of the other, the night-side reality. Such thoughts of madness and terror are contained by ordering all conceivable realities within the same symbolic universe that encompasses the reality of everyday life – to wit, ordering them in such a way that the latter reality retains its paramount, definitive (if one wishes, its 'most real') quality (Berger and Luckmann 1979, p. 116).

In relation to individual biography, the symbolic universe provides order by allowing “experiences belonging to different spheres of reality to be incorporated into the same overarching universe of meaning” (1979, p. 115). As part of this it also offers the possibility of transcending the everyday through spiritual experiences, as I will discuss further along in this section. In integrating discrepant meanings (e.g., motherhood and career) the symbolic universe allows the individual to represent one or the other as a ‘higher calling’ – in symbolic terms – and then relate the other to it (Berger and Luckmann 1979, p. 117). Most significantly, and related to both of these the symbolic universe makes possible the ordering of individual biography:

The individual passing from one biographical phase to another can view himself as repeating the sequence that is given in the ‘nature of things’, or in his own ‘nature’. That is, he can reassure himself that he is living ‘correctly’. The ‘correctness’ of his life programme is thus legitimated on the highest level of generality. As the individual looks back upon his past life, his biography is intelligible to him in these terms. As he projects himself into the future, he may conceive of his biography as unfolding within a universe whose ultimate coordinates are known (1979, pp. 117-118).

A person’s subjective identity is precarious given the shifting nature of experiences and relationships, and the dreams and fantasies encountered in ‘marginal’ experiences. “The ‘sane’ apprehension of oneself as possessor of a definite, stable and socially recognised identity is continually threatened by the surrealistic metamorphoses of dreams and fantasies, even if it remains relatively consistent in everyday interactions” (1979, p. 118). The identity that is known to the gods or psychiatry does not need to be legitimated or understood by the individual; it is enough that the identity is ‘*knowable*’:

The symbolic universe establishes a hierarchy, from the ‘most real’ to the most fugitive self-apprehensions of identity. This means that the individual can live in society with some assurance that he really is what he considers himself to be as he plays his routine social roles, in broad daylight and under the eyes of significant others (ibid).

Finally, the symbolic universe allows death to be located within a system of meaning. Berger and Luckmann assert that death is the marginal situation *par excellence* for the individual and the “most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life” (1979, p. 119). The essential task of the symbolic universe here is that it “must enable the individual to go on living in society after the death of significant others and to anticipate his own death with, at the very least, terror sufficiently mitigated so as not to paralyze the continued performance of the routines of everyday life” (1979, p. 119). On this Berger and Luckmann observe further that “everyday life can retain its subjective plausibility only if it is constantly protected against terror” (ibid).

Sub universes and competing knowledges

Given the multiplicity of experiences and subjective interpretations thereof, symbolic universes are manifold and always, to some degree, at variance. The symbolic universe of those with more power will be upheld and strengthened over those with less:

The confrontation of alternative symbolic universes implies a problem of power – which of the conflicting definitions of reality will be ‘made to stick’ in the society. Two societies confronting each other with conflicting universes will both develop conceptual machineries designed to maintain

their respective universes. From the point of view of intrinsic plausibility the two forms of conceptualization may seem to the outside observer to offer little choice. Which of the two will win, however, will depend more on the power than on the theoretical ingenuity of the respective legitimators” (Berger & Luckmann 1979, p. 126).

In addition to conflicting interests, social segmentation results in the creation of sub-universes of meaning whereby, and, arising from role specialisation, knowledge becomes esoteric and either in or out of the commonview. These sub universes may be socially structured by sex, age, occupation, religion and so on, with the quantity and diversity increasing with division of labour and economic surplus (Berger & Luckmann 1979, p. 102). This creates a multiplicity of worldviews “with the establishment of sub-universes of meaning a variety of perspectives on the total society emerges, each viewing the latter from the angle of one sub-universe” (1979, p. 103). Thus the relationship between knowledge and society is a dialectical one, “that is, knowledge is a social product *and* knowledge is a factor in social change” (1979, p. 104).

Being confronted with the alternative symbolic universes can pose a threat to the individual and foster a sense of uncertainty. However, an alternative universe may come to appeal and “individuals or groups within one’s own society might be tempted to ‘emigrate’ from the traditional universe or [...] to change the old order in the image of the new” (1979, p. 126). The attachment to, and appeal of, symbolic universes depends, in part, of the social values available to a given individual and the kinds of knowledge and experience embedded therein.

Through internalising particular roles, the person has access to particular stocks of knowledge which are accompanied with particular values, standards and behaviours. Thus the apprehension of a particular social role holds with it socially inscribed meaning and purpose to which the individual subscribes.

Individual apprehension of social reality

In subscribing to a particular role the individual, at least to some extent, internalises the contents of that role. Internalisation is “the immediate apprehension or interpretation of an objective event as expressing meaning, that is, as a manifestation of another’s subjective processes which thereby becomes subjectively meaningful to myself” (Berger & Luckmann 1979, p. 149). Internalisation begins with the individual ‘taking over’ the world in which others already live in order to understand and interpret that world. Once the world is ‘taken over’ it can be creatively modified or recreated (although the later is considered less likely). In this way:

I not only ‘understand’ the other’s momentary subjective processes, I ‘understand’ the world in which he lives, and that world becomes my own. This predisposes that he and I share time in a more than ephemeral way and a comprehensive perspective, which links sequences of situations together intersubjectively. We now not only understand each other’s definitions of shared situations, we define them reciprocally. A nexus of motivations is established between us and extends into the future. Most importantly, there is now an ongoing mutual identification between us. We not only live in the same world, we participate in each other’s being (1979, p. 150).

More broadly, individuals need to undergo the process of 'socialisation' if they are to be integrated into a particular society. Here Berger and Luckmann (1979, p. 150) differentiate between 'primary' and 'secondary' socialisation. Primary socialisation occurs during childhood and is the first stage of becoming a member of society; secondary socialisation in various organisations and institutions during the life-time of the individual. In both cases, the apprehension of the self:

Entails a dialectic between identification by others and self-identification, between objectively assigned and subjectively appropriated identity. The dialectic, which is present each moment the individual identifies with his significant others, is, as it were, the particularization in individual life of the general dialectic of society (1979, p. 152).

A decisive phase in primary socialisation is where the person becomes conscious of the existence of a generalised 'other'. This is a progressive abstraction from the roles and attitudes of specific others (mother, father, siblings) to more a generalised other (society), indicating the beginnings of the internalisation of society and objective reality, as well as the subjective establishment of the self as coherent entity (1979, pp. 152-153). "When the generalized other has been crystallized in consciousness, a symmetrical relationship is established between objective and subjective reality. What is real 'outside' corresponds to what is real 'within'" (1979, p. 153). While objective reality can be translated to subjective reality and vice versa, they are not coextensive and the symmetry between the two can never be perfect. Instead the symmetry between objective and subjective reality is an ongoing balancing act and must be produced and reproduced *in actu* (1979, p. 154).

One of the “shocks” or failures of symmetry occur, when the sense of security implanted in primary socialisation – the feeling that ‘everything is all right’ is challenged by misfortune. However, even under these experiences the world of childhood, according to Berger and Luckmann, is likely to retain its overall particular and ‘peculiar’ reality:

The world of childhood is so constituted as to instill in the individual a nomic structure in which he may have confidence that ‘everything is all right’ [...]. The later discovery that some things are far from ‘all right’ may be more or less shocking, depending on biographical circumstances, but in either case the world of childhood is likely to retain its peculiar reality in retrospection. It remains the ‘home world’ (1979, p. 156).

Secondary socialisation begins with the conscious understanding of the generalised other (which also denotes the limit of primary socialisation) and is the internalisation of institutional or institutional-based sub worlds (1979, p. 158). The extent of secondary socialisation for each individual is related to the division of labour and distribution of knowledge specific to a particular society. Berger and Luckmann talk specifically about secondary socialisation in terms of ‘special knowledge’ with regard to institutions and associated roles, however, there is also more general knowledge occurring outside these more formalised structures for example, gender specific knowledges such as motherhood, or class specific knowledges. “Secondary socialization requires the acquisition of role-specific vocabularies, which means, for one thing, the internalization of semantic fields structuring routine interpretations and conduct” (1979, p. 158). Further, “the ‘sub-worlds’ internalised in secondary socialisation are generally partial realities in contrast to the ‘base-world’ acquired in primary socialisation. Yet, they too, are more or less cohesive

realities, characterised by normative and affective as well as cognitive components” (1979, p. 158). Legitimacy and language again play a crucial role in this internalisation process with some ritual often present in the transition from primary to secondary socialisation.

Secondary socialisation encounters an “already formed self and an already internalised world. It cannot construct subjective reality *ex nihilo*” (1979, p. 160). Further secondary socialisation is not usually characterised by the affectively charged environment of primary socialisation, but is instead, more anonymous and impersonal. As such it is relatively easy to set aside the reality of secondary socialisations: “it takes severe biographical shocks to disintegrate the massive reality internalized in early childhood; much less to destroy the realities internalized later” (1979, p. 162).

When an individual takes on a secondary role that will define their whole reality, for example, a religious occupation, secondary socialisation requires more affective techniques. In the process “the relationship of the individual to the socializing personnel becomes correspondingly charged with ‘significance’, that is, the socializing personnel take on the character of significant others vis-à-vis the individual being socialized. The individual then commits himself in a comprehensive way to the new reality” (1979, p. 165).

Berger and Luckmann (1979) distinguish between routine maintenance, which is designed to maintain the internalised reality of everyday life, and crisis maintenance,

which is designed to cope with crisis-situations. The procedures for reality maintenance are much the same across the board, with crisis situations characterised by greater explicitness and intensity (with the experience or anticipation of death being the most significant form of crisis). In both cases routines, rituals and interactions with significant others are important. Significant others are particularly important in maintaining a sense of one's own identity, and thus, for example, whether one is a failure, is compassionate, sensitive, hopeless, spiritual, and so on. Differences between a person's view of themselves and what they believe others think of them can lead either to adaptations of their own behaviour or a rejection of the views of others, or some combination of the two. This process also operates when an individual's worldview is challenged by views of a significant other. The situation when one partner is Catholic and the other is not, for example, may challenge specific aspects of that person's faith. In contrast, a non-Catholic work colleague would be less likely to influence their beliefs:

Generally speaking, in situations where there is competition between different reality-defining agencies, all sorts of secondary-group relationships with the competitors may be tolerated, as long as there are firmly established primary-group relationships within which *one* reality is on-goingly reaffirmed against the competitors (1979, p. 172).

'Conversation' broadly interpreted, provides the medium whereby subjective reality is produced and maintained. "One may view the individual's everyday life in terms of the working away of a conversational apparatus that ongoingly maintains, modifies and reconstructs his subjective reality" (1979, p. 172). At the same time that conversation reaffirms and maintains reality it also modifies it. This occurs when "items are dropped

and added, weakening some sectors of what is still being taken for granted and reinforcing others”, for, “the subjective reality of something that is never talked about comes to be shaky” (1979, p. 173). Conversation allows a person to sort through doubts or difficulties by “‘talking through’ various elements of experience and allocating them a definite place in the real world” (ibid). For effective reality maintenance conversation must be “continual and consistent” (1979, p. 174). If a person loses touch with a specific religious community, for example, the ‘reality’ of that religious reality may falter. Various techniques can be deployed to counter potential or actual discontinuity such as writing and correspondence. Lack of frequency can also be compensated for by intensity. Further, “certain conversations may also be explicitly defined and legitimized as having a privileged status – such as conversations with one’s confessor, one’s psycho-analyst, or a similar ‘authority’ figure” (1979, p. 174).

Transformation of reality

The possibility of transforming the self in the face of everyday reality is an important issue for this thesis. To demonstrate the process of transformation (or switching worlds) Berger and Luckmann use the example of religious conversion which they consider an extreme ‘alternation’. They suggest that total transformation is not possible as “at the very least the transformed individual will have the same body and live in the same physical universe” (1979, p. 176). Essentially they argue transformation requires a form of re-socialisation that replicates the strongly affective identification with the significant others characteristic of childhood. “These significant others are the guides into the new reality” in the context of intense interactions occurring within the group (1979, p. 177).

Berger and Luckmann argue that in the case of religious conversion, it is only within the community itself that conversion will be effectively maintained. Even if a person has a conversion prior to a particular community affiliation it must be reinforced for it to retain its plausibility (ibid). Equally important is segregation from old community links, as the new world must displace all other worlds. Once the new reality has “congealed” relations with others can resume but they will always remain a potential threat to the newly formed reality.

This process brings about a ‘rupture’ in the individual’s subjective biography and everything is now described “as flowing from this new reality” (1979, p. 179). The individual’s story is reframed to re-describe the past and to incorporate “motives that were not subjectively present in the past but that are now necessary for the reinterpretation of what took place then” (1979, p. 179). In religious conversion the older reality is typically “nihilated *in toto*” by interpreting it through a phrase belonging to the new reality such as “when I was still living a life of sin” (ibid). Significant others and events pre-alternation are also radically reinterpreted.

There are also partial transformations, which fall short of re-socialisation as they “build on the basis of primary internalizations and generally avoid abrupt discontinuities within the subjective biography” (1979, p. 181). The past is also viewed retrospectively here but in a less radical manner. In these cases “there is usually a continuing association with persons and groups who were significant before. They continue to be around, are likely to

protest too fanciful reinterpretations, and must themselves be convinced that such transformations as have taken place are plausible” (ibid). Under partial transformations the individual privileges definitions from their spheres of existence, sometimes creating a cleavage between ‘reality’ and ‘appearance’ whereby their everyday world and activities may be the same, but internally the person feels different.

In concluding this chapter I note the importance of the generational transmission of meanings and the historical location of social knowledge. The objective world reality antedates and postdates birth and death – and Berger and Luckmann argue that it is “only with the appearance of a new generation [that] one [can] properly speak of a social world” (1979, p. 79). In this way the individual apprehends her or his personal biography as an episode in the objective history of society. Because the new generation receives social reality historically via tradition, objectifications require constant and consistent legitimation whereby the existence of these realities are both explained and justified so they can, in turn, be internalised by the individual (ibid). However, only those that become “sedimented”, that is, congealed “in recollection as recognizable and memorable entities”, assist the individual to make sense of their own biography (1979, p. 85).

CHAPTER THREE:

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES - THE DISLOCATION OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a God endorse the codes he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over woman, it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949, p. 632) – *The Second Sex*

Introduction

Feminist interpretations of religion emphasise its relationship to patriarchy and suggest that it is a cause and contributor to women's secondary social status. In the first part of this chapter I consider the feminist critique of religion. How feminists propose to change this oppressive position of women with regard to religion also forms a significant part of this discussion. My intention here is to illustrate the break in dominant discourse made by feminists with regard to women and religion. To do this I rely on some key early feminist works, for example, Simone de Beauvoir, who writes about theology as part of a broader interest in epistemology and patriarchal social relations, as well as feminist theologians

such as the early writings of Mary Daly, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow. While I have used original texts pertinent to this era, I draw the reader's attention to the contemporary and lively debates in feminism on religion and divinity, the sacred feminine, and eco-spirituality through the works of authors such as Elisabeth Radford Ruether (1992), Grace Jantzen (1999), Luce Irigaray (1993) and Lucy Tatman (2007).

In the second part, I turn to the shaping of women's consciousness. Here I also comment on how this served to shape the methodology for the empirical stages of research.

Feminist critique of Christianity

Feminist critiques of Christianity focus mainly on its contributions to women's oppression and look to the structure of the church as a powerful contributor, if not a cause of, the dislocation of women's religious and spiritual experiences. Feminists challenge the masculine and hierarchical characteristics of Christianity and point to the exclusion of women from positions of spiritual and religious leadership as a reflection of the institutionalised subordination of women within the Christian religious hierarchy. They argue that the structured religions teach the inferiority of women and more critically do not speak to, or reflect women's ritual and spiritual experience (Christ & Plaskow 1979).

As part of the consciousness-raising dimension of second wave feminism, feminists aimed to illuminate how and where religion contributed to the oppression of women. Mary Daly's critique of Christian ideology, particularly within the doctrines and

scriptures of the Catholic Church, and her identification of women as the second sex within the church, was critical to this task. Her early work (1968) consolidated various themes found in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* –including oppression and deception; dogma; harmful moral teachings; and women's exclusion from hierarchy (Daly 1985). In the following discussion, I use these four themes as a basis for discussing feminist critiques of religion. Following this, I highlight key feminist proposals for change and pay particular attention to the core feminist strategy of acknowledging and naming women's experience.

Oppression and deception

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) identified marriage as oppressive to women as it rendered them financially dependent and fostered their entrenchment in an often unfulfilling, domestic life. Ideological deception, she argued, served to maintain this inferior position as women undertook a passive and non-participatory social position. In parallel to Marx's suggestion that religious belief and doctrine worked to contribute and perpetuate poverty by repressing the revolutionary impulse, de Beauvoir (1949, p. 633) argued that ideological deception worked to mask the reality of women's oppression and dull her desire for change:

Woman is asked in the name of God not so much to accept her inferiority as to believe that, thanks to Him, she is the equal of the lordly male; even the temptation to revolt is suppressed by the claim that the injustice is overcome. Woman is no longer denied transcendence, since she is to consecrate her immanence to God; the worth of the souls is to be weighed only in heaven and not according to their accomplishments on earth.

Belief in the afterlife thus reinforces women's passive position. With her unequal social status masked, she is set to redeem her position in heaven: "There is no need to *do* anything to save her soul, it is enough to *live* in obedience" (de Beauvoir 1949, p. 634: emphasis original). Like de Beauvoir, Daly (1985) considers this passivity to be mutilating for women, because personal development through genuine participation in social affairs is inhibited or prevented.

Daly (1985) illustrates how the forces of male guilt and the pseudo-exaltation of women provide for and perpetuate the asymmetrical relationship between the sexes. Male guilt, she explains, is relieved by a "specious sort of reasoning" which allows the male to treat a female in this world as servant (Daly 1985, p. 59): "Venerating woman *in God*, men treat her in this world as a servant, even holding that the more one demands complete submission of her, the more surely one will advance her along the road of her salvation" (de Beauvoir in Daly 1985, p. 59). In its turn the pseudo-exaltation of women masks a despising of woman as a sexual being and a fear of woman as being something unknown and 'other' than male (Daly 1985). Therefore, for Daly, Christian ideology masks misogyny by exalting the notion of 'woman' in Godliness and in the afterlife, - thus not admitting her to her own reality and stifling her development as a full conscious being.

The symbolic idealisation of 'woman', Daly argues, projects a limiting representation of women, and dupes them into accepting narrowly defined social roles. The idealising action, she claims, was accepted and perpetuated by members of the clergy, as well as many women, without realisation or understanding of the distress caused to many women

with the profound aspirations of “liberty and full personhood” (1985, p. 54). Daly asserts that the symbolism of the Virgin Mary plays a significant role in the socialisation of women in that Mary “is glorified only in accepting the subordinate role assigned to her” (Daly 1985, p. 61). Within Christian, and specifically Catholic culture, women are encouraged and socialised to identify with this image of Mary – of selfless servitude and inferiority, particularly to men – which, de Beauvoir argues, leads them to masochism and contributes to the conditioning to adore and serve man (Daly 1985, p. 62). Daly made a similar point in relation to domestic oppression when she suggested that the model of God the Father in heaven represented divine rule but also the structure of family and sexual politics on earth. Jan Mercer (1975) again argued similarly in her analysis of the Christian church in Australia showing how it was a major agent in the socialisation of sexist attitudes.

Dogma and language

Merlin Stone (1976) argues that historical accounts have either minimised, or more frequently, completely omitted representations of female religions commenting that “descriptions of the female deity as creator of the universe, inventor or provider of culture were often given only a line or two, if mentioned at all” (Stone 1976, p. 9). Stone also notes the absence of female religious scholars and the absence of religious scholars outside of the Judeo-Christian traditions in general. She observes how historical representations of religion from male scholars carefully capitalise ‘God’ and sometimes ‘He’, whereas references to ‘goddess’, ‘she’, ‘queen of heaven’, are all inscribed in lower

case. Moreover, historical translations of pre-Christian religions often distorted and moralised sexual representations of the Goddess:

Within descriptions of long buried cities and temples, academic authors wrote of the sexually active Goddess as ‘improper’, ‘unbearably aggressive’ or ‘embarrassingly void of morals’, while male deities who raped or seduced legendary women or nymphs were described as ‘playful’, even admirably ‘virile’. The overt sexual nature of The Goddess, juxtaposed to Her sacred divinity, so confused one scholar that he finally settled for the perplexing title, the Virgin-Harlot. The women who followed the ancient sexual customs of the Goddess faith, known in their own language as sacred or holy women, were repeatedly referred to as ‘ritual prostitutes’ (ibid).

Dale Spender (1980) follows this theme in *Man Made Language* through what she calls the politics of naming. She argues the imagery and symbolism contained in the bible was ‘carefully’ edited and translated by male scholars, without reference to female meanings and interpretation, giving primacy to male spiritual interpretations and perspectives.

Both Stone (1976) and Spender thus argue that there is a lack of positive female sacred representation within Christian texts. This combined with the omission or absence of “accounts of the female Deity which told of her magnificence and splendor, her creation of the world, and her wisdom” (Spender 1980, p. 169). Daly suggests the only sacred female figure in Christianity, Mary (who came to represent ideal womanhood through virginity, passivity and servitude) was thus ideologically enslaved as a reaction from both Judaism and Christianity against ancient pagan traditions and worship of the mother-

goddess. Similarly, de Beauvoir (1949, p. 203) points out that the symbolism of the 'Virgin Mary' reverses the actual reality of social order:

For the first time in human history the mother kneels before her son; she freely accepts her inferiority. This is the supreme masculine victory, consummated in the cult of the Virgin – it is the rehabilitation of women through the accomplishment of her defeat.

Spender notes another example of this is in the narrative of Adam and Eve where Adam in essence 'gives birth' to Eve from his rib (with God the Father having first 'given birth' to Adam), where "man is born from woman's body not woman from man's" (Shulman 1974, in Spender 1980, p. 168). Spender points out that in certain other creation stories of the time God was imagined as unisex, androgynous or female (Spender 1980, p. 167). These narratives did not make the endorsed biblical version as they failed to:

Uphold the image of masculine supremacy and would have made little or no contribution to the patriarchal order. There would have been little to gain as far as males were concerned by propagandizing the version which had God make human beings in God's image – female and male! Given this imagery of equality, Adam would have had to share his place with Eve and we would have the opportunity to imagine God the Mother as well as God the Father (Spender 1985, p. 166).

Further, the authorised account systematically operates to privilege men and interpret women in the negative. Thus Adam's eating of the apple becomes a sign of his superiority and strength rather than yielding to temptation, while Eve is branded as the dangerous temptress (Shulman in Spender 1980, p. 168).

Spender argues that masculine imaginings of God establishes a primary category of the world (creation, order, universal presence etc) as essentially male, thus relegating female identity to the 'other' (that which is male fashioned, done to). Male supremacy, she points out:

Is at the very core of language, thought and reality and it has been allowed to develop in this way by precluding women from the process of legitimating any positive names they may have for themselves and their existence. As a muted group, the meanings females may have generated have been systematically suppressed (Spender 1980, p. 170).

For Spender it is the superior/inferior dichotomy involved in naming that reinforces women powerless position. More specifically, she observes that: "on the basis that only the affairs of males could be praiseworthy, male activities were named as *religion* while comparable female activities were named as *cult*" (Spender 1980, p. 169).

Moral teachings

Daly (1985) asserts that as well as contributing to the socialisation of women's 'inferior' position, the church's moral teachings locate women's inferiority to her sexuality and body. She highlights that Christian literature associates female embodiment, the flesh, as the devil's temptation and carries an inherent misogynist and anti-sexual content. De Beauvoir (1949, p. 199) points out that while the flesh as devil's temptation is referred in gender neutral terms, it is in fact only *women's* flesh which is accorded this 'privilege':

Evil is an absolute reality; and the other flesh is sin. And, of course, since women remains always the Other, it is not held that reciprocally male and female are both flesh: the flesh that is for the Christian the hostile *Other* is precisely woman. In her the Christian finds incarnated the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. All the Fathers of the Church insist on the idea that she led Adam into sin.

Further, Christian literature uses representations of female flesh to enhance the disgust that man can feel for woman. De Beauvoir points to St Augustine who “called to attention with horror the obscene commingling of the sexual and excretory organs: *‘Interfaeces et urinam nascimur’* (‘We are born between faeces and urine’)” (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 199-200). This kind of view led to the later church declarations of a ‘virgin birth’, against the original church view that “Mary had been brought to bed in blood and filth like other women” (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 200). In this way, she points out, the idea of the virgin birth served to spare Jesus the ‘defilement’ of the natural birthing process.

The other common biblical reference to Mary is that she had an ‘immaculate conception’ with her body remaining sacred, pure and untouched. In dialogue with this tradition, Church teachings effect a bifurcation between the ‘ideal’ woman, and her opposite, the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore. This bifurcation serves the patriarchal order through the notion of the ‘pure’ wife. De Beauvoir points out “when woman becomes man’s property, he wants her to be a virgin and he requires complete fidelity under threats of extreme penalties” (de Beauvoir in Daly 1985, p. 63). Prostitution is one result of the

'honest' woman's familial enslavement (Daly 1985), illustrating the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard:

It is the male's demand that creates the supply, yet he suffers no disgrace as a result. Man is measured by other standards besides sexuality, and the respectable official remains such whether he frequents brothels or not. Woman, having been reduced to the condition of a venereal being, stakes her moral value in the contingent realm of sexuality (Daly 1985, p. 64).

De Beauvoir also describes how the church's attitudes to abortion and contraception, perpetuate women's biological enslavement even when science had provided the means for liberation (Daly 1985). Preventing access for women to contraception means a woman is unable "to undertake her maternities in freedom" (de Beauvoir in Daly 1985, p. 64), providing a clear instance of those circumstances where "there is a basic enmity between much traditional Christian moral teaching and the personal aspirations of women" (Daly 1985, p. 64).

Exclusion from hierarchy

The final theme that Daly elicits from de Beauvoir's work concerns women's exclusion from the church hierarchy. She asserts that the exclusion of women from positions of leadership provides a confusing symbolism for women, and in particular, psychological confusion in young girls:

God's representatives on earth: the pope, the bishop (whose ring one kisses), the priest who says Mass, he who preaches, he before whom one kneels in the secrecy of the confessional - all these are men....The

Catholic religion among others exerts a most confused influence upon the young girl (de Beauvoir in Daly 1985, p. 65).

Daly suggests that the exclusion of women instills in a young girl a sense of “*specific inferiority*” whereby if she desires a future role within the church it becomes “futile for her to aspire to such an exalted role no matter how great her talents and piety” (Daly 1985, p. 65). In addition, she argues that the association between the male form and divinity, particularly through the rituals of confession, contributes to a lack of social participation and a sense of passivity for women. The only way to escape from her ascribed inferiority is through docility before the male “who serves as the only intermediary between themselves and a masculine God” (Daly 1985, p. 66).

De Beauvoir noted that despite this situation, women continue to participate in church life, often more so, than men. In trying to explain female religious participation despite the masculine symbolism, she suggests “if woman quite willingly embraces religion, it is above all because it fulfils a profound need” (de Beauvoir 1949, p.632). On this, she notes that while religion fosters gender inequality it also paradoxically provides a way for women to transcend inequality through alignment with the transcendental. She argues that religion aligns women with the sacred, and as such, for women it becomes a matter of social occupation going some way towards the restoration of equality:

This is why the little girl and the adolescent are much more fervent devotees than their brothers; the eye of God, which transcends the boy’s transcendence, humiliates him: under this mighty guardianship he will remain a child a for ever; it is a more radical castration than that

threatened by his father's existence. But that 'eternal child', if female, finds her salvation in this eye that transforms her into a sister of the angels. It cancels the advantage of the penis. A sincere faith is a great help to the little girl in avoiding an inferiority complex: she is neither male nor female, but God's creature (de Beauvoir 1949, p. 633).

In this way "God alone restores the feminine sex in general to its place of dignity [...]. As a human person [a woman] has little influence, but once she acts in the name of divine inspiration, her wishes become sacred" (de Beauvoir 1949, p. 634). De Beauvoir thus points to the underlying paradox whereby women use religion as a means for satisfying their desires while at the same time involving themselves in a process that leads to constant self scrutiny and the reporting of all her behaviour through the ritual of confession, thus reaffirming her enslaved position to men:

Religion sanctions woman's self-love; it gives her the guide, father, lover, divine guardian she longs for nostalgically; it feeds her day-dreams, it fills her empty hours. But, above all, it confirms the social order, it justifies her resignation, by giving her the hope of a better future in a sexless heaven. This is why women today are still a powerful trump in the hand of the Church; it is why the Church is notably hostile to all measures likely to help in women's emancipation. There must be a religion for women; and there must be women, 'true women', to perpetuate religion (de Beauvoir 1949, p. 635).

Pathways for Change

Feminist spirituality is the reclaiming by women of the reality and power designated by the term 'spirit' and the effort to reintegrate spirit and body, heaven and earth, culture and nature, eternity and time, public and

*private, political and personal, in short, all those hierarchized
dichotomous dualisms whose root is the split between spirit and body and
whose primary incarnation is the split between male and female.*

Sandra Schneiders (1991, p. 75).

Whether or not the church can be reformed from within divides feminists commentating on this issue. De Beauvoir, an atheist existentialist, rejected Christianity as a pathway for change. Daly, writing as a feminist theologian within Christianity, initially proposed church reform based on a philosophy of hope, but later turned towards post-Christian feminism, and came to view all religions as infrastructures to the edifice of patriarchy and thought they should not be reformed (Daly 1985).

Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979) in *Womanspirit Rising* identify two different positions on this issue: the *reformist* and the *revolutionary*. The reformists believe that religion still has something to offer and that a reformation of the church to include women equally within its structures is feasible. From this perspective, the opportunity for transcendence within religious tradition is an authentic core for revelation and freedom. Its adherents “search tradition for positive and constructive alternatives to sexist theology” and glean the scriptures for feminine images and representations that serve as a basis for a critique of institutional sexism (Christ & Plaskow 1979, p. 10). Christ and Plaskow point out that these thinkers “usually claim that we are inevitably rooted in our past and that the attempt to transcend history proposed by some feminists is fraught with danger” arguing that it is better to “reform the past than to ignore it, because those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it” (1979, p.10). However, despite their loyalty

to tradition, the revelations of sexism and the awareness that religion teaches the inferiority of women, is experienced by the reformists as a betrayal of spiritual and ritual experience.

The revolutionaries, on the other hand, feel the depth of sexism in religion to be so entrenched that they “claim no loyalty to biblical tradition,” and suggest that the prebiblical past and modern experience both provide more authentic sources for feminist theology and vision than traditional religion (Christ & Plaskow 1979, p. 10). In seeking the exploration of female spirituality outside of the confines of the traditional forms of religion, they argue for a completely new religion that honours women’s experiences, independence and spirituality. While there is a clear ‘radicalness’ in rejecting a biblical past, there are some revolutionaries who claim to follow ancient prebiblical religious traditions, and as such, can be “even more ‘traditional’ than followers of the biblical faiths” (Christ & Plaskow 1979, p. 10). Many revolutionaries find inspiration for feminist theology and spirituality in the history of Goddess worship as it provides “an image of female power that can counteract the symbol of God as male” (Christ 1979, p.10-11). While revolutionaries consciously use these symbols as a means for counteracting a patriarchal God, they can, as Christ and Plaskow point out, “be charged, on the one hand, with not breaking sufficiently from the past, and, on the other, with distorting the past through romanticizing it” (1979, p.11). Christ and Plaskow (1979, p. 10) note that terms such as “post Christians, post Jewish, pagan, witch, Goddess worshipper, or simply as members of the womanspirit movement” are all used in association with this group of feminists (1979, p. 10).

Whether or not religion is considered to have the potential for reform, feminists in this area have attempted to re-write women back into religious history by researching women-centred societies and forms of religious expression, and by offering alternative interpretations of the bible.

It is validation of women's experiences and the naming of those experiences that underpins feminist propositions for change. Like de Beauvoir (1949) and Daly (1985), Christ and Plaskow (1979) take issue with the suppression of women's experiences under masculine language, symbol and ritual. They suggest that separation from the ability to name has kept women "in a state of intellectual and spiritual dependency [because] it is through naming that humans progress from childhood to adulthood and learn to understand and shape the world about them" (1979, p.7). They believe the pathway to change begins when women begin to name the world for themselves:

They will upset the order that has been taken for granted throughout history. They will call the world into new being. Naming women's experience thus becomes the model not only for personal liberation and growth, but for a feminist transformation of culture and religion (Christ & Plaskow 1979, p. 7).

Similarly, Dale Spender argues that women's ability to name their own experience is a central pathway towards their liberation. While she acknowledges that naming symbols will do little on its own to change power structures, she sees it as a necessary and

foundational step in challenging patriarchy (Spender 1980). Furthermore, the development of an authentic female spirituality is dependent upon it.

One difficulty is that the nature of women's experience – widely acknowledged by feminists as the basis for a female spirituality – has been forced underground by patriarchal culture and can thus be difficult to articulate and realise. Christ and Plaskow argue that “although it can be distinguished from roles or attitudes prescribed for women by men and male culture, women's experience is always shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the male-centered cultures in which women live” (1979, p. 8). The point of difference therefore between many feminists is “which of women's experiences are authentic and which alienated, about which can become the basis for cultural transformation and which must be repudiated because they have been created by sexism” (1979, p. 8). How feminists view female experience thus leads to different understandings of its transformative components, and contributes to a number of tensions found within feminist theology and spirituality (Christ & Plaskow 1979).

Christ and Plaskow suggest that in thinking about female experience, feminists are primarily concerned with the experience of liberation itself; that is in “recognizing oppression, confronting sexist culture and institutions, and moving into freedom” (Christ & Plaskow 1979, p.8). While acknowledging that this model of women's experience does not speak to women who do not see themselves as oppressed, Christ and Plaskow note that it can be used to criticise tradition and “construct new understandings of spirituality, rooted in feminist community” (ibid). At the same time, women's traditional experiences,

such as marriage and motherhood may provide “important clues for transforming patriarchal culture” (ibid). From this perspective, anything associated with femininity (intuition, relationships, expressing emotion) or any aspect of women’s traditional experience that has been rejected or denigrated by sexism, must be revalued. From this point of view:

Women’s body experiences – such as menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and menopause, and the traditional association of women with nature that is based on these experiences – become part of women’s traditional experiences that many feminists wish to affirm. Feminists argue that creating positive attitudes toward the female body is essential for women’s liberation and that anything common to many women should be positively valued from a feminist perspective (Christ & Plaskow 1979, pp. 8-9).

This association of women with nature contains certain problems given essentialist claims that women have an inherent connection with nature. In this respect, physiological functions such as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, can be seen as the basic reason for the devaluation of women because “women are seen as closer to nature and therefore as inferior to men” (Haralambos et al, 1996, p. 467). However, Christ and Plaskow (1979, p.12) make the point that the feminist position is about re-valuing the feminine and the notion of ‘nature’ rather than accepting any kind of ‘essential’ connection: “in traditional theology and philosophy, women have been equated with nature and men with freedom and transcendence. The new focus on women and nature elevates that which traditional theology and culture have denigrated.”

In this respect, the association of women with nature and “the sense of closeness to nature that some women experience in nature mysticism or in the cycle of their bodies, in menstruation, pregnancy, and birth have much to teach all women and men about the rootedness of the human condition in the natural order” (Christ & Plaskow 1979, p.11). In essence, then, while the traditional association of women with nature has led to oppression, differently construed it offers the opportunity for spiritual transcendence.

Christ and Plaskow argue that a feminist spirituality must do more “than reappropriate the despised body and traditional female experience” suggesting that a “fully adequate feminist theology must express the combination of rootedness in nature and freedom that feminists experience in their lives” (1979, p.12). Further they view the many tensions found within feminism as “creative and exhilarating” and argue that it is not necessary to resolve these as “patriarchy is a many-headed monster, and it must therefore be attacked with all the strategies at our command” (1979, p.15).

Gender consciousness

The dislocation between my sense of my self inside and my behaviour outside was clear and undeniable. I felt I could never bring them together unless I re-entered myself.

Sheila Rowbotham (1973, p. 20) - *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*

Sheila Rowbotham (1973) argues that social representations of women are mirrors of distortion whereby women are taught to regard themselves as satisfied, and that to be dissatisfied, is personal failure. This serves to dislocate women from their own sense of

reality as well as from the experiences of other women. It also means that women face their experiences alone (Rowbotham 1973, p.3). Rowbotham argues that conscious recognition of femaleness involves a radical challenge to versions of femininity. Here she echoes a common feminist theme that unless women become aware that they share a common experience and come to understand the nature of their oppression, their subordination will not change.

In her critique of patriarchy and religion, de Beauvoir suggested that because of the social positioning of women as 'other', women taking up traditional female roles and participating in male inscribed social activities like Christian religion suffered a "bamboozled" consciousness, a consciousness that is both deceived and self-deceptive (1949, p. 631). More generally, she maintains that women have "double allegiance" to the "carnal world and to a world of 'poetry' [which] defines the metaphysics, the wisdom, to which woman more or less explicitly adheres" (ibid). It is through this 'double allegiance' that women endeavour to combine life and transcendence. This serves to impede women's creative and intellectual endeavors, with their "capacity for objectivity and creativity [...] partially worn out in the struggle to break the webs of delusion" (Daly 1985, p. 61). Because translating the masculine world consumes a woman's consciousness, her energies for creative freedom and self-expression are reduced.

Dorothy Smith (1987) talks of the development of women's consciousness and how it is affected by masculinised social structures - patriarchy, and what she calls the 'relations of

ruling' (which does not necessarily include all classes of men, for example, working class men or black men). She speaks of "the line of fault" where women are removed from the subjective reality of their own experiences, define their experiences in relation to male discourse and language, and learn to reflect and think about themselves through male objectivity (Smith 1987). Heightened by the public/private social divide, women's consciousness forms along this 'line of fault' creating a bifurcation.

It was through her own experience of negotiating work and family that Smith noted the operation of two modes of consciousness that did not happily coexist. She called this a bifurcated consciousness – a divide into two modes of thinking and operating with each going in different directions, with the bifurcation most evident when a woman moves from one sphere to another:

Moving from one to the other was a real shift, involving a different organisation of memory, attention, relevances and objectives, and indeed different presences. The strains and anxieties involved in putting and holding together work sites, schedules, and modes of consciousness that were not coordinated marked the separations institutionalized in a gender division of labor. Movement between a consciousness organised within the relations of ruling and a consciousness implicated in the local particularities of home and family transgressed a gender boundary (Smith 1987, p. 7).

Smith (1987) argues that this disjuncture manifests itself in a gap between experience and the forms in which experience is socially expressed (thereby becoming intelligible and actionable). Like Spender (1980) and Daly (1985), Smith stresses that masculine

interests, perspectives and experiences shape the dominant discourse, with the relations of ruling thus fundamentally gendered. Women's interests, perspectives and experiences, particularly those entrenched in family and domestic life, do not find a presence in the dominant discourse.

Smith's 'line of fault' operates in parallel with, and correction to, Marxist ideas about ruling class, ideological apparatus and the development of social consciousness. Her main concern is with the gendered production, dissemination, and ownership of knowledge where she argues that "in relation to men (of the ruling class) women's consciousness did not, and most probably generally still does not, appear as an autonomous source of knowledge, experience, relevance, and imagination" (Smith 1987, p. 51).

The 'relations of ruling', Smith suggests, are in part structural where they operate through institutions and organisations, and in part ideological where they operate through images and symbols and form a differentiated yet coherent system – an "apparatus of 'ruling'" (Smith 1987, p. 54). These fall to the section of the ruling class known as the intelligentsia.

The intelligentsia:

Serves to organize and order the expression of the local, particular, and directly known into forms concordant with its interests, aims and perspectives. Thus experiences, concerns, aims, interests, arising among people in the everyday and working contexts of their living, are given expression in forms that articulate them to the existing practices and social relations constituting its rule (Smith 1987, p. 56).

Social consciousness can originate outside of actual or lived experience forming an external category in which the actualities of real experience attempts to fit (Smith 1987).

In respect to this Smith suggests that there are two forms of social consciousness:

On the one hand, ideas and images – the social forms of thought – directly expressive of a world known directly and shared, arising where things need to be thought, said, sung, or imaged in paint or sculpture, enacted in ritual, or formulated as rule, and, on the other hand, the social forms of thought made for us by others, which come to us from the outside, and which do not arise out of experience, spoken of and shared with others, or out of the need to communicate with others in working contexts (Smith 1987, p. 55).

Hence the ideologies flowing from the relations of the ruling serve to organise, legitimise and maintain the existence of those with the power to name, while those outside this conscious production of thought are effectively silenced. They do not participate in its production – the dissemination of ideas and images, education processes, communications media and so on, that the ruling class hold in virtual monopoly (Smith 1987).

So far it can be said that Smith's analysis is important for my purposes in three ways. First, her notion of the disjuncture of experience is translatable to feminist critiques on the institutions of religion - where the religious doctrines, scripture, ritual and so on are the external ideological or 'experience categories' in which actual and real experiences are to be "stuffed". Second, her ideas about the relations of ruling and the production of

knowledge highlights how external ‘experience categories’ represent the thoughts and experiences of the dominant class (which is white and male). Third, she shows how both these factors work to silence the experiences of those outside the means of the production of knowledge.

Smith (1987) also talks of submerged traditions where experience is either incompatible with language or has no language. For example, she points to Rowbotham’s work on the British working class which suggested there was a divide between home talking and educated language where “the embarrassment about dialect, the divorce between home talking and educated language, the otherness of “culture” – their culture – is intense and painful” (Rowbotham in Smith 1987, p. 57). She points out that at the beginning of the women’s movement, there was not even a ‘home talk’ language to contrast with an ‘education language’ – there was *no* social language:

In the beginning to find out how and what to speak, we had to begin from nowhere, not knowing what it was we would have to say and what it was we would need to know how to speak. In almost every area of work, therefore, in opposing women’s oppression we have had to resort to women’s experience as yet unformulated and unformed; lacking means of expression; lacking symbolic form, images, concepts, conceptual frameworks, methods of analysis; more straightforwardly, lacking means of self-information and self-knowledge (Smith 1987, p. 58).

In this situation, women have “had to resort to their experience unmade, because there has been no alternative” (Smith 1987, p. 59). In this way, a return to experience and

subjectivity (the powerhouse of artists and poets), where each woman is the centre of her own experience, has been critical (Smith 1987).

The problematic of inquiry

In the same way that feminists have provided a critique of religious institutions, Smith has provided a critique of sociology and its masculine perspective. She locates sociology in the relations of ruling, arguing that it has a gendered history with its studies contributing to male interests and its values to masculine ideologies and forms of thought. From this basis, she makes suggestions about the way in which we should do research about and on women. She starts with the importance and legitimacy of women's own accounts of their experiences, and suggests that it is in this return to experience that "we ourselves have directly in our everyday worlds", that a distinctly feminist mode of research can emerge. This involves:

The repudiation of the professional, the expert, the already authoritative tones of the discipline; the science, the formal tradition, and the return to the seriously engaged and very difficult enterprise of discovering how to begin from ourselves (Smith 1987, p. 58).

Her own 'problematic of inquiry', she saw, emerges from:

The disjuncture [...] between *the forms of thought*, the symbols, images, vocabularies, concepts, frames of reference, institutionalised structures of relevance of our culture, and *a world experienced* at a level prior to knowledge or expression, prior to that moment at which experience can become "experience" in achieving social expression or knowledge, or can become "knowledge" by achieving that social form, in being named, being

made social, becoming actionable (Smith 1987, pp 49-50 emphasis added).

Smith's plea for a feminist sociology provides the conceptual and methodological foundation for the empirical stages of research for this thesis. It is to this that I now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To understand the spiritual perspective, we must be willing to reverse our usual way of thinking and looking, which is linear and externally focused.

We must look beyond what is easily counted and accounted for and examine what does not fit into our categories and conceptions of the world. There can be no preconceived notions about what may be helpful.

(Sermabeikian 1994, p. 179)

Introduction

Phenomenology and feminist research methods inform the empirical stage of this research. In this chapter I explore these underpinnings and outline the processes undertaken in conducting the interviews with female participants. The overall aim of this investigation was to detail how the women understood, explored, and translated spirituality into everyday life. To do this I focused on how they described their sense of spirituality through the depictions of their own personal life story. As will be described in more detail later on I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with eleven women within the age range of 18 to 38 years who describe themselves as spiritual and/or are interested in spirituality and do not necessarily identify with a particular religion. First though, I revisit the commentator interviews undertaken in the first stages of the study and comment on how they shaped the second stage.

Research design – stage one

The first stage of data collection, through the commentator interviews, was designed to explore notions of spirituality in contemporary Australian society. It aimed to highlight the key elements of public dialogue on the topic of spirituality and to provide a foundation of background information specific and relevant to the Australian context. As well as providing a basis for understanding contemporary issues within Australian culture this stage of the research also provided some direction for establishing a research design for the second stage.

Interviewing the ‘commentators’

To do this I identified several people who were authors and/or commentators on the topic of Australian spirituality. They were chosen primarily because of their contribution to the public dialogue on contemporary spiritualities through various forms of media including journal articles, books, newspaper columns, television and radio. As a consequence I conducted interviews with seven people who were authors, academics and/or media representatives. As stated in the introduction, these were:

- The Reverend (Dr.) Nancy Victorin-Vangerud: Author, Lecturer in theology Murdoch University – Western Australia
- Hugh Mackay: Author, news columnist, research consultant
- Geraldine Doogue: Journalist, radio and television presenter (ABC Radio National, Compass ABCTV)
- Professor Tony Kelly: Author, Lecturer theology – Australian Catholic University

- Associate Professor Lynne Hume: Author, Lecturer theology- University of Queensland
- Associate Professor David Tacey: Author, Lecturer Arts Cultural Studies – Latrobe University
- Rae Lindsay: Author, Senior Lecturer Social Work – University of Western Australia

Given time constraints and the nature of the contribution this part of the research made to the project as a whole, I considered a minimum of six and maximum of ten interviews appropriate for this purpose. The final group was determined by the interest and availability of people to participate in the research. A number of others were asked to contribute but either did not respond or chose not to participate.

Several steps were undertaken in developing the interview schedule. The people chosen represent a small group considered to be in a knowledgeable position as far as the topic of spirituality was concerned. They came from varying perspectives and areas of expertise and had a good grasp of the wider context and were also privy to broader sources of information (Gillham 2000). Because the interviews with commentators were conducted for background knowledge and to provide some directional points for the future stages of research, I needed to ensure our discussions would result in a comprehensive and clear foundation. I also gave due consideration to utilising the commentator's particular expertise and made provisions for flexibility so each one could articulate their own viewpoints and understandings.

I based the interview schedule (Appendix A) on a semi-structured interview format with prompts and some open-ended questions to both stimulate and guide the discussion. The overall research direction was highlighted with a series of key discussion areas. Within each discussion area, there were a series of prompts indicating possible directions for discussion. Commentators were invited to talk on their own areas of expertise and to lead the discussions and order information in a way that was familiar and comfortable to them. This provided enough flexibility to allow the discussion to go where it needed but also enough structure to keep the discussion relevant to the topic (Gillham 2000, p.4). By adopting a facilitative type of interview process, I was able to use the commentators' expertise to provide direction on the remainder of my research and to seek their guidance on things to look out for and questions that should be asked.

After ascertaining a preliminary interest from each potential interviewee through email contact, a letter formally requesting their participation was forwarded (see Appendix B). As part of the ethics process, provision was made to provide each interviewee the opportunity to view any particular quotes used prior to thesis submission or any publication. Each commentator was given the option of having a 'confidential' interview or an 'open' interview. The confidential interview determined that comments could be published on the proviso that identifying information was not used. The open interview (which all of the commentators chose) was on the understanding that they would be provided with a copy of the interview transcription to ensure any comments or quotes used within the thesis or any subsequent publication were accurate. Permission for the interviews to be taped and transcribed was also gained (Appendix C).

I conducted each commentator interview on an individual basis over a three-week period from May 19 – June 6, 2003. Each interview was conducted for a minimum of one hour (with some taking up to two hours). A semi-structured interview or discussion guide (as outlined) was used to facilitate the discussion. The discussions centered around five broad areas:

- The nature of contemporary spirituality
- Contemporary spirituality and Australian culture
- The search for meaning - personal and spiritual development
- Individual, social and spiritual relationships
- Spirituality of younger adults aged (18-38)
- Assisting the research direction

Each of the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Although Gillham (2000, p. 83) suggests that this kind of interview “is something you should report very fully”, I chose not to do this given the ‘background’ contribution these interviews made to the thesis as a whole. By their very character these interviews were not susceptible to a ‘common themes’ analysis but were more important in terms of the authority of the information and the role it played in shaping the research. However, following Gillham’s suggestions, I merged the information from the interviews alongside, and cross-referenced them with, the published material (the various quotes and comments from these interviews were used throughout Chapter One of this thesis).

After all the interviews were completed I allowed a two week period and then contacted each commentator to see if there were any further thoughts they wished to contribute to their interview. All responded and did not feel any key areas had been overlooked.

In writing the final drafts of this thesis, just over three years following these interviews, I undertook a follow up process with each commentator to confirm first, their correct title and occupations at the time of interview and second, to allow them to comment on the quotes ascribed to them in the body of the thesis. Each commentator was sent a letter asking them to check the details of their name, title and qualifications. If they were quoted directly from the interviews (as opposed to their published work), they were also given a brief contextual synopsis of their comments and asked to peruse them for intention and context. While I did not send a full interview transcript as noted in the ethics application, I mentioned that this was available to them upon request.

Research directions

As the commentators were all academics, authors and researchers, I sought to utilise their expertise in designing the broad parameters of the interview schedule for the research design for interviewing the younger group of participants (noting that the decision to solely interview women had not been made at this point, and was made, in part, because of the directions from these interviews). Accordingly, at the close of each interview, I asked each commentator their opinion on some research directions. While they had varying opinions on the type of approach to be used, they all concurred that the use of qualitative research techniques was the most appropriate. Mackay suggested that this was

“because it’s a complex subject and an intensely personal and emotional subject”. Further, he confirmed my thoughts that one-on-one interviews would be the most appropriate approach, particularly using a similar sort of unstructured interview to the one used for the commentator interviews (Mackay 2003, CS Interviews). Victorin-Vangerud suggested that this approach to research was important because it is helping “give voice to the voices that are coming into being [...]. It really helps people, I think, because they can look at something and say, you know that’s where I am, and I don’t feel so weird, or that gives me a new possibility” (Interview, CS 2003).

On completion of this first stage of data collection with the commentators, I became convinced that the main area of deficiency in research was related to women’s spirituality. Most of the commentators concentrated on spirituality in direct relationship to institutional religion and directed their comments towards possible social ramifications of spirituality without religion. The ‘new’ spirituality was thus considered in quite an abstract manner with only a little more than cursory glances towards how it was relevant to women within those contexts. While there were acknowledgements that the new spirituality was somehow enabling to women’s spirituality (Bouma 2000; Lindsay 2003; Tacey 2003; Hume 1997), there was little elaboration as to how and why it was enabling to women’s experience (aside from Hume, who was looking specifically through the lens of witchcraft and paganism). This, then, was one of the key factors in my decision to present the stories from a woman-centred perspective, underpinned by my core interest in the issue of gender.

Research design – stage two

The research design for stage two was basically underpinned by phenomenological considerations. Phenomenology concentrates on the “subject-experience” and the intentionality of consciousness, and considers subjectivity and objectivity as coexistent and dialectical (Psathas 1973; Berger and Luckmann 1979). Moreover, it can ‘illuminate’ whatever individuals experience (Rogers, 1983). As well as drawing, in a general sense, on a phenomenological approach to explore and explicate the women’s stories, I was also influenced by insights from symbolic interactionism. In this sense I assumed that the women’s stories had to be understood as they were understood by them, and that the meanings that they put forth were the consequences of social interaction embedded in their individual social circumstances (Berg 1995). As Blumer (1969, p. 2) suggests “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things [s]he encounters”. Mead’s classic work on the self is also important in that “the self is seen as a process, a reflexive process which provides for self-interaction. [Wo]men can make indications to [her]self and plan and organize [her] actions with regard to what [s]he has perceived, classified, and evaluated” (Psathas 1973, p. 6).

While some of the strengths of phenomenology for this research have been raised in Chapter Two in the analysis of Berger and Luckmann’s work on the social construction of reality, a brief summary of relevant points for the empirical stages is provided here.

Phenomenological methodology

The strength of the phenomenological approach lies in its “understanding of consciousness and its relationship to action and interaction, and in the study of culture and its constraining effects on actors” (Ritzer 1988 p, 231). The notion of consciousness as something which is expressed in the relationship through which people give meaning to objects (the notion of intentionality) is at the heart of contemporary phenomenological sociology (Morris 1991). Phenomenology posits that people view their world in an ordered way, are highly involved with that world, and do not question their ‘natural standpoint’ in it. The ordering that is done, as people make sense of their circumstances and experiences, forms the essence of the phenomenological investigation. Moreover, phenomenology has a commitment to penetrate the various layers of reality constructed by people to get to the essential structure of consciousness. Phenomenology requires the researcher to ‘bracket’ his or her natural standpoint, which is considered to be a source of bias or distortion. This requires (as far as possible) having “an ‘open’ mind that is present to all possibilities with preconceptions about the subject set aside or “bracketed”, and assumptions, theories, beliefs, prejudices noted (Psathas 1973, p. 13). The researcher therefore must adopt the stance of a disinterested observer to study the world of the other and although she may draw on her own experiences, she does not study it from her own perspective (ibid). This requires some subjective reflection on the researcher’s behalf and I provide comment on some of the difficulties I experienced as part of the research process further along in the chapter.

As shown, Berger and Luckmann's work was important for this study because it centres on the everyday construction of reality and the process of everyday knowledge production. These authors considered the phenomenological approach to be best suited to "clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life" as it is "a purely descriptive method and, as such 'empirical' but not 'scientific'" (1979 p, 34). In this way, Rogers suggests that phenomenological results are not cumulative, that each phenomenologist "is a downright beginner", and that phenomenology is "more a flexible orientating frame than a fixed interpretative scheme" (1983, p.2). Similarly Psathas (1973, p. 17) proposes that adopting a phenomenological perspective requires that the researcher *evolves* a way of looking at the subject rather than *categorizing* data as under positivist research. This means that the results of research can be presented "within such new formulations or conceptualizations as are deemed necessary, and no argumentative or comparative posture which argues that this approach is 'better' or more 'valid' or 'truer to life' than some other is mentioned. The world stands on its own and the reader is expected to understand the paradigm it embodies" (Psathas 1973, p. 17). In the same way, Berger and Luckmann posit that "the phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather of the subjective experience of everyday life, refrains from any causal or general hypotheses, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of the phenomena analysed" (Berger & Luckmann 1979, p. 34).

Psathas (1973, p. 12) suggests three ways in which "validity" can be shaped in phenomenological studies of the life world. First, the accounts should 'fit' and make sense. Second, the descriptions and accounts should be recognisable to those reading the

accounts. Third, readers can apprehend the accounts and apply or participate in them themselves. I have tried to achieve these elements in my research by locating the stories in the Australian cultural context, by retelling the women's stories, where possible, in their own words, and by explaining in the best way possible the 'reality' they were voicing in their accounts.

Feminist approach

While the phenomenological approach allows for a richly detailed account of each woman's story, a feminist woman-centred approach pays particular attention to women's experiences. Thus women's experience, as reported and described by women, forms the basis of knowledge production. Feminists such as Abbott, Wallace & Tyler (2003) argue that positivistic enquiry has effectively silenced the experiences of women as it provides a more adequate platform for voicing the male experience through the use of categories and concepts that follow dominant relations. Further, Christ (1980) argues that there is often an implicit interest in preserving the patriarchal status quo. In line with this, Dorothy Smith points out that "inquiry does not begin with the conceptual organisation or relevances of the sociological discourse, but in actual experience as embedded in the particular historical forms of social relations that determine that experience" (1987, p, 49). She applies her 'line of fault' supposition to sociological method and suggests there is a disjuncture between women's experiences and their social expression in research. "This actual or potential disjuncture between experience and the forms in which experience is socially expressed (becoming thereby intelligible and actionable) is the break on which much major work in the women's movement has focused" (1987, p. 50).

It is on this disjuncture as experienced by the women themselves that I attempt to position the voices of my women participants, in counter to those standard sociologies that ignore “the particular local places in the everyday in which we live our lives” (Smith 1987, p. 2).

What makes feminist research, feminist, is not the application of particular methods, but the way the research is carried out and the frame in which the results are interpreted (Abbott et al., 2003; Letherby 2003). Millen (1997) asserts that feminist research incorporates two main characteristics: “a sensitivity [to] the role of gender within society and the differential experiences of males and females and a critical approach to the tools of research on society, the structures of methodology and epistemology within which ‘knowledge’ is placed within the public domain” (in Letherby 2003, p. 73). Influenced by arguments such as these, and combined with the phenomenological approach, my broad assumption was that the women’s experiences and understanding of spirituality needed to be told *as articulated by women themselves*, and not judged or assessed in any way in relation to some yardstick as to what constituted spirituality. This, I hoped, would give insight into how these women’s experiences of spirituality were articulated in the lived world “in which we find and make ourselves subjects” (Smith 1987, p. 6). In other words, feminist approaches enable us to explore the construction of the social ‘woman’ and the ‘female’ identity and women’s experiences of these in the everyday worlds in which they find themselves.

There are various positions on what feminist research should set out to achieve. Some, such as Walker and Thompson (1984); and Cook and Fonow (1986), suggest that it should aim to achieve social change, by empowering, improving and transforming women lives (cited in Miller & Treitel 1991). Others, such as Epstein (1974), consider that “in addition to promoting social change, research must uncover gaps in knowledge about groups other than the dominant one” (ibid). Smith (1974) argues more broadly that research that begins from subjective experience will help all participants to understand the structure and organisation of their world (ibid). This is the position taken here.

In sum, then, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism stand against the traditional positivist approaches of sociology and claim the importance of understanding the subjective. Feminist approaches also reclaim the subjective but focus more on the importance of women’s experience as central to understanding the female position. It is to the women’s personal experiences and accounts of spirituality to which I focus.

Data collection

The considerations discussed above had implications for the way in which I selected participants, and developed and conducted the interviews with the women participants. Quite clearly talking to a small number of women in depth about their sense of spirituality was to be my approach. Letherby (2003) suggests ‘*talking, talking, talking*’ whether through interview or focus groups, life history, biographical interview and so on, is an important method for gathering and recording information.

The women participating in this study were drawn from the Perth metropolitan and the south-west regional areas of Western Australia. I sourced the women through the 'snowball' method where potential participants were referred to me by word of mouth (Letherby 2003). Some I personally approached and others approached me. This meant that I knew two of the women interviewed, I knew who three of the women were by association, while six were unknown to me prior to the interview (the influence of this on the interview process is considered later in this chapter). I chose the snowball method because of the highly personal nature of the research. My assumption was that if the women were accessed through a relationship connection that kept a reasonably close link to 'Kim the person' (friend/colleague/friend of friend and so on) then, 'Kim the researcher', would arrive with a sense of already being 'known'. This, I reasoned, would assist in the issue of establishing some trust in the interview process and the ability for the women to feel comfortable in talking with me about personal information.

To interview the women required ethical clearance with all the normal caveats and considerations. I took care to inform participants of confidentiality, their right to withdraw at any stage, and their right to decline from responding to anything that made them uncomfortable. I detailed these points in their written information and consent letter seeking confirmation of their participation (Appendix D). I reiterated each of these points to participants at the beginning of the interview process and asked each participant to sign the requisite consent form with this understanding. As part of the ethics requirements, I undertook to put them in contact with a counsellor if they felt they needed this following the interview.

The interviews

In the months of February and March 2004, I conducted eleven in-depth one-on-one interviews with women between the ages of 18 to 38 years inclusive who identified themselves as spiritual and/or were interested in spirituality. Each interview was scheduled for a minimum of one hour, but the course of conversations most often went over that and took 90 minutes to two hours. I conducted some interviews outside of the metropolitan area in the vicinities of Mandurah and Bunbury.

The interview schedule (Appendix E) was semi-structured with a loose format of eight main questions and a small number of prompts. The questions served as a conversation guide around three base levels of spirituality, - the self, everyday experiences, and explorations of the non-material. These were kept quite general to allow each participant to engage with the topic in a manner that was comfortable to them. Put simply, the questions about self and everyday life were aimed at providing some foundations from which to map a personal sense of spirituality. I included some reflective questions about the past to explore any particular events that may have shaped their self perceptions and their beliefs and values. The strategies used for dealing with challenges and difficulty were drawn out with particular reference to spiritual beliefs and practices. Finally, questions around the spiritual and sense of the transcendental were explored in relation to the unfolded story.

I suggested meeting participants in a place of their choice for the interview, where they would be on 'their turf' so to speak. Accordingly, interviews were conducted in a variety of places as determined by the women, with most choosing for me to come to their homes, but a few also requesting neutral space such as a café or local park. Approximately two weeks prior to the interview, participants were given the interview schedule and asked to reflect on the questions, and if they felt it was appropriate, to write, draw, paint, include poetry, to express themselves - or to write as much as they could in 'journal style' around the topics of discussion. This was primarily as a catalyst for discussion but they could also be used as part of their story description if they were comfortable with that. All of the women who had undertaken to do this were happy for me to keep their sketches, notes, and stories in addition to their interview transcriptions.

During the interview I used prompts with alternate terminology such as 'meaning' to assist the conversational flow. As mentioned, I began each discussion by asking each woman to describe herself and to detail how she experienced everyday life. As part of the conversation participants were asked to reflect on their life and life experiences, their perception of themselves, their beliefs and values etc, and how these potentially influenced their lives on a daily basis. At the close of our discussions I asked them to reflect on their story and describe which aspects of their stories they considered to be spiritual or connected to their sense of spirituality.

Overall the interviews went smoothly and I felt that I had developed quite a rapport with each interviewee in a short space of time. Invariably it did not take long to get into very

deep discussions. Interestingly, I found that interviewing the women I had not met before easier than interviewing those with whom I had a closer sense of familiarity. These interviews I felt reaped more information and gave me a clearer sense of spirituality as something tangible in their lives. On reflection this could possibly be because I was completely unaware of the nuances of their story and had to ask questions and provide prompts more strategically rather than resting on preconceived assumptions. Further, I was perhaps unaware of any sensitivities that may have existed and therefore did not avoid particular areas that may have been considered painful. Nevertheless, each participant told their story wholeheartedly and revealed a rich, deep and fruitful sense of themselves and their sense of the spiritual.

Initially I thought a focus group after the interviews would be a good way for the women to share their perceptions and thoughts about spirituality, and the connections maintained through the 'snowball' method would also have been appropriate for that purpose. However, during the course of the interviews, I became increasingly aware that the level of personal detail that the women were sharing about their lives and the way their sense of spirituality was taken up practically and specifically to their experiences, would not translate to a group setting. I was concerned that in such a setting there would be an implicit assumption that they should share their experiences, some of which were traumatic, because they had already shared those with me as an inherent part of their spiritual story. In other words, I was aware of the potential for over-disclosure based on the research/researched power dynamic.

In the two weeks following the interviews I contacted each participant to see how they had responded to the interview and whether I had inadvertently raised any areas of pain. I checked on how they felt during and after the interview, asked whether it had uncovered anything too painful to deal with, and offered to put them in touch with a counsellor if that was the case. All of the women had various follow up responses but no-one felt the need for counselling. Some of the women said they felt a little tired and drained after the interview but okay the next day. Some reported feeling stimulated and thought more about their beliefs and connections with the world. One participant said she enjoyed conversing with me, but that talking about her spirituality was not something she would repeat on a regular basis as it connected with her past memories so significantly. At this point, some of the women offered additional information that elaborated on the interview. No-one contributed any distinctly different elements to their story. Once I finalised the key themes I forwarded each participant an overview of the key findings that arose from the sharing of their story.

Transcribing and analysing the narratives

I undertook to transcribe the interviews myself because of their personal nature, and the opportunity it provided to become more familiar with each woman's story. This took somewhere between four to seven days for each interview. I used a thematic approach to analyse the transcripts. I did this by first drawing out the elements of each woman's story according to the discussion areas represented in the interview schedule. From these I developed three main themes: painful experiences; searching; and meaning and purpose. From within each of the main themes I further drew out the common points in each story

into sub themes and section headings. As narrator I do not judge or provide a critical analysis but simply attempt to provide an interpreted thematic account of the interviews.

* * *

Some reflections on narrating the women's stories - the problem of locating voice

Throughout the course of this research, I have undergone some interesting shifts – both emotionally and intellectually - that demonstrate some of the difficulties I have faced in narrating the stories of the women participating in the research. I feel it is useful to mention these here as a preface to introducing the women's stories.

My first difficulty came at the very beginning stages of my research as I began to explore a topic on which I had little or no academic background but a strong personal interest. In reading the critiques of the new spirituality, I experienced a certain frustration with some of the conservative and traditional views of church representatives, particularly their references to self-indulgence and superficiality. I was unable to separate this sort of critique from the realities of my personal experience and my own sense of the spiritual. Because I felt these critiques to be judgmental and devaluing I found myself wanting to prove, in the first instance, that spirituality outside of religion was authentic and to 'prove them wrong'. Moreover, I wanted the voices of my future participants to be heard in their fullness and through the detail of their everyday lives. I didn't want them dismissed and I was prepared to fight for their stories to be heard and to argue for their validity.

As I thought more about the nature of the phenomenological method, however, I realised that if I wanted to be faithful to my goal of listening and retelling the women's stories as much as possible from their own perspective, I needed to separate the way I was identifying myself with the material. At the same time my awareness of varying viewpoints which developed alongside the research process, required me to constantly review and reflect on new information and different perspectives. Increasingly I felt that it was not my role to be critic but to understand. However, I still felt that some of the critiques of the new spirituality relating to superficiality, narcissism and so on lacked adequate understanding of the cultural context in which experience and meaning are dialectically related.

This was where 'bracketing' my own spiritual life became important to the validity of the discussions. The concern of the researcher subjectively influencing the research material is a well discussed issue in qualitative research literature (Best 2003). Exactly how much my subjectivity influenced the interview process and detailing of the women's stories is something that cannot be fully explicated. However, I can reflect on the point that none of women questioned me about my spiritual perspective and some only clarified with me at certain points in the interview that I understood their particular language and what they meant by certain phrases or examples used in their stories. However, while they did talk openly and willingly about their early life experiences, their reflections on suffering and their sense of journey in understanding these events through their spiritual exploration, I can reflect on the possibility that this was further shaped by the way I also think of things in process.

In considering how to tell the women's stories I was faced with the problem of creating a space from which the narratives would speak for themselves. This was partly related to a fear they could be negated or 'put down' on the basis that they were the voices of a white, basically middle class group. My concern about this was compounded when I attended a conference in Sydney and narrated some parts of the women's stories in a short presentation to a small group. After this a woman approached me and said that to her the stories had sounded like a "bunch of white women" talking. She also suggested that what some of them had to say was "dodgy" and that it was these kinds of stories that had made her return to religion (she was referring to psychic and occult experiences in this respect). Because she raises important concerns, I deal with each of these issues in turn.

Her first concern echoes criticisms that have been made of earlier feminist studies for ignoring the voices of women from marginalised groups (Ang 2003; Pettman 1992). My particular concern rested with the absence of Indigenous voices in this project. However, to have included them would have made for an entirely different research subject, in which my position as researcher, narrator and interpreter would have been equally, if not more tenuous. I do not consider, and didn't from the beginning, that I am an appropriate person to research this area. Evidently, though, this stands in as an important limitation of this study and one, which will, hopefully, be made good in future research.

All experience is 'situated' – that is marked by the culture, class, sex, ethnicity, age etc – of those represented. A particular group of women, with particular experiences, speak

here. In recording their voices, I see this thesis as creating some kind of ‘anticipatory space’ waiting for the inclusion of many other stories and voices from women of other ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic positions, cultural traditions, and educational heritage. The women’s stories are much less about who is speaking and much, much, more about what they are saying.

Finally, I return to the issue of the references to the occult, psychic and out of body experiences. I emphasise here that my interest lies not in judging whether these are ‘spiritual’ or not, nor what their psychological or social antecedents might be. Rather it is gaining insight into the kinds of phenomena the women in this study included within and under the broad notion of ‘spirituality’. It is the interpretations of what they consider to be spiritual that is important. To ‘get underneath’ this means that judgments and critiques are put aside. As Weber intimated, *Verstehen* - translated as understanding, concerns the extent to which we can imagine ourselves in the position of others in order to try and comprehend their worlds and behaviours (Acker 2001). Thus social research provides a frame within which subjective realities can be explicated and explored rather than representing the search for an objective or normative truth.

THESIS PART B –

THE WOMEN’S STORIES

PREFACE TO THE NARRATIVES

At this time we walk in the inner corridors of people's lives. Therefore tread softly, with wonder and awe, for no greater privilege can they give than to open their hearts and let another in (Anonymous)³.

Introduction

This second part of my thesis explores the everyday lives of eleven women with the purpose of unfolding their spiritual stories. Reflecting the age group most underrepresented in church participation, the women who participated in the research were all aged between 18 – 38 years. In being introduced to the study they all acknowledged themselves to be ‘spiritual’, or as having a strong interest in spirituality. Only one participant also had a religious affiliation. They represent a variety of personalities, interests, occupations and family life. They were selected by the ‘snowball’ method and the discussions were on an individual, in-depth and very personal level. Overall my purpose was to explore with each woman, how spirituality is understood, experienced and translated into their own everyday life.

³ This quote was provided by Gina, one of the participants involved in this study. Gina, a psychologist, said she used the “wisdom” held in this quote as a guiding influence in her working life: “I have this on the wall of my office and I think that aptly sums up the gift that my clients give to me – something they are most often unaware of”.

Using a pseudonym, the eleven women stories recounted here are: Donna (18), Felicity (21), Elise (27), Brianne (31), Gina (32), Katie (33), Ilene (35), Caroline (35), Hannah (36), Alicia (36), and Janine (36).

In the following chapters the women's stories are discussed in relation to three major themes: Difficult experiences and emotional pain (Chapter Five); Seeking and practicing spirituality (Chapter Six); Attaching meaning, forming beliefs and establishing purpose (Chapter Seven). In this preface I comment on four basic commonalities underlying their accounts. These provide an important foundation in reading and translating their stories overall.

I found, first, that most of the women had difficulty in describing themselves and were often quite reserved in talking freely and intimately about certain aspects of their lives. Of the eleven women, eight either directly expressed and/or displayed this difficulty. Second, with one exception all the women defined themselves in relation to social factors – that is, in attempting to portray how they saw themselves and to describe who they were, they offered information to do with their family position, how they thought others might describe and perceive them, and their work and/or career status. Third, I found that nine of the eleven women referred to the busyness and demands of responsibility in their lives. Six of those nine women described themselves as overwhelmingly busy with many demands placed on them and two spoke of how they had changed the busyness in their lives in response to illness. Fourth, just over half of the women included what they

believed in, or valued, as part of their core self-description. While all of the women talked about beliefs and values at some point during the discussions, six of the eleven women stated a key belief or value as an intrinsic part of their description of self. This belief or value was demonstrated as a code for everyday living upon which the women's everyday life was guided.

To introduce the women's stories, I use Brianne's story to elaborate on the four themes just mentioned.

Brianne's story

Brianne is a 31-year old single woman who lives alone in the Perth Metropolitan area with her cat as companion. She works full time as a psychologist for a government department. She found talking about herself difficult in the initial stages of the interview, saying that this was because, through her work, she would mostly "spend time listening to people". Talking about herself therefore, was "a bizarre experience, [...] really hard, [and] so embarrassing." Another difficulty she found in speaking about herself was not being able to find a description that accurately represented her many dimensions: "I am a bit of everything so it's a very difficult question to answer [...] I describe myself as really kind of a complex person – I wouldn't say that I am simple".

However, Brianne did reflect on how she thought others see her, saying, for example, that "people who know me in some areas would say that I am like a happy person – but I wouldn't say that is true either – I am kind of a mix of things." In this way, she

explained: “I feel a lot of emotions, [I am] pretty determined, reasonably clever, quite smart [...]. I am lucky my brain works well [...] but it’s not my primary form of operating, I kind of use my emotions as well to get through my life”.

Brianne said her everyday life was busy and demanding. Her daily routine is work focused and because her job is “a burn out job” she spends a lot of time recovering after-hours and on weekends. Her job covers some regional areas and hence involves a lot of travel. While she has a variety of friends from different social circles, she remarked that she usually prefers “one-on-one contact with people”. She explains, “I am much more of a loner than I am a group person”.

Brianne’s responses indicated that her core beliefs and values were essential as an everyday guide. She feels she is a person of “high integrity”, saying that, “I live my life as close as possible to my own truths and ideals”. When I asked her to elaborate what she meant by ideals, Brianne stated: “the ideals that fit in with my spirituality about what [...] a human being’s purpose is and what they are here to do. And I live according to those kinds of ideals”. These values guide her behaviour, which she explained, is more about being congruent to the self rather than subscribing to particular social mores. Hence, she reflects that, “ethics in a general community sense as opposed to a psychology sense would be - ‘people should be nice to each other all the time – at all costs’. And I don’t live that life because I don’t believe that’s about being true to yourself”. This meant if you were just being nice to everyone all the time that you could be just trying “to make somebody else like you or not to be judged or those kinds of things”.

The responses of the other women participating in this research similarly reflect these four key tendencies mentioned earlier: difficulty in talking about self: using social reference points; the busyness of everyday life; and the importance of beliefs and values as an everyday guide. At the same time, each woman's story brought a different dimension and uniqueness to that particular theme.

'Talking about myself is difficult'

As indicated, the women participating in this study generally found it difficult to describe and talk extensively about themselves, with four of the eleven either expressing this directly and another four indicating it through non-verbal cues. An example of the latter is to be found in Donna (18), who brought a friend along to the discussions for support, asked that the interview not be taped, and needed a fair amount of prompting to keep the conversation flowing smoothly.

I propose that the difficulty in talking about 'self' was underpinned by three main factors. First, being in the role of speaker was difficult for those, who like Brianne, usually prefer being in the position of listener. Second, finding ways to articulate and translate the many facets of the self that describe 'who I am' was hard. Finally, there was difficulty in revealing sensitive information about personal experiences and emotional reality. Related to this, there was some difficulty in sharing particular experiences that might be considered outside the 'norm'. For example, those who had paranormal experiences were

particularly sensitive in disclosing them as they are not necessarily accepted in mainstream society.

A minority of women, however, were comfortable with extensive descriptions of self. Thus, Janine (36) describes herself as a teacher/therapist using alternative therapeutic and psychic methods. She lives in Perth, is married, and hopes to have children one day. She says freely “I am strong willed, I am wise, I am funny, I am warm, I am caring, I am sensitive, I am passionate about life absolutely, and about my work and my loves”.

The self as socially defined

All of the women used some form of external reference in an attempt to project an image of themselves that reflected who they were and how they wanted to be represented. These reference points included familial and social roles, how other people had described them, work and career, age, and marital status. They also often included reference to the star signs. For example, Hannah (34) said “I am a quite vivacious, outgoing person – I am a Leo - which kind of makes me a proud person as well.” Similarly, Elise (27) reflected that, “it’s funny because whenever anyone asks me like - what I think I am – I think I am a typical Cancer. I am right, slap-bang, in the middle of the star-sign. [...] I am just really homely, like to know where my comfort zones are”. Against this, Felicity (21), told me that, “I am very grumpy if I haven’t had enough sleep or food – very grumpy! Everyone says that’s because I am Aries, but I don’t think that the star-signs work too well”.

Like Brianne, Gina (32) used other people’s opinions as a point of departure in describing herself, saying “people often describe me as ‘laid back’ and I was thinking about that. I

don't think that I actually am! I was thinking that perhaps the things that stress me are different from what stresses other people". In the same way, Katie (33) suggested that she is generally described by others "as earnest", meaning that she holds some strong beliefs. While she agreed that she does indeed hold strong beliefs, she rejected the attributed characteristic of earnestness: "I am not going to say that of myself, [Instead I will say] I believe in fairness – I can't stand it when things aren't fair".

Ilene (35) was more general when using other people's perceptions to describe herself. Initially, when I asked her for a self-description she was hesitant and claimed that she would usually "just let other people do that." Like most of the other women, she mentioned her social roles and personal relationships, describing herself as a married mother of two small girls living on a small farm property in the country. Her family, her family relationships and family business interests, are the main focus of her everyday life. She viewed herself as "fairly easy going" commenting that "I don't like a complex life – I like a fairly simple life".

Caroline (35) also described herself through her social roles and her key relationships: "I am a mother and my daughter is fifteen – Joe [my husband] and I were married very young". Caroline also said she was "a writer" who contributes to "a lot of diverse things like [...] [a young women's] magazine and newspapers and all sort of things like that". She reflected, "I love research, and love teaching, and love writing, and they are the three things that I try to do in my life rather than thinking 'oh I am going to have a job' – I keep these three elements going". This requires a lot of "thinking time", so Caroline tries

to have significant periods of seclusion “where I literally just don’t speak to people for a long time”. She owned that “I am definitely an introverted person, even though I don’t have any trouble teaching or giving papers or anything like that. I don’t like groups very much – I am a one-on-one person”. She also said she had “lots and lots of friends but they are all one to one friends and they are very old friends usually – I have got the same closest friend since I was 12 really”.

Friendships were an important part of many of the women’s accounts, even though their comments on them were sometimes qualified. For example, Brianne and Caroline both described themselves as having many friends, but preferring to have one-on-one contact with people rather than large group interaction. Elise (27) also preferred the smaller circles of friends she developed after a relationship break-up, commenting that: “I guess I started enjoying the different kind of relationship you have when you have fewer friends. That you tend to have, or they tend to be a lot deeper because you spend more time with them”. Donna described spending most of her time with her core group of friends who had helped her through some difficult periods in her life. Alicia (36), on the other hand, drew attention to her large network of social relationships, saying that “I think the things I really enjoy is being around friends and family [and] being around people that I connect with deeply”. However, at times she feels “a bit overwhelmed with the number of people that we have, or I have, in my life and the number of things going on”. She found that this often resulted in a “really chaotic, really busy” lifestyle which impacts on her mostly “quite happy and balanced” personality.

More generally, it was through these relationships that most of the women found they were often extremely busy. Many felt a struggle in balancing the consistent, and sometimes overwhelming, demands placed upon them as professionals, mothers, daughters, friends, and so on. Most of the women who began describing their relationships and the career dimensions of their life, also started to elaborate on very busy lifestyles.

The busyness of everyday life

*I put down busy and exhausting because of the way that life gets out of
control and the way that you feel that you are running along
beside it at times*

- Alicia (36), Research participant

Busyness was a familiar theme in most of the women's stories. Nine of the eleven women spoke of feeling the demands of everyday life in some form, and mentioned the on-going difficulty of finding a balance between competing demands. Six of these talked about trying to develop strategies to change and deal with this. Three indicated that through various circumstances they had learned to establish better daily routines and talked about how they now manage their competing demands and responsibilities. However, the two younger participants, Donna (18) and Felicity (21), didn't suggest that they felt too busy or had any difficulty in managing work or relationships in the same way as the other women.

As one of the busy majority, Ilene stresses and worries about her children as well as how she will manage to get everything done within the day. She took a break from her nursing career as she said “I wanted to spend more time with my family [...] and you know spend time and do activities with [the kids]. I just think it’s important while they are young – they just learn and absorb so much - [and it is] when they are young that you can put as much effort in helping shape that, and then [...] they get a better start in life”. Even though Ilene took leave from her profession, she still finds balancing the various aspects of her life and having time for herself, difficult. Like most of the others, Ilene made a conscious effort not to be so busy and to take time to recuperate, but acknowledged that to slow down and “lighten up, [...] is easy said and harder done”. She said that maintaining balance is an on-going dilemma for her because:

You need to get everything done and [get] everything organised [and] have a plan for everything [...]. It’s not a matter of just putting your kids in the car and taking them to school, you have got to think about their meals, and drinks and their clothes and a change of clothes and their nappies and bits and pieces.

Hannah (34) also found it hard to fit those things she loves to do in and around her role of being a mother. Her role as a primary school teacher combined with raising a young family means that she is “very busy”. She recounted that, “I work three days one week and four days the next – but I love what I do. I like people, so I am a people person – I like to be out there and experience the world and [so] I sometimes feel quite frustrated as a mother because [...] you are limited by what’s in your life”. While “having children is a

wonderful thing, [...] you have to slow things down and actually just do that, not try and take on too many other things”.

In a different way, Gina (32) also described her life as busy involving a full-time career in psychology, part time study towards a PhD, participating in a variety of team sports, and undertaking individual challenge events like the Rottneest Channel Swim⁴, with all this taking “a lot of commitment”. Gina said that she “kind of likes to be busy” but was conscious that her busy life stemmed from “wanting the best out of every aspect from things” and because of the difficulty she has in saying ‘no’, both to others, and to herself. On the other hand, Gina explains that she also “like[s] to do other stuff - like spend time by myself and have quiet time and do nothing”, but finds creating this space for herself difficult and “actually hard to fit in”. Sometimes, she reflects, it is just as “hard to sit around and do nothing”. Gina was concerned about finding a balance in her everyday life because in her occupation “burn out is a very high possibility”. In light of this, she recognises that “I do really need to find ways to cope and deal with it – but it’s all a process”.

Ilene, Hannah and Gina provide good examples of how most of the women interviewed felt about trying to achieve a balance in their lives. They all experienced very full lives which usually included a large amount of responsibility and high levels of work commitment, both paid and unpaid. Other contributing factors included travel time to work, involvement in sport, maintaining relationships with family, friends and so on.

⁴ Rottneest Channel Swim is an annual event in Western Australia where competitors swim 19.4 kms (solo, in pairs, or in teams of four) from the mainland starting at Cottesloe in Perth to Rottneest Island.

Janine, Katie and Caroline, who also talked about these pressures, recounted how they had developed the ability to cope with the competing demands of their lives. Both Katie and Janine had experienced illness and said that this experience helped them to balance their lives on a practical everyday level. In a similar way, some of Caroline's traumatic life experiences promoted an understanding of her need for her own space and the ability to create it. These stories are recounted in Chapter Five.

In contrast, the two youngest women (Felicity 21, and Donna, 18) did not appear to find life so busy. Both were in the process of exploring career ideas and making study choices. Donna worked in a video shop and planned to move to the City from a regional area to attend university within the next year or so. She said that earning money helps her to be independent, which is very important to her. Felicity was less-goal oriented and preferred to have as little routine in her life as possible. Everyday life for her is "hard to narrow down because at the moment everyday life is; I will wake up when I wake up – I set an alarm clock so I don't wake up much past 10am – but generally I am up at 7am anyway. Sometimes it is 5am, sometimes it is 9am – depends on what my body wants to do". Her current two jobs of doing night-fill and working in an ice-cream shop require that her hours are mixed, and she has developed a flexible lifestyle to encompass this.

While Felicity feels her current life is quite boring "and quite workish", she focuses on the benefits for her future plans. She explained, "I am trying to make [money]. I really want to go out traveling [...] and want to go around Australia". Felicity "love[s] change – anything different", and says, "I can't stand things that are so baseline. I can take that for

awhile but that generally lasts about six months and then I start wanting change automatically”. In the same way, she believes that “I think you should change yourself, you should learn from things, and I like to say that I learn from things, change my opinions. [Again] it comes with that not staying constant thing”.

In describing their everyday lives, almost all the women spoke about change in some way. Donna talked about planning her future studies and working towards her independence, while Felicity welcomed change in and of itself. Caroline, Janine and Katie reflected on the changes they had made as a result of difficult life experiences and how they worked to sustain those changes in daily life. Others talked about the need to make changes in order to include some space for themselves in their everyday lives. The women linked this element of change with self-development in terms of making themselves and their lives more effective.

Beliefs and values as an everyday guide

All of the women talked about beliefs and values at some point during the discussions, with six of them describing a key belief or value in the beginning stages of the interview as a way of presenting who they were and how they perceived themselves. These beliefs or values influenced how they went about their daily lives whether in maintaining a particular lifestyle or planning to change it. Essentially, these operated as a code for everyday living through which the women’s own behaviour and experiences were assessed. For example, Felicity stated that she believed in the power of the individual and as part of that she values personal change: “I believe very much that everything is within

– like you change how you think, you change what you believe – very much the power is within you. And in that I think you are responsible for everything – I mean of course society does influence you - but I think ultimately it does come down to your choices when things happen”. This set of beliefs are put into practice in Felicity’s everyday life through her very flexible daily routine and her openness to take in new information and experiences.

In a slightly different way, Ilene’s story also provides a clear example of the relationship between self-perception, beliefs and values and the attempt to reconcile these in everyday life. Her decision to break from her nursing career was in line with the value she places on simplicity, and on family and personal relationships. She found that living on their small hobby farm the “the simplicity of everyday life” was one of the central ingredients of her happiness: “I just like the simple basic things in life [...] - I’m more comfortable having people close to me, and [...] those things are more important to me than money and possessions”.

While the detail of Katie’s story will be covered more fully in Chapter Five, some comments here provide a good example of this convergence of self, belief, and daily life. For Katie a central value is fairness: “I believe in fairness – I can’t stand it when things aren’t fair and I believe strongly in treating everyone equally and in giving people a go”. Katie believes that recovering from breast cancer has opened up the path for her to explore this belief and to find ways to enact it in her life. For her “every soul has an ultimate purpose [...] and the ultimate in any lifetime, is to find what the ultimate is, and

reach it". She has worked to identify that goal for herself and to bring it into her daily life. She says:

I think I am pretty close. I think that's what the cancer was all about personally. I haven't cemented it yet, but I know the factors. I think it's about – I think it's where I get my fairness from and I think that might be a soul thing – It's about somehow finding a way of bringing fairness into a certain group of people from a global point of view. Indigenous people, I have a particular affiliation with, Aboriginal people and also women [...] and that's where ultimately I am working towards.

In a very conscious way, Katie is putting these beliefs into practice in her working life: "I am working towards that in terms of the jobs I am accepting and the sort of people I am dealing with. I have just negotiated a contract with a big company to actually write up their Indigenous relations strategy for the next five years [...] which would be working with Indigenous people". On a practical level, this has meant "saying no to other projects and setting yourself up so that you are offered those sorts of projects". At the same time she acknowledged: "People let control get taken away from them and it's so easy to do – and even with all this work I have done I still see myself nearly getting sucked back into these old patterns and letting other people take my control away. You really have to remind yourself and constantly work at it".

Concluding comments

The women's initial self descriptions show a primary consciousness in and of the realities of everyday life. A spatial and temporal location of the self within these realities served

as the starting point for each woman as she began to map her own personal spiritual story. Each woman identified strongly with traditionally 'female' social roles and reflected, to varying degrees, an internalisation of responsibility through work and career and family and significant relationships.

In subscribing to a particular social role Berger and Luckmann (1979, pp. 149-150) suggest that to a certain extent we internalise the contents of that role in terms of values and behaviours so that it becomes real and meaningful to us. To do this we begin by 'taking over' the world of others living in that role (usually in primary socialisation) in order to understand and interpret it for ourselves (ibid). Importantly this connects us with others as we share and participate in each other's subjectivities. Each woman's roles and responsibilities in relation to others were important factors in the busyness and the competing demands they describe, which was mostly talked about in terms of not having enough time for themselves.

In describing themselves the women also used other people's descriptions or various predefined categories like the star-signs. These were used to either embrace those categories as self-representative or to separate themselves from various aspects of those representations where they saw themselves as different. This reflects the dialectical subjective and objective relationship through which Berger and Luckmann (1979, p. 44) suggest we come to understand who we are. It is through such typifications and projections that we can stop the continuity of our daily experience and reflect on these

objectifications in relation to our self. The women's description revealed this as they talked about how they see themselves in relation to various objective references.

This process of defining themselves in this subjective/objective way and in such a role oriented manner was significant for this study in that none of the women identified themselves upfront as a 'spiritual' person. This was even though they had previously identified themselves as a spiritual person and/or were interested in spirituality when agreeing to participate in this research, and further, knowing that I was there to talk with them about spirituality. Nielsen (1996) asserts that unacknowledged gender is "present as background when one reflects on something else, for example what kind of a person one is, what kind of desires one has, what kind of feelings one experiences as having" (in McLeod 2000, p. 46). Thus, the themes I have introduced here as a preface to the women's stories – the preeminence of the everyday and the women's social roles and responsibilities through work and family relationships - provides a gendered foundation for the women's sense of spirituality.

CHAPTER FIVE

DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES AND EMOTIONAL PAIN

Introduction

Distressing and sometimes traumatic experiences were central to all of the women's personal stories. In the interviews they talked of experiences such as illness, divorce, family violence, sexual abuse, death and grief, and related them to personal spiritual development. In this chapter, I explore these experiences, emphasising their importance in the women's search for spiritual meaning and the development of their personal sense of spirituality. As a way of prefacing this discussion, and providing a bridge between this and the previous chapter, I return to the stories of Katie and Janine and Caroline, who made changes to their lives as a result of their difficulties.

Katie made a clear connection between her experience of dealing with breast cancer and the formation of the beliefs and values that she now uses to guide her in her daily life. She was diagnosed with breast cancer at 31 years of age, when her newborn son was just eight weeks old. Katie explained that, "one of the major changes" she made "was putting work into perspective [...]. Work was everything to me, work was number one and anything else, even my relationship with my husband [...], my health, everything, work was number one - and that was my first illusion to be shattered". In putting work into perspective she faced a particular struggle in that "my mind works in a way that I am 110% committed to things, and it has to be perfect, [or] I'll just keep trying [at] it". She

believes that this was the “predominant thing that she had to change” and that even now she “still struggles with overriding that”.

Janine (36) underwent a similar process to Katie as a result of having a chronic illness over a period of six years. Janine was an elite sportswoman competing at a national level and representing Australia in her chosen sport. At a world sporting event she came down very sick as a result of contracting three different kinds of parasites and she “just didn’t get better after that”. She recalls “for the first two years I was so angry because I was aiming for the Olympics, and I was so frustrated because I knew I could get there, but my body was holding me back”. After persevering with her training throughout her illness, Janine’s coach suggested that she should not continue until she was well again. She remembered “I had no shine in my eyes, no colour in my face, and I had no shine in my hair”. After trying some “quick fix” methods that didn’t work, Janine said “I really had to, I suppose, take stock of [my] life [...] which was huge [...] [and] definitely really hard”. Letting go of the intensity of her sporting life and, as she says, “of proving myself”, allowed Janine to open herself up and to enjoy other aspects of her life. Now she reflects, “I can go out with my friends, I can have a social life, I can go to the movies, I can go to dinner – which was just unheard of for years”.

Caroline sees her difficult experiences during adolescence and as young adult as underpinning her spiritual story. These difficulties began with family separation when she was eleven years old: “My parents divorced in a terrible sort of divorce and then my mother married a man whose wife married my father – so they did a swap over”. As a

result, Caroline's mother moved away to the country, which at age fourteen, left Caroline responsible for her younger brother. Her mother then had two daughters in her new marriage and they would all occasionally come to stay with Caroline and her brother on weekends and school holidays. As a result she explains "I didn't feel I had any place of my own", which is why she now feels that her home is her spiritual sanctuary. Having learned to manage her personal space, she reflects, "I think that's where some of that comes from – just having [had] your space totally invaded".

In order to fit in the things that she values most (writing, teaching and research), meant that Caroline "really fought to make sure that time is kept safe" as she found "it is very hard to explain to people that you need extra space in your life". Remembering how difficult it was for her dealing with other people's demands and perceptions, she can now see that "for years I used to feel so guilty about needing that time". Now Caroline finds in her life that "everything is quite simplified - I mean we have a cleaner, we have someone who does the ironing - and they are things I am happy to pay for otherwise all my time gets taken up". She has managed to bring her life to a point where "I seem to have all this space and it's very, very strange". Reflecting on this, she said "people are always saying 'oh you are so productive' because I do produce a lot of writing and I do a lot of teaching and I win a lot of grants and things and yet it feels like I am doing nothing".

Accounts such as these figured in all of the women's narratives. Four key themes emerged which are discussed sequentially in the rest of this chapter. First, under the heading of "difficult experiences", I show how the women's stories revealed significant trauma in their childhood and adolescent years and how they connected these experiences

with their sense of spirituality and the development of their spiritual self. Second, under the discussion “limited social support” the narratives reveal the relative failure of the traditional social services to assist women in difficult times. Many of the women in this study had sought assistance from counselors, health care professionals and church representatives as well as family and friends. Those accessing counselling services in particular, described them as inadequate for their needs and instead often found reading and talking with other people to be more helpful.

My third theme “incompatible church experiences” describes a level of incompatibility between the women’s experiences and desires and Christian religious practice. All but two women had had some kind of exposure to Christianity either through direct family involvement within a traditional religious structure and/or having attended a Christian based school, but only one woman, Ilene, continued to attend church regularly (but not weekly). Some of the women specifically noted that their mother’s negative experiences within the church had a shaping influence on their own alienation from traditional religious practice. Finally, under “influential female relationships” I note that for many of the women, a female role model or mentor was critical to their spiritual perceptions and understandings. These included mothers and grandmothers, as well as more formally constituted spiritual advisors. In this context, I also observe that the women themselves and/or female guardians/friends are positioned as healers rather than more traditionally placed saviours, priests or gurus.

These four themes – difficult and painful experiences, limited social supports, incompatible church experiences, and influential female relationships –are introduced first through Katie’s story and then discussed thematically and separately.

Katie’s story

Katie’s ordeal with breast cancer, she explains, was the catalyst “for me to actually go down a different path – to find different answers and ultimately find my true meaning in life rather than that path I was going”. In dealing with her cancer, Katie revisited her religious origins in Catholicism in an attempt to gain some understanding of what was happening to her and to find some ways of coping. She found her discussions with the young Vietnamese priest interesting and reflected: “He was the only priest [...] I have ever come across who really made sense”. Nevertheless what he had to say for her, “didn’t feel right”. Perhaps this was because she “was never comfortable with the Catholic Church [...] [as] it doesn’t represent, and never has, what I feel comfortable with”. Katie recalled questioning her religion at an early stage:

When I started questioning it would have been in high school because at [...] school [...], [while] there were some good people, there were just a lot of horrible people, as there probably is in every school. But on one hand we are going to religion classes and saying you know, ‘love your neighbour’, and ‘be friends’, and ‘love each other’, [and on the other hand] these kids - were just fucking awful kids. So there was none of that!

However, the primary reason for Katie’s disillusionment with the Church, she explained, was “the overall sort of emotions which are attached to the Catholic Church - like guilt

and martyrdom – you know the motivations behind their rules and I am just not interested at all. I think it really stuffs people up”. Katie also linked martyrdom and her Mother, recalling a Father “who worked all the time and was never home” and “a Mum who probably succumbed to martyrdom and was trapped in the mothering role”. Guilt is another emotion Katie associated with Catholicism and ironically, was a motivating factor in her returning to the Church when she was first diagnosed with cancer:

It is the whole Catholic thing. You find out you think you are going to die - the first thing you do is like blame [it on] the whole guilt of everything you have ever done wrong in your entire life. You think ‘oh my God’, I need to go and confess my sins [...]. It’s just like bred into you. I think I probably went to a priest before I went to a psychologist, before I went to a spiritual counsellor.

Despite her relatively good encounter with the Catholic priest when she returned, Katie said, “I still felt shit. I didn’t feel comfort, I didn’t feel peace, [and] I didn’t feel I had any solutions to anything”. After seeing some holistic doctors and “doing a lot of reading”, Katie then came to the conclusion that there had to be a lot more to healing than just diet and exercise. At that point, she found a spiritual counsellor through a recommendation from a friend. She “went and saw her and it just, you know, felt right”.

Katie also met and talked with other people through the Cancer Support Association. Although they too advocate spiritual work and meditation, she felt that most of her spiritual development was promoted through spiritual counselling; “I would put the majority of this down to spiritual counselling for sure”. For Katie, spiritual counselling is

“like a mutual exploration” where her mentor “kind of puts me in a position where I come up with it myself. She puts me in tune with it so that I can come up with things or ideas that maybe I wouldn’t have known”. In addition, through her mentor, Katie has met with other people and found that “it was interesting to talk with them about different things”. With Katie’s story as a foundation, I now turn to the first of my four themes.

Difficult and painful events

Like Katie, the other women I spoke to had experienced significant trauma and/or difficult life experiences. These occurred either in childhood or adolescence, or later on in adulthood, or in some cases, in both.

Childhood/adolescent experiences

In describing what life was like for them growing up, eight of the eleven women recalled disruptive childhood and/or adolescent experiences. Ilene, for example, remembered how her mother and youngest brother were killed in a car accident when she was just eight years of age. The entire family (mother, father, older sister, herself, and her two younger brothers) were all in the car when it collided with a train at a rural train crossing. The scene of the accident is within a two-kilometre radius of the farmhouse where they lived then, and where Ilene and her husband and children live now. Ilene said that this raises many memories of her mother and their family time together prior to the accident. She says, “I think about my Mum and how she was, and I’d be silly not to say that I strive to be how she was because I probably do in a way”. This is “probably to do with being out

here [on the farm], and I don't consciously think about it all the time but I think her presence is here". Ilene's return to the farmhouse helped her siblings and father discuss the accident and their loss, something they have all been unable to do for many years: "We never talked openly much about Mum's death because I don't think Dad could emotionally handle it – so it was never really an approachable sort of a subject for a long time".

Donna, now eighteen years of age, experienced the death of her older brother, Tom, five years ago when he was killed in a mining accident. She described this as an extremely "hard and difficult" time, and she still experiences "massive blanks" over the details and timing of what and when it all actually happened. Donna's parents had divorced many years earlier and she lived with her Mum during this time. She recalled the experience of her brother's funeral and how she had to watch her Dad's grief, her other brothers crying, and most of all her Mum's raw pain. This meant that she "had to learn really early" about heart-wrenching grief.

The women who experienced family breakdown during their developmental years (Hannah, Brianne, Gina, Elise, Felicity, Donna, and Caroline) often recalled memories of domestic violence, varying levels of abuse, and feelings of abandonment. Felicity, for example, recounted that "my Dad was a very violent person – we think he might be schizophrenic quite frankly because he has two different, two totally different personalities. He would love us, totally love us, and then he would just turn". Her Dad was violent towards her as a child and "started off being verbally violent, and then started

physical violence”. Felicity felt that her experience with her Dad helped her to build some of her personal strength: “It led me to be quite strong because I stood up to my Dad a lot. I just didn’t agree with what he was doing so when I was ten [...ten or twelve...around there], I divorced him in the courts because I didn’t want him to be near me and my sister”.

Felicity’s childhood experiences have influenced her in several ways, personally, socially and spiritually. The violence she experienced she believes:

Brought me up to be a lot stronger and just a lot more open about things, I guess. It doesn’t really shake me when I hear about violence. We got brought up with it. I disagree with it totally – I disagree with fighting and things like that – I think that people should talk things through, I don’t think there is enough talking, but it doesn’t really shake me to my core, I can deal with it.

But the same experiences she recalls also “did make me very antisocial for awhile – yeah up until I was about 15 - I had a lot of problems socialising with people [...] because [...] I would always go back to just socialising in my own little mode, which is my Mum and my sister, because it was a lot safer. And I was just so sick of people being crap [I thought] ‘I don’t want to deal with it anymore’”. As well as the violence leading to a close relationship with her Mum and sister, Felicity also believes that it led her to distrust males: “It led to a lot of my distrust in guys [...] – which is understandable - [and] in the way that I treat or feel about guys. I am very picky about the guys I socialise with because they just have to be very nice people”.

Most fundamentally, Felicity pointed to the spiritual impact of her childhood experiences:

[They] influenced me in a way spiritually that I would disappear. And I guess I sort of call them early meditations – where I would disappear. I would sit here and just go and fade off for hours, you know, and I would create my own little world sort of thing. I never blamed myself. I never said he hates me or he hits me because it is my fault – I always knew it was his problem, not mine. So I used to turn to things, animals [...], going to the beach, going for swims, even when I was really little being by myself a lot.

Nature thus became a big part of her life and living on a farm in the country, she recalls, “made me a bit more natural and [...] I guess it just made me always be able to find something to do. [...] It brought me to bring home, and I still bring home, rocks and shells and interesting sticks. [...] I love natural things and nature and [...] it just made me more conscious of that type of thing and how you need it”.

Gina’s parents separated during her adolescence. Although she did not consider she had experienced “a huge degree” of domestic violence, she remembers feeling “really scared and sleeping with my window open so I could escape [...], so there was that fear element there”. She went on to say that, “I don’t think my Dad ever hit [Mum] but he would kick in doors and scary stuff like that. And I would wake up and my Mum would be sleeping on the floor in my room because she didn’t think he would do anything if someone else was there”. Gina thinks she was in Year 11 or 12 at school when this was going on. After several attempts of reconciliation, Gina’s Mum took out a restraining order against her father, and the marriage ended when Gina was about 17 or 18 years of age.

The breakdown of Gina's family was the beginning of a series of difficult circumstances. She describes the difficulty of not having her parents reconcile "to the point where they could be civil" and the additional difficulty in dealing with the knowledge that her Dad "had been having an affair." She said at this point he "didn't want to see us children". Gina then went through a period of rebellion and "ended up getting kicked out of home". This meant that her Mum was not talking to her, which "was quite isolating". Added to that, her younger brother David was diagnosed with leukaemia. The already hard-pressed family then faced an exhausting eighteen months dealing with the deteriorating illness and eventual death of David, aged only fifteen.

Gina recalls feeling unsupported during this time, particularly by her peer group: "I was 21 when [David] died, and that's not what [other] 21 year olds are doing". While Gina's mother made a tentative reconciliation with Gina just after David's diagnosis, she was at the hospital every day and as such was essentially unavailable to the rest of the family. Hence, Gina reflects, "when I look back I didn't have any support".

Experiences in adulthood

Some of the women I talked to in the interviews said that painful adult experiences led them to uncovering earlier childhood memories. For example, Katie's adult experience of cancer prompted her spiritual search and with it certain memories of childhood. In a similar way, Brianne's spiritual search as an adult uncovered childhood memories, in particular, the memory of being sexually abused as a very small child. She said that in the

period just before she began to explore her spiritual life she had experienced intense and prolonged anxiety and emotional pain: “I always had lots of anxiety and I felt like I didn’t want to be here – it was so hard. [...] [As part of being involved in this research] I was looking back at the pain of it all, [and recognise] it sounds so self-involved. [But] I was just in a lot of pain”. While “I never had the courage to really try and take [my] life” and “never made an attempt [I] really had the thoughts of not wanting to be here and just wanting it to kind of stop”. This is what prompted her spiritual search: “when you have a lot of pain it drives you to sort it. Like I’d look at people and think – it can’t be like this for everyone else, there must be a way out of this – it doesn’t have to be this way”. In combination with this, she said she was the type of person who “always asked questions” and frequently wondered “why life felt really hard”.

Brianne commented that “if you had asked me [about my childhood] even a year ago, I would have said ‘oh you know it was fine, went to school, don’t remember much, you know... parents were divorced’. Very global, non-specific, affect-absent responses. And now [...] I am integrated enough to say it was really confusing, it was really hard, and there wasn’t a lot of people around that I could trust and those sorts of things”. As she now knows that she was sexually abused when she was “a child of around two”, much of her spiritual work has focused on healing this part of herself and understanding the ramifications of this for her self and her life story both past and present. She believes that “you go back into it (the emotional memory) but there’s always the link between what is going on in the present day and the adult”.

Elise talked about a period in her life where she experienced a long-term depression while traveling overseas with her fiancée. She thought the depression was the result of a series of difficult experiences in what could usually be described as a happy time in one's life:

I think it was actually one of the lowest points I have ever been. I found out [...] about a week after we got overseas, and I was in London, that I had come back with a negative 'pap smear' result, which [...] was bit scary but wasn't too much. But then I had to go in and have laser surgery and it was a bit revolting and intrusive, and the doctor didn't do it properly and I ended up hemorrhaging afterwards. But the thing that made it really bad was that Richard and I had decided to get married at that time, so we were sort of going through all the [planning]. We wanted to plan everything while we were over there and then come back and have the wedding a couple of months after we got back. I ended up having a really massive argument with my Dad about where we were going to have the wedding. [It was] just so bad that he came to the ceremony of my wedding, but didn't come to the reception, and I haven't spoken to him since. So [it was] a really, really, sort of tough time. And to make it worse that's when September 11 happened and [...] I just remember thinking 'oh the world is just a crap place' – and what are we doing [here]?"

At this point, Elise recalls thinking, "not only is there something wrong with me, there's something wrong with my family, and there's something wrong with the world you know. And it was just this kind of really oppressive depression that I sort of fell into over there – just thinking how on earth am I going to get over [this], I don't know how to work any of this out. And I could really see myself falling, you know, and you kind of think - I can't get out of this". This, though, was "a really important point, I guess, that I really

needed to start [to sort myself out] because I was always a really kind of ‘things will always work out’ [person]. [...] [So] that’s when I started doing all the work on myself”.

For others, like Alicia and Caroline, there was a cumulative effect, whereby their childhood or adolescent experiences served to compound their adult experiences. Alicia talked about years of emotional pain in dealing with infertility. For seven years she and her husband Steven had been trying to have a baby. Dealing with infertility and going through Invitro-Fertilisation (IVF) has been “the significant event in my life, or [at least] one of them”. The other significant event for Alicia was the death of her father when she was a teenager. She believes that both experiences – the death of her father and infertility – have helped touch and guide her spiritual life. She told me that she had “always had the sense of being directed somehow through this world”. In losing her father, she “could see very quickly why that happened” and said “I could understand it in terms of how I was being directed, but [...] there was no real release of the emotional stuff. I was able to process that very rationally, but not actually allow myself to experience the grief. And so I have been given this second opportunity of being able to let it out which I have done with the IVF stuff”.

Like the other women, Alicia describes a process of being pushed to make changes in her life as a result of painful experiences. During the process of waiting for a pregnancy result she recalls “I thought I would just go fucking mental – in a moment I was getting this phone call that would either change my life - or it could plunge me into the shit”. It was through this process “I really had to learn to just be in the moment [...] I am no

longer living in the future – no longer projecting expectations about anything”. These experiences have also prompted changes in her relationships with others. Going through IVF she said “has made me have to be, or had to be, honest” (by this, she means not pretending to everyone that everything is fine when it is not). It also allowed her to create some boundaries around her time and energy and to say no to others: “It’s forced me to have to say, [...] ‘No’, I can’t give that to you”.

One of Caroline’s defining moments came as a young adult, an occasion which she described as “such a spiritual moment - but [yet] so terrible”. At eighteen, and having just finished her first year of university, she and a friend “went off and went to England”. She explains “I was born in the UK so I had a British passport and I had 200 pounds in my suitcase and that’s all I had – so that was good and exciting - and some of it was terrible because again, there was being homeless, and having no money, and all that sort of stuff”. When, for various reasons, things took a turn for the worse, and Caroline desperately needed money to survive, she decided to do what one of her friends had already done to survive in London, thinking “alright then, I’ll just be a prostitute – fine’!”:

So I found a brothel – I don’t know how - and went along there and said I think I might like to work here. And they said ‘oh yeah that’s fine’, ‘just get changed and you’ll need to buy some condoms and yeah you can start tonight’. So then, I was just in this little room and all these other women were starting with [me], and they were very interesting to talk to, and I remember it was a Sunday night and we were just waiting and waiting and waiting. One guy came and wanted one of these other girls to go away

with him [but] she didn't go, and then the whole night passed and no-one came. And so I just thought ok, well, this is very strange, and then right at the end the woman in charge, or whatever she was called, said 'oh someone's just rung from a hotel – do you want to go'? And I said 'yeah ok'. And so I started to get my things and she came back and said they have just rung back and it's not going to happen. So I packed up my things, and I walked down to the Baker Street tube station - coz they are all on Baker Street, not that anyone would know - and I was just standing there, and I honestly felt the most wonderful feeling. I just started to laugh and I threw the condoms in the bin and I knew I had been given the most enormous reprieve. Honestly, that's how I felt. I thought if I come back [...] I won't get that [reprieve] again. But that's not going to be for me – that's not for me. And... yeah it was very, very strange. And then I started going out with Joe and I actually got pregnant with Ella and we have just celebrated 15 years of being married. He (Joe) is so lovely. I am a bit more go getting and he is just very, very, supportive and [so] that was a big turning point for me.

Caroline found that one of the difficult parts of the London experience was reconciling the conflicting elements of her social status. She remembers “going out with all of these aristocratic people while having this other panicked sort of existence. And that's always a hard thing for me because my parents were not poor originally. I went to private schools and so very middle class, upper middle class upbringing, and then I just found myself in the gutter really. At the worst, lowest levels you can be. And having to survive - and so I don't have any judgments about what people do to survive because I know what I would do to survive”.

Limited social supports

To help them through the kinds of difficulties they experienced some of the women accessed social organisations or services. Katie, Donna, Felicity, and Gina, all mentioned specifically that they had been to counselling only to find that either it wasn't helpful at all, or it left them with a sense of incompleteness. However, Katie did find real support from the Cancer Support Association, which is "like an alternative cancer support – so they talk a lot about meditation and spiritual work". Other forms of support such as that provided by religious organisations or health-care professionals, was described as not particularly helpful. This contrasted with the support offered by close friends. This difference between the more formal support and friendships is illustrated in Donna's case. At the time of her brother, Tom's, death, she was attending an Anglican school. She recalled that the school made a point of praying for her and her family when her brother died. She found this particularly unhelpful because she "doesn't fully believe in it" (the practice of prayer). Donna was also provided with counselling to help her deal with her grief but this was also experienced as "fairly unhelpful as the counsellor did most of the talking". In contrast, Donna found her two close friends were there for her on a daily basis and just allowed her to talk.

Felicity turned to a counsellor when she was "having trouble dealing with the fact that my Dad used to hit me". She decided to seek help "because I just tried going out with a couple of guys – I tried dating a few of them and well they'd just turn around and say awful things. And I just sort of went 'oh you guys are wankers' - and so I told them they

were wankers - and had a big meltdown and felt they were all arseholes and just didn't want to be near anyone. So I totally isolated myself and [...] that was when I tried counsellors, and that didn't work". The counsellors she saw "were kind of useless" because they didn't really provide any strategies for helping her to deal with her childhood memories of her father's behaviour. Instead they would go 'hmmm and yesss', whereas "I just needed to be given some guidance – I felt stuck". Because she couldn't find any help that made sense to her, Felicity ended up isolating herself: "I really, really isolated myself, I isolated myself from everyone - I wouldn't go out - I wouldn't do anything".

As a teenager, Gina went through family counselling sessions with a psychologist to assist with accepting her brother's illness and eventual death. Although she later became a psychologist herself, the counseling process did not leave her with "a good impression". Added to this, Gina found that people in general "have strong reactions to death". In explaining this she said that:

I can remember when [David] first died, then going to work - and [I] really had only two people ask me how I was. [In comparison, it] wasn't long after [David's death that] I had missed out on a job that I was doing – and probably like half the people I work with [...] made comments and things like that. So you can't tell me that they didn't know that something like [David's death] had happened. They just didn't want to talk about it. I guess I lived like that for a long time [...]. He was the first person I had even known who had died and I hadn't really ever grieved.

She recalled just feeling emotionally raw during this period: “I remember I used to go home every day and cry – like spend the whole day trying to be normal and not fall on the floor crying - so, hard times for awhile”.

Incompatible church experiences

Gina, who still identifies with the Catholic religion, but describes herself as ‘non-practising’ as she does not attend church, linked her move away from church attendance to family difficulties:

My family actively practiced religion until I was around 15-ish. We attended church regularly, except for my father, observed such events as Lent, I received communion and was confirmed. [It was] around the time my parents were having very serious marital difficulties and going through the process of separating [that] we no longer attended church. I personally had no desire to and without Mum making it, we ceased going. Then as things further deteriorated and David became sick, it just was no longer important.

Like Gina, most of the women drew on certain episodes occurring in their developmental years when describing their current views on religion. With two exceptions, all reported having no set religion and not subscribing to a particular set of religious beliefs. However, excluding Elise, all of them had some early exposure to religion. For the most part, this was either through attending church with immediate or extended family members, or by attending religious based schools. All of the religions spoken about by

the women were within the Western Christian traditions, predominantly Catholic or Anglican.

The women with a Catholic background (Katie, Ilene, Gina, Hannah and Caroline) clearly identified Catholicism as their heritage, but Gina and Ilene were the only ones to still call themselves Catholic (and only Ilene still attended church on a semi-regular basis and for significant religious dates such as Christmas and Easter). However, the women with a non-Catholic background (Janine, Felicity, Donna, Brianne and Alicia) were less clear on their particular religious denomination. For example, Janine was unsure whether the denomination of the high school she attended was Anglican or Presbyterian. Others, like Brianne and Felicity, mentioned attending Sunday school and church but did not specify the denomination. Alicia thought, (but was not sure), that her Gran, with whom she attended church several times as a young person, was Anglican.

Some of the women spoke at length about their experiences with Christianity and the consequent impact this had on their lives and personal beliefs. In certain cases, it was said their early religious practices provided a sense of belonging and community and a safe place in which to form social relationships during adolescence. Brianne in particular, describes this as the most important reason for her interest and her decision to join religious groups. As the youngest of three sisters, she was the only one who attended an “after school group in primary school”. When Brianne entered high school she continued on with another group: “Then in high school I found one as well - which was Christian based – so I kind of gravitated towards that [...] it was just a way of making friends and

being with people in a place where I felt safe”. In contrast, other women hardly mentioned their earlier religious affiliations, and saw them as having no tangible correlation to their sense of spirituality. Felicity described her experience of church as “just dead boring – like I think we used to fall asleep in there”. She also found Sunday school “just as bad because you’d have to sit up straight and colour in pictures of Jesus Christ!”

Janine described a minimal religious background saying that her Dad was “a classic sort of a Christmas day [parishioner].” She recalled that: “when we were young, we used to go to church - but that was just token gesture”. This attendance was more about seeing “friends from school” and the only reason she thought it was ‘cool’ as a child was because she “always loved singing”. She said that her Mum “read the bible a couple of times and (she) found some of those stories interesting”. On those occasions Janine did attend church, she recalls consciously rejecting its rituals: “I remember sitting there and I would not recite things including [...] The Lord’s Prayer.” Above all, it was the notion of sin that distanced her from notions of God. This was because she found the term ‘God’ to be synonymous with punishment, a concept that she strongly rejects. She also reflected that certain traditional religions promote the idea that “sin and you will be punished - you have to be this way – it’s all outer - you have to exist for the outer parameters which, I believe, is absolute hooley”.

Katie’s ‘sense of fairness’ strongly influenced how she felt about church. She recalled that:

Even when I was younger, I remember sitting in church looking at people – and the whole concept of going to church amazed me because everyone seemed to be looking at their watch the entire time they were there. And I used to think as a young girl, ‘why are you wasting your time here when you obviously don’t want to be here’? And I always had this impression that it was just ‘well we’ll tick that off and go and do whatever it is we want during the week and then as long as we go to church again on Sunday.

Janine and Katie’s stories both hinge on an internal sense of ‘not feeling right’ in church. Hannah also described how as a young person, she felt that participation in church did not fit her personal sense of what ‘felt right’. She was about sixteen years when she made the decision to leave the church:

At about sixteen I decided. One day I was sitting in church and it was around Easter time and everyone was walking up kissing the feet of a statue on a cross – that’s one of the things you do. (I don’t think it was Ash Wednesday but some time like that). Anyway, I had this overwhelming sense of wrongness - of it not being right - that we shouldn’t be doing this and I actually ended up in tears. I was sitting in church at sixteen crying thinking this is so wrong, I shouldn’t be here. There was just statues everywhere and I have a very personal sense of right and wrong and even at sixteen I was going ‘well, we have got all these things everywhere, all this gold all these statues, everything is so beautiful in this wonderful big church and there are children dying and there are people without homes, and that kind of stuff. It was just so overwhelming, and at the end of the mass I thought, I will never go back. And I walked out at sixteen and haven’t really been back – I went back once with my grandmother and for people’s weddings – but not by choice.

Influential female relationships

Katie, Janine, and Hannah, each recounted conscious realisations underpinning their choice to no longer participate in church services. In making a similar decision, Hannah and Caroline describe a sense of disillusionment with particular conventions of the Church. Both experienced their parent's divorce in their childhood years and were witness to their mothers being excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Hannah described at length the impact of this:

Initially, as kids, we went to church all the time – we were Roman Catholic and that was how Mum was brought up. But by the time Mum was about, probably about my age [36], and we were about eight or nine, she started to question the Catholic Church. I think because she had been in a very aggressive marriage, not physically aggressive but emotionally draining. And with everything Dad had been and done - the Catholic Church [said] she still was not allowed to divorce him. [...] She was not allowed to live without him [and] she had to accept that she'd married this man and live with him and put up with what she had. And her family, her [own] mother would just say things like 'you made your bed and you have to lie in it'. So her mother was a strong Catholic and this was the way it was [...]. So by the time I was about eight or nine she had started to decide that this wasn't the way it should be and if we had a God he certainly would be more understanding than that. So, when I was about ten or twelve she divorced him, and that was after years of taking him back on and off because she felt sorry for him [...]. And from then she started looking beyond the Catholic Church because she was getting a divorce and they said basically she would be excommunicated from the church with the divorce thing. Even my grandmother insisted she write to the

Pope and get the Pope's permission. By that point my Mum was going 'no I don't want the Pope's permission I just need my understanding of God – she knew that if God accepted it, it would be ok.

Caroline, like Hannah, was brought up Catholic and so “had that Christian framework” which she still finds useful. However, like the majority of the women, Caroline did not identify with a particular denomination and although she “would say Christian” she was clear that “more and more I find organised religion difficult”. Caroline described her parents as “very spiritual missionary types”. She recalled that prior to being Catholic her parents were Church of Christ: “My grandfather is actually a minister and then my mother, to rebel, decided that we would all become Catholic – so we all became Catholic”. Then “when my parents divorced I was at a Catholic school, and when the priest heard that my mother wasn't married to my father – he said we weren't allowed to have communion. And so I was in grade seven and had to sit through the mass and watch everyone go up, even though I was confirmed, and [to] not be able to take communion, was awful”. After this her Mum “became Church of England with her second husband, and so we all had to become Church of England”. At that point Caroline didn't want follow the family's change of denomination and was instead baptised in the Church of Scotland.

This exposure to various religions prompted Caroline to reflect on the need to belong to just one denomination or faith. She says “I can't see any need that exists, or is worth having a total allegiance to one”. Caroline has “also been to the Quakers” and is now interested in finding out more about Celtic religions and pre-Christianity. Her feminist

views have reinforced her decision not to affiliate with any one denomination as she finds “the denigration of women in organised religion that we historically honour is just too much”. “And”, she explained, “I am not interested in being part of a religion that doesn’t allow women to be priests or bishops. [...] Not only that, just the splitting of [representations of] “her” between the Madonna and the whore for me, is a big issue, and I don’t want to be a part of that”.

Both Hannah and Caroline thus talked about experiences within the Catholic Church that were not supportive to them or their mothers as women. Caroline placed this within the context of a broader feminist stance, while Hannah only briefly questioned the gender representations, and this in relation to the story of Adam and Eve:

I did question, I did think though about Adam and Eve not that long ago. One of the boys asked me and was going ‘how come Adam was first’ – you know does that mean God put the male before the female? Or did that mean the male really needed the female in order to live a full life? So I started to think about that one but didn’t go very far. We kind of get interrupted...I write now I keep notes and stuff to reflect on.

At varying levels all the women’s stories reveal strong connections to other women. All of their accounts suggest that significant and influential female relationships either through the grandmother/granddaughter relationship, the mother/daughter relationship, or the relationship between all three - contributed to their sense of self and their spiritual journey. Alicia, for example, described going to church on a few occasions with her grandmother, with whom she had a very close relationship. While her immediate family

were not religious, she remembered that “the only times I have been to church were with [Gran] and I loved it. I would sit next to her and there would be singing”. She said that this relationship with her grandmother taught her a lot about religion and spirituality. Her Gran “would go to church in the morning and if anyone was a religious and spiritual woman it was her because she integrated that whole religion stuff – that formal religion stuff into action. She would live a good life, be a good person to other people, a good person to herself...yeah, just lived it”. And while her Gran “never talked ... about what she thought God was or what Jesus was or any of that formal religious stuff – I just knew she had this belief system, very strong and very important to her and lived it as a true – as an amazingly spiritual woman”. Alicia’s Gran also taught her “about the importance of family, about always being there, always being strong, always being positive – she was just an optimistic woman and would just be really nice to people. I’d watch her talk to the person behind the counter at the bank and I’d see these people just love her because of the way she was with them – she was just delightful!”

In a similar way, Elise told of a strong connection with her grandmother, yet this time not supported by any particular religious background. Elise was the only participant to describe a completely non-religious background: “None of my family ever has been [religious]. We’ve never been to church or anything like that”. She described her Nanna as a “big part of my life”, reflecting that “she is just a real typical Grandma – you can’t get much more ‘Nanna’ than she is – she is about five feet tall and nice and dumpy and has great hugs!” Further “there is not a mean bone in her body and she is just really caring and has never said anything harsh – even when you were in trouble – she is just a

really good grandma”. Despite the absence of a religious background, Elise felt there was a sense of spirituality in the female side of her family: “I think Mum’s side of the family, especially the females in Mum’s side of the family, are fairly spiritual naturally. I think they have got that sort of ability to [sense things]. Certainly Mum does – I have had few discussions with her about sort of some of the things she’s [experienced]. [...] You put them down to coincidences at the time but in some situations - she has been able to predict what’s happened or dreamt some things that have happened and things like that. So yeah – I think it runs on this side of the family a bit”.

In Hannah’s case, it was her mother who was of important spiritual significance. She commented that “Mum has always been looking for something spiritually, so to me it is not foreign [...]” Like Elise, Hannah talked about supernatural experiences in the context of spirituality. She recalled that:

All along little things had happened in [Mum’s] life. Things like her father (who had died [of leukemia]) coming back to her in dreams and things like that. She had [also] seen a little girl in the house we were living in – you know like nothing frightening – just a little girl, she was just there and it was nothing overwhelming. [...] I don’t know why but my Mother and I had a very strong connection all the way along. [...] So, spiritual things she told me about.

Concluding comments

The consideration of pain and suffering as a mobilising force for spiritual change is not new, particularly within those disciplines such as psychology and social work that are

concerned with individual therapeutic methods for dealing with grief and pain. While suffering is not necessarily a precondition for exploring one's own spirituality we can recall from Chapter One that Angell et al (1988) identified that significant loss *can* often serve as a turning point in finding new perspectives on life. The nature of the sorts of events the women describe illustrate a profound sense of loss and reflected general life issues - coming to terms with death, experiencing illness, negotiating relationships, economic survival, fertility and so on; and more specifically the nature of living in terms of the stresses of work and family, family breakdown, isolation, violence, and abuse. Griffin and Tobin (1999, p. 30) draw our attention to the fact that grief is equated with such losses and while we may suffer one large identifiable loss we often also suffer a number of others in relation to it – changes to a way of life, relationships, established routines and social patterns, for which we also grieve. As part of this and in coming to terms with such loss, we find new ways to function and form new patterns of relationships in order to accommodate the deficit.

While grief and loss may mark 'turning points' in making significant life changes (whether those changes are forced upon us or not), Balk (1999) identified that loss or crisis on its own is not enough to engender spiritual change. He suggested three further factors must also be present: a significant sense of psychological disequilibrium that resists stabilising; time for reflection; and that life is forever coloured by the crisis. The way the women told their stories in light of their difficult experiences suggests that these factors were all present, and importantly, I add to this that these factors were interrelated and point to the ongoing sense of spiritual change and the 'journey' they describe.

Clearly the events the women talked about significantly impacted upon them and became important location points in the unfolding of their spiritual story. In Berger and Luckmann's (1979) terms, the sudden transition from our everyday 'taken for granted' worldview into an alternative and often unsafe reality causes instability and disequilibrium. These sorts of marginalities, depending on the severity of the disruption, become sedimented in memory and thus become available for recollection (1979, p. 85). Recognising their experiences as turning points in enacting life changes and developing spiritual awareness was significant in unfolding their sense of spirituality and their sense of self. In all of the women's cases this was retrospective and on reflection. While some of these turning points may have been instantly recognised at the time (for example in Caroline's account, the experience of overwhelming love came to her with immediate realisation that she had been given a reprieve), it was from *present* understandings and interpretations of the spiritual through which they were translated. Because of the enduring nature of these kinds of experiences in the form of significant and shaping memories, life is forever coloured by such experiences and the event/s made available for reflection in a spiritual light.

During their painful times, the women recalled feeling unsupported and seemed to endure their difficulties in a profoundly solitary way. Griffin and Tobin (1997, p. 31) argue that Australian society in general does not have a very good record in providing acceptable avenues for the expression of grief with the complexities of bereavement placing additional burden on those already under stress. They argue that the stripping away of

social services combined with a general avoidance of the subject of death (and we can add here grief and loss in general), predisposes us to behave as if grief is “purely an individual matter with no social consequences” (ibid). While different cultures have different processes and expectations for expressing grief, they suggest the Anglo-Saxon community in general tends to use language that inhibits the expression of emotion. In line with Gina’s account where she felt people avoided her when she returned to work after her brother’s death, Griffin and Tobin (1997, p. 34) point out that other people tend to become uncomfortable with our feelings of grief and attempt to avoid these uncomfortable emotional aspects by either turning away or preventing our expression of them (thereby leaving us more lonely).

The women who accessed various social institutions or organisations for assistance in times of difficulty (who were in the minority), described them as not meeting their needs and as sometimes contributing to already painful experiences. Two main factors were cited here, the need to be listened to, and the need for some guidance. Excluding Ilene who still practices Catholicism, and Katie who talked about returning to her religion of origin following her diagnosis of cancer, none of the others suggested that they would turn to church for solace. The reasons cited by many Australians for not attending church as outlined in Chapter One was premised on boredom, hypocrisy, and irrelevancy (Bellamy, et al 2002; Kelly, 1990; Wilson, 1983). All three of these factors were illustrated in the women’s stories with the notions of irrelevancy and hypocrisy talked about in a very specific manner.

Those with a religious upbringing talked specifically about not connecting to religious teachings and doctrines and having a sense of it being irrelevant. Gina for example, stated that going to church became irrelevant for her when her family began to breakdown, thus reflecting Ruth Webber's observation that mainstream churches seem unable to assist the post baby boomer generation to deal with massive social upheavals such marital breakdown, alternative family structures, loneliness and so on (2002, p. 40). With particular reference to religious institutions, this indicates the presence of a significant disjuncture between the personal experiences of the women and available social structures. Feminists such as Daly (1985), Spender (1980) and Stone (1976) in their critique of Christian institutions argue that women are removed from the subjectivity of their own experiences because religious doctrine represents the male experience without reference to female meanings and interpretation. In de Beauvoir's (1949) terms this means women are constantly trying to translate their experiences through masculine interpretations, which serves to disconnect them from themselves and their sense of creativity and freedom.

Many of the women talked about the notion of hypocrisy in terms of it being wrong to attend church when it didn't feel right or match their values, or in the sense of church officials or parishioners 'not practicing what they preach'. Materialism was important here with Janine, Katie and Hannah, in particular, rejecting the overt displays of wealth by the church, reflecting Tacey's (1997) assertion that this new form of spirituality contains an anti-material sentiment. However, there was also a rejection of particular

Christian beliefs for example, 'sin' which was considered negative and punishing to the self and was thus in a sense considered 'anti-spiritual'.

Against this, all of the women described significant women, often mothers and grandmothers, as important foundations to the kinds of beliefs to which they subscribed. Hodge (2001) asserts that family, and in particular females, shape spiritual belief as they are primarily responsible for children's care. Further, Berger and Luckmann (1979) suggest that in primary socialisation girls internalise and identify the worlds of their significant socialising others, which is specific to their gender and usually mothers and grandmothers. This process they suggest (ideally) results in a sense of symmetry between inner and outer worlds and provides a sense of security – or a secure 'homeworld' to which everything else is contrasted. This symmetry is an ongoing dialectical balance through changing awarenesses in either reality. This sense of security that 'everything is ok' is challenged by the kinds of misfortune the women describe and while secondary socialisations such as those connected with religion are more likely to be changed the primary socialisations of the home world are likely to remain. The women showed a particular sensitivity to incongruency and actively sought out information, shifted and changed beliefs and apprehended meanings that would provide them with a sense of symmetry between their subjective and objective realities. The significant women they describe as shaping their spiritual beliefs and practices were often cited as displaying this sort of congruency between belief and behaviour.

Finally, the women's stories also revealed a strong need to understand and to have some rational explanation for their own circumstances and pain. When one or another did not match against the reality of their everyday circumstances further areas were explored.

CHAPTER SIX

SEARCHING - SEEKING AND PRACTICING SPIRITUALITY

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.*

T.S. Eliot - *Four Quartets 1: Burnt Norton*

Introduction

This chapter presents my second line of inquiry, which concerns the ways in which the women searched for and practiced particular forms of spirituality. The discussion takes place in three parts. The first explores the factors that served to stimulate and support the spiritual search and in part relates again to the foundational importance of female relationships. Here I also comment on some of the women's experiences in the form of

dreams and other psychic phenomena. The second deals with how the women sought new information and ideas through a variety of spiritual literatures, with this often involving a number of different religions and a variety of practices. It also reveals the extended periods of self-directed exploration involved. Third, I discuss how it was through these diverse practices and multiple pathways that the women were able to forge their own direction according to their personal experiences and individual biography.

I now turn to Caroline's story to illustrate these issues. I will then deal with them separately and in more detail.

Caroline's story

Caroline's mother had a significant effect on her religious upbringing together with the number of changes made in her religious denomination from an early age. As an adult, Caroline talks about spirituality with her friends and her sister who is going to be a chaplain. In particular, Caroline has a friend, Jacqueline, a spiritual counsellor, who has been a useful support to her in times of need. In Caroline's words: "Although I did go to her in crisis for counselling [initially], now it is about spiritual direction, and that's very important to me". An example of this spiritual direction was a time when Caroline was writing a book for young women and "felt that I really went back in time writing that book – and all of these people kept visiting Perth who I hadn't seen for years". As a result, she had the sense that "time was exploding" and when Jacqueline showed her TS Eliot's "time past and time present" Caroline felt a shift in her sense of time, which then affected other phenomena too. For example, in the way that she now believes her

grandmother and grandfather continue to shape her life even in death. “They”, she said, “are here”, and “you only have to tune in and someone else is with you. And sometimes it can be a sense of perfume or something like that and that’s beautiful. But I don’t mean they are here in a ‘whoop hoo hoo’ way – I don’t mean that at all (laughing). In my mind, it is no different for me than a memory that can be shaping your daily experience”. Later she explained the difficulty in “accepting that we have extraordinary emotional and spiritual relationships with all sorts of people when they are alive and dead, and some of them belong to our past, and some belong to our future - and they are happening all the time: At times that can be overwhelming, I think”.

While having Jacqueline as a support, Caroline’s search was also self-directed in that she read widely from a broad range of literature including spiritual and religious texts. She commented, “I would read any New Age things, I would read any traditional theology, I read philosophy, I read anything and everything. But I think there is some beautiful popular literature on spiritual stuff that’s touching people”. While she had always felt a sense of connection “to whatever it is or whatever you want to call it”, she uses the “Christian framework” in which she was brought up as well as more feminine-centred spiritualities to guide her reflections. She is also currently researching and writing about Celtic religion and pre-Christianity as well.

Caroline said that her main spiritual practice is her writing and this for her is a form of meditation in that it provides a space where the words and thoughts that she needs become clear:

For me, writing is how I do that [meditate]. It comes through actually what you are writing, it just comes through, and I write it down. Not in a spooky stupid sense – but I do feel that when you are in a particular space you are able to produce good work. So for me getting into that space for clarity, clarity of thought that is not a visitation from the vast reaches, but clarity of thought that's achieved when the mind is clear.

Stimulating and supportive factors in the spiritual search

Foundational female relationships

The previous chapter revealed the importance of female family members for the women in this study, in particular mothers or grandmothers. However, many of the women also mentioned other female relationships that were significant in either stimulating and/or providing support for their quest for self and spiritual understanding. Like Caroline, some of the women, Janine, Brianne and Katie, also talked of female spiritual counsellors or mentors. In the following discussion, I further consider the significance of these relationships, starting with some of Janine's reflections.

When she was suffering from a chronic illness and could no longer pursue her career as an elite athlete, Janine had a dream that told her she would in the future, be doing healing work. She remembered that she “told Mum a bit about the dream” but says, “I didn't really understand it. And she (Mum) said ‘go and see this lady’, her name is Sally”. The experience of visiting Sally proved significant for Janine who initially “didn't really know what she was about”. Yet from the first visit a strong connection between the two

formed and continued to the point where Janine says “I now call [Sally] my spirit Mum”. She described that first visit in the following way:

I went in there and I realised things [...]. You can either see things and acknowledge them or just dismiss them. And all these things that I had seen I had just dismissed I think because through the last how many years of [sport] you are just sort of busy, and you're exhausted. And she basically just showed me things – it wasn't her - it was like I saw things in the room and that just totally blew me away and the feelings I felt – it was just like ‘aaah’ – everything that I have known as a child, you know magic, it's true, it's true, and it's just bought back all my belief. [...] I remember driving back from there just going ‘my life has opened back up again’, the world is so much bigger.

As the relationship developed, Sally became a regular support for Janine. She explained that, “something would happen to me and I would ask her, have you had this happen, can you understand this, what does this mean? And it was life sort of just ...basically your world just opens up and you would see more and I would say look, I am seeing this or I am feeling this and she would just explain, ‘ok look this is a process’”. Janine also feels that the kind of spiritual exploration in which she is involved, which has elements of the psychic, is easier for her than the previous generation in terms of social acceptance. Here she talked about Sally's experiences who is now aged 65: “I mean I know poor Sally went through hell – she was a nurse – it was really hard for her, you know, I have got it easy - totally”.

Katie experienced spiritual counselling as life changing, attributing her changes in worldview to “spiritual counselling for sure”. As we have seen this contrasted markedly with the other avenues where she had sought help in dealing with her cancer, like religion and psychology. Like Janine, Katie viewed her counselling as more of a one-to-one interactive relationship rather than a traditional counsellor-patient process: “the spiritual counselling is like a mutual exploration [where Carol] kind of puts me in a position where I come up with it myself. She puts me in tune with it so I can come up with things or ideas that maybe I wouldn’t have known”. [...] [It’s] kind of setting me up in a safe environment to explore those things”. Katie also found Carol important in linking her to other people in a support network. She remembered that “ I kind of got more in contact with people through Carol in that circle of things, only from friendship...I don’t really go to sessions or anything with them, I just met a lot of different people and it was interesting to talk with them about different things.”

Brianne also described a process whereby another woman gave her a safe place to explore her self and her life experiences. At a time when life was just really too hard and she was in significant amounts of emotional pain she says:

I met a girlfriend of mine who has a specific way of dealing with [emotional pain] and she is a bit older than me – she is about 44 – and we got talking. I met her about five years ago and she started asking questions about what happened when I was such and such [an age] – she is quite intuitive- and I kind of learnt the method [of dealing with emotional pain] from her. And [eventually] I got to the point where I could just do it on my own.

While these women mention a significant person that assisted them in making sense of their experiences, all the women mentioned the importance of friends for talking things through. Ilene, for example, would “rely on a few friends to talk things over”, while Hannah suggests that “being a people type of person I find when I connect with a person who is similar to me and I talk to that person I find that is the way for me”.

Insights through dreams and other psychic experiences

A number of the women talked of the importance of dreams in their spiritual lives. These were variously interpreted as premonition, spirit connection or self-connection. While they thus had fairly different perspectives on dreams, the common factor behind their interest was self understanding. Janine experienced dreams as premonitory saying that “during my life I have had dreams and then things happen. [...] So I sort of know what is going to happen - or it [somehow] relates to the dream - and I always listen to that and take notice of that”. The dream that led her to Sally, her mentor, she believes changed the course of her life:

I had one dream during this time that was the most amazing dream and just made me feel amazing, the most amazing amount of love – and it told me that I was going to be doing – basically, ‘healing’. And I had no idea [what that meant] because I come from such a sort of sheltered upbringing, I suppose. Well I thought it was sheltered, you know no-one had ever talked about anything beyond the physical and healing or anything like that.

It was this new awareness, which she believes came from a mystical source, that began to shape her choices in life. Like Janine, Brianne and Felicity also interpreted their dreams in terms of connecting with the 'spirit world', which for them is a central part of spirituality. Brianne believes dreams are a medium for messages received from the spirit world and said "this is the discovery – that if they can't get to you while you are walking, talking and awake – the last port of call is the dream". However, for Felicity, "dreams are sort of - spiritually if you like – like mental garbage. So you have got your soul [and it] sort of looks at the day and has been reflecting on the whole lot [...] And [...] the way it communicates to you is through your mind, so I think the best way it can communicate with you, especially if you are very awake to yourself, is through your dreams. So it's amazing the insight that comes out of people's dreams [...] but more often than not it goes – 'this is what happened today'.

Elise used dream analysis regularly and in her description it appeared less about connecting with spirit and more about self-understanding. She accessed a number of books as references to "look up what some of the dream symbols mean". She would take these interpretations of the symbols at face-value and as a starting point for reflection: "I kind of think your dreams have quite a lot [to do with] what your interpretations of what the symbols are, not necessarily what a generic one is". She said that some dreams "really click and some you get out of bed and go 'oh that doesn't really make sense at all' and you ponder it during the day. [...] [And] I like knowing [that] if you are having reoccurring, not the same dream but similar dreams, that there is obviously something there that needs understanding – [something] that you are not looking at". She contends

that this kind of analysis provides her with more understanding of certain issues in her life: “I kind of get the sense that if I can piece it all together and understand why it’s happening and what’s making me feel that way then [...] it feels just better knowing that you understand it.” In this way, dream analysis for Elise was a self-supporting practice for her to understand her self and her self in relation to her everyday situations.

Both Hannah and her friend Kathy attended a course called ‘The Forum’⁵ which she described as a mainly “academically orientated” course. She said that “it’s about people’s thinking and recognising and realising why people do what they do and the stories we have about each other [...]. And it’s actually an intellectual based learning, there’s nothing spiritual at all”. Nevertheless, Hannah found it a useful starting point in her reflections: “I didn’t realise the impact of certain incidences in my life on myself. You know like being kidnapped. I didn’t realise that was part of the reason why like with my own children I am quite obsessive [...] [about] where they are at any point, and until I did the ‘Forum’ I didn’t realise that came from having been taken”. Doing the course meant that “I had to reflect on my past and where things came from”. From here, she believes, a whole series of memories were released. Further, during one of the sessions Hannah had an experience which precipitated her spiritual search:

One of the activities is actually ‘being one with the group’ which is very hard, most people can’t make eye to eye contact with people without feeling uncomfortable, and in groups a lot of people just shut down, like they will sit back [...] and listen and not be involved. [During the activity]

⁵ ‘The Landmark Forum’ is a personal development course prepared by Landmark Education www.landmarkeducation.com.au (accessed January 2, 2006)

[...] I am sitting there and these people were sort of standing and holding hands, at peace with themselves and with each other - and there was this amazing glow around the whole group of them – it just started from one end and just went the whole way around. I was just sitting there going ‘oh my goodness’ [...] I couldn’t believe what I was seeing because I hadn’t started the spiritual journey at all, so I was going ‘is like that normal - are people seeing what I am seeing at the moment’? And at the end, I said to the leader of the group ‘has anyone ever said they have seen a glowing light or an aura around people?’ And he looked at me and he goes ‘well each to their own’, and he gave me this weird look [...]. So there was no spiritual connection at all to this – yet there was - they probably didn’t realise that there was, but there was a real spiritual connection in making people become one. And recognising that we are all equal is a spiritual understanding. Even though it is an intellectual one as well – it is spiritual too. [...] It was interesting because we kind of went on this journey and we started with that (the Forum).

A few of the women recounted what might be called psychic or paranormal experiences that contributed to their search for understanding, but were not necessarily supportive like the female mentors or dream analysis. While “out of the ordinary”, they reveal the importance of emotional/psychic factors, and the relationship between the two, as a stimulus for the search for understanding and ultimately change. Brianne recounted how what she now calls “early psychic experiences” triggered intense distress:

I woke up one night speaking in tongues and I felt like I had a devil inside me, and that was when I was twenty, or twenty-one, or something. It was a horrible, scary, revolting, ugly experience. I have never been so scared in all my life [...] I just felt like there was something inside my chest and it had gotten hold of my throat. It was like I had a force that was coming out

of my chest that was making me speak in this most violent, evil, foul manner. [...] I just don't know how to even describe it [but] that's what woke me up – it was this force just pushing these words out of my mouth.

Brianne said it was around this time, that she would get “cuts” that would just appear; “I got cuts [on] my hands – I used to get cuts – this is when I was 20, it was a terrible time”. While the fear engendered by these experiences was uppermost, Brianne used the experiences to deepen her understanding of what was happening, by turning to books and other sources.

Felicity also described supernatural experiences that she found difficult to cope with. When she and a friend were living together, at about age nineteen or twenty, “some really weird things started happening”. She recalled that: “I don't know what was happening but we had like – literally - had like little girl handprints all over the glass in our house after we had moved in. [But] there was no-one else [living there]. And like we were on a top story and they were on the outside of the glass, so that freaked me out too much”. Another occurrence happened around the same time: “I would walk into a room and there would be an old woman standing there, – and then I'd sort of duck out and walk back in and she wouldn't be there anymore. So that gives me the creeps... that really does ...and so that was too much for me, it was too fast”. It was only years later that Felicity felt she could begin to look at these experiences in an effort to gain some understanding.

Self directed exploration

All of the women's accounts reveal a self-directed search for understanding themselves and their experiences. The three main elements of this self-direction included talking with other women (as already discussed), reading a wide selection of books and other forms of literature, and reflections on different religions.

Books and verse

As for many others, books were a critical resource for Brianne. When I asked her which books she found particularly useful she responded that, "there have been so many books - I don't even know where to start". Reading was particularly important in helping Brianne forge her way through the difficulties she faced. She reflected that: "I have mostly done this on my own so the books have been hugely important. [...] I felt like a lot of weird stuff happened to me in terms of a transpersonal sense - [...] I would get weird things happen - I'd know things and stuff, and lot of it was strange and scary. So I was reading a lot to try and find and figure [it] out [...] and put it into some kind of perspective.

Like Brianne, Janine reads a lot and says that she has "always been interested in anything spiritual [...] but not churchy" (she included books like the popular series 'Conversations with God' and similar kinds of resources, under the category 'spiritual'). She said she had "bookshelves of everything - I have got so many books, [with some] I just go 'gel' and some I don't. And some even that 'gel' I just go hmm...yeah...but I'll always listen to me and I don't just take on something. If it gels I relate to it but if I don't know I will

leave it”. Reflecting on this further, she said, “it’s like sometimes when you read you might not have experienced that, or found that, or felt that. But I might just gel with it and it will broaden me, and then I’ll sort of experience it maybe, or work with it and see it that fits with me, and I’ll take it on”. The book *Rantha* was particularly important to her because “this is what I ultimately believe – what you believe you create – and that’s it. It’s as simple as that”.

Katie sought information and assistance from many sources but primarily from those relating to cancer and healing. One particularly “valuable tool” was a book on archetypes (presented as part of a course):

It had like 90 different archetypes and you had to go through and you had kind of identify key ones of yourself. And that in itself was a really valuable lesson because you read through them all and although they are in like quite colloquial sort of language - like the rebel, the reformer - they represent the light and the dark, the masculine, the feminine. But it makes you actually think about who you were and not just as in now as in today, but who you were in all the aspects in early life, the middle of your life and so you had to choose archetypes which represented across your life. So I just found it as a self-journeying tool as quite beneficial. So out of everything, spiritually that was good.

In her turn, Gina talked about the books she has read as part of her career as a psychologist. She said that she had been heavily influenced by the ideas of existentialism as advocated by Irvin D. Yalom, and that it “makes things a lot easier for me particularly that we have to find our own meaning in things”. The essential thing that was helpful to Gina was the notion that there is no universal meaning. This, she feels, has given her

some “comfort” and “some incentive to find meaning and to accept that these things happen and there is no rhyme or reason to it. It’s just happened and I need to find meaning that is going to allow me to move on with my life”.

Like the other women, Felicity has read a lot of books and finds this important for developing her worldview:

I started reading books [...] I love reading. Leanne [my sister] bought me a whole heap of books for my eighteenth birthday and they were all about these different situations people could be in. And then I just started drawing on other people’s experiences, just listening to people, talking to people. And now if I want to know anything I just talk to everyone and anyone about everything and then you find that people give you little tidbits that all come together eventually and they help you form a bigger picture.

When I asked the women to cite particular books that influenced them, or books they recalled as being significant to them, most like Janine, gave examples of the more popular style of spiritual literature. Hannah, for example, said, “I’ve read so many different [pieces] I couldn’t really point to any one thing. I just read a lot. I read the *Alchemist* not that long ago and just went (breathes out) - that is such a good book that book”. Elise, while not big on the ‘self-help’ style of books, preferred the fictional style of *The Celestine Prophecy*. She said “I remember reading that all the way through like in a day”. This was because “it was written as a story – because I am a real fiction reader – it was easy to follow and it kind of sits with me well”.

While books from the popular spiritual genre were regularly nominated, other forms of literature were also mentioned. For example, one of the books that Felicity mentioned was *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. She found this book important because “it validated everything I think – [...] you know how you can have these ideas – [but] it is really nice when someone else says – ‘yeah you are on the right track’. [...] You should be a bit more wild, that you should stand up for what you believe in and say what you think, you should be nice to everyone and treat everyone with courtesy or whatever but still tell them what you think and things like that”. Janine felt the same way with the book *Conversations With God*: “I wouldn’t say [it] changed me but it was like ‘oh I can see it in black and white’ – it’s like somebody’s written about it – bingo!”

Songs could also provide comfort and meaning. Elise and Donna found their emotional state encapsulated in a Fleetwood Mac song and found solace in this recognition and the belief that painful periods will pass. Alicia found a spiritual affirmation in Christine Anu’s *My Island Home*, which held special significance for her with her sense of affinity with saltwater and Indigenous people. This was later reaffirmed for her by a local Aboriginal elder, who painted a scene from the song and of her favourite line as a gift.

The women also used certain phrases gleaned from their readings, poems, songs and so on to assist them in naming their experiences. Gina described a poem she came across in a “Camp Quality⁶” newsletter, when her brother was dying from leukaemia. It was written by the sibling of another cancer sufferer: “I remember there’s a line in that and it

⁶ Camp Quality is a non-profit organisation that brings hope & happiness to the lives of children living with cancer, their families, and communities. (www.campquality.org.au/ accessed October 19, 2006).

just really expressed how I was feeling just because I didn't have the capacity to or I didn't understand what was going on for me. But I read that poem over and over again [...] but the line that really expressed how I was feeling was 'can't anyone see that your dying is killing me too'. So, I think that things like that helped me name what was going on for me".

Multi-religious reflection

As part of the process of exploring various forms of literature (popular spiritual, feminist and philosophical literature has been mentioned so far), some of the women explored different religions and the beliefs, values, and practices associated with them. While the information gathered about a particular religion was mainly by reading about it, some of them also attended various courses on particular practices such as meditation. With the exception of Ilene, none of them were actively engaged with one particular religion nor had the view of becoming a committed participant. Hannah said that this was because she was more interested in the spiritual aspects of each religion than the practice of the religion itself: "I have been to other churches and I have read other things but religion isn't what I am interested in, it's more spirituality". Her curiosity took her to manifold sources. She recounted that she had "looked at the Lutheran, the Roman Catholic, the Buddhist, and just reading in general on different backgrounds and things." This opened up new possibilities for her including the notion of reincarnation: "when I did the Buddhist course, I really got reincarnation – [but] until then and because of the Catholic upbringing - it just didn't exist [for me]". Her willingness to explore a number of faiths

appeared tied to the sense they make to her at an immediate level. Her search continues because “none of them actually made a physical or emotional difference to my life”.

As already outlined, Ilene’s Catholicism helps her to find peace and harmony in her life, and enables her to work towards becoming a better person. For her, it is less to do with living by a particular religious doctrine and more about having reflection time through church attendance. She revealed that: “I am not a staunch or strong Catholic I don’t think, but I just get a sense of peace going to church and just having that reflection time more than anything else”. Ilene, however, is also interested in “all of those alternative types of therapies and that stuff always interests me and always has, but I have never really had the commitment and knowledge [...] about a lot of it. I mean things interest me like going to Bali and going up into the mountains and that for three or four weeks and just chilling out”. She also commented that, “anything that would give you peace and harmony or through meditation [is good]”.

Buddhism was frequently mentioned in the interviews. Some of the women had been exposed to Buddhist ideas through their working or personal lives. For example, Felicity learnt meditation techniques at Naturopathy school by a woman who had learnt them directly from Zen Buddhists. Allied with this, the women talked about notions they saw as Buddhist and how they appropriated them within their own spiritual frameworks. Brianne, for example, described her spiritual path as “kind of in line with a Buddhist ideal but slightly different”. By this she meant having the belief that your life is

something to be worked on and “just not put it away, which tends to be the Western ideal”. She suggested that:

You come to the planet with a purpose and that is to put yourself back together. The soul decides to come down because it has got areas that it wants to work on and wants to heal and so it makes an agreement and it comes down and it chooses the family or whatever it goes into to give it the best opportunity to heal those areas. So the method is about going into those places that have been hurt and damaged and bruised and healing them because that’s in line with why we came. That’s why we are here!

Brianne thought these notions had similarities to Buddhism yet suggested “we are walking along a Buddhist path - but we are kind of not either - we are kind of alongside”.

Katie talked in similar terms to Brianne:

I believe that every soul has an ultimate purpose and we need to negotiate different things with other souls. [...] And someone explained it to me once, they said it’s like [this story] where there was a Buddhist monk who was in a prison and he was being tortured, like really bad torture, and he was completely calm, and he looked into the eyes of his torturer and he forgave him - and to me that’s what karma is. It’s not about I do something to you and you do it back – it’s about negotiating a contract with different souls before you go into that particular lifetime and recognising that people are doing things to you so that you can learn from them.

Multiple pathways and practices

Reading and reflecting on dreams, experiences and a wide range of literatures was important for validating each woman's experience and forging spiritual beliefs. All of the women used a variety of practices as both a means for understanding but also as a way of positioning themselves to seek further information. Notably, through their practices the women sought a connection with the non-material realm. These practices were selected eclectically and for a broad range of purposes. They included dream analogy, yoga, 'sitting', silence, walking, being in nature, and swimming. An interesting omission was the traditional practice of prayer, which only Hannah mentioned in brief.

Three main themes emerged during the women's discussions of these practices: connecting with self, connecting with 'other', and regularity. Connecting with self was important in order to 'ground' the self and deal with daily life. The practices were also a means for connecting to 'other', to the non-material realm. However, this seemed to be in the sense of placing the self in a position to receive guidance and information and was generally considered secondary to the primary purpose of connecting with self. Regularity was important, and various practices were fitted into regular 'daily', 'weekly', or 'fit it in as much I can' routines.

Self Connection

Most of the women described undertaking a range of practices that served to assist them in their daily life. Some of these were considered 'spiritual,' and some were not. They

ranged from yoga and meditation, to tarot readings, lighting candles, walking and/or being in nature. Mainly, the women spoke of these practices in terms of assisting them to cope with the demands of everyday life rather than as a way of forging a spiritual connection with the non-material world (noting, however, that there was a place for this too, which is discussed below). Essentially, their chosen practices allowed them to take time for themselves and have some space outside their daily routines and responsibilities. Three main interrelated reasons were given as to why this was important to them. The first concerned health and well-being and achieving some sort of 'balance' in life activities; the second, the need to 'ground' and 'centre' oneself and one's emotions; and the third, the importance of having enough space in one's life for reflection and contemplation, which was important also for the first two.

All of the women's accounts reflect at least one of these elements. Common to all, was the need to take time out to achieve some kind of balance to life's activities. Some of the women relied on structured and semi-structured practices (such as yoga and meditation) in order to achieve this, while some were still trying to find ways to achieve balance. For example Gina, who leads a very busy and achievement oriented life recognises that she doesn't actively seek time out or a place to feel at peace. She suggested that this is something that she should do, or would like to do, more regularly, saying that "I don't often take time out to purposely seek peace - I just always intend to". While she doesn't have any particular rituals or practices that allow her to do this, tapping into the natural environment is something she does: "I think somewhere where there is something bigger than me – like the ocean or like out in the bush or somewhere like that to escape to".

The health benefits arising from undertaking particular activities such as yoga and meditation were also emphasised. Ilene, for example, talked about walking and being in and around the natural environment as her way of getting ‘time out’ and achieving a level of balance and well-being. She also spoke of the health benefits of practices like yoga, which she wanted to include into her lifestyle, but found difficult to incorporate. If she did have the time for practicing yoga on a regular basis, this would be for “a bit of relaxation and just some flexibility [...] [but] mainly mental and physical balance”. Elise started practising yoga by video for ‘relaxation’ type reasons while she was traveling overseas:

I wanted to do some kind of relaxation stuff while we were over there, because we were traveling around all the time you can’t get to a regular class. And so I bought a tape over there – just a video – and Richard would go for a run every morning and I’d do yoga. Well in the places that had a video recorder anyway! And so pretty much everyday for the year I did it – and so that’s where it really started becoming a habit I guess. You kind of get needy of it – you need to have that time to yourself and know how you are feeling.

Elise also used certain meditation visualisation techniques. In describing one where she visualises her heart as crystal she said, “I kind of get the sense when I go into [...] (meditation) and try and see how I am feeling - I feel like I have got a crystal in my heart [and] that’s how I gauge how I am doing. On a good day the crystal is nice and bright and clear and other times it can change colours depending on the mood I am in. But I find it is a good gauge to try and see how I am going”. This technique came to her

one day during a meditation: “I did a really deep meditation one day - I think it was actually like a guided one on a tape [...] - and they said look to what your heart is feeling, and that sort of visualisation just started”. She acknowledged that in daily life “you go along and think ‘I am ok, I am ok’, and then you lie down and, you know, start doing [the visualisation] and then go ‘oh I am actually not!’ [laughter] So it’s nice to know it doesn’t try and hide things from me”.

Hannah, who began meditation as a result of work pressures, remembered that “I put myself under a lot of pressure – I was working full time, I had taken on this Nuways business, so I started meditating”. While the practice of meditation was primarily a way of coping with her busy lifestyle, it was also a way of connecting with her self and validating her self worth. Hannah explained that “I didn’t meditate for a long time because I have a need to be busy all the time, and it wasn’t that I didn’t like my own company it was just that if I wasn’t being busy I wasn’t being the best I could be. Like if there was washing on the line then I wasn’t good enough. I had all these preconceived ideas about what good enough was. [...] [Now] I meditate and I just give myself time now that I never used to think I deserved”. Like Hannah, Felicity finds meditation an essential element for her daily life: “I meditate everyday and I find that really grounds me. And if I don’t meditate or just do yoga in the morning, I find that I am a lot more grumpy and a lot snappier generally. A lot of the time if I meditate in the morning I can deal with things all day because I find it really centres me”.

The use of tarot cards or similar, was described at some length by Donna, Alicia, Felicity, and Brianne. As part of her practice, Donna uses fairy cards, which she said are a bit different from tarot in that they are less of a predictive tool and provide more of a general view of what is happening in a person's life. She usually uses them alone and mainly when things are difficult. However, she also sometimes does a reading on a relaxing day or if there is something particular on her mind. Her routine is to go on the balcony, where she is "closer to nature", and sit and shuffle the cards. Three cards are selected, the first being representative of the past, the middle card being the now, and the third being some form of future. She describes the information or symbolism held in each card as "hints" to what may be occurring in her life rather than them being predictive. After a reading, Donna puts the cards away and does something else – or just reflects on them.

Alicia also intermittently uses tarot cards: "they are something that I tap into every now and then". While yoga is her main practice, she uses the tarot cards to receive guidance on certain issues: "I guess it's about that universal stuff and to just ask for a bit of guidance [...]. More often than not, it is kind of spot on". By this she means "it gives some guidance" and that "even if I don't know what is going to unfold – I will look back over that a couple of days later and go 'oh ok that actually was what I needed for that time'". Felicity sees this and related practices as a form of divination, which for her is a means of accessing inner knowledge and tapping into a 'higher self':

I think [connecting with the] self, you're tapping into a higher self still. You know because I think there is a part of you that knows everything, but it's just a matter of opening that channel. And I think if tarot cards help

you open that channel, ok - use them, if meditation helps you open that channel then great - use that.[...] All of those types of methods of divination are very broad and a lot of the messages you divine from them, are, I think, inside you anyway. You understand them or know them and you are just pulling the messages out of those cards that you want to pull out of those cards. But if that helps you get to the root of the problem I think that is great - you know whatever method works do it.

Caroline, Janine, and Brianne, undertake writing as part of their spiritual practice. Caroline, as we have seen, experiences writing as a meditation type practice. Janine said that she used writing as a method for connecting with her emotions. This was particularly important to her because “I always do what I feel. Always go with my feeling and that is probably the biggest thing that I run my life by”. Writing helps Brianne work things out when she feels ‘guided’ to do so. She said that she had a strong connection to her guides, getting persistent messages from them to write in order to unlock whatever emotional block she might be experiencing. Once she sits down to write “the next step comes after that” and she finds a way to deal with the issue before her.

Connecting to ‘other’ and the question of ‘nature’

While all the women talked about ‘grounding’ or ‘centring’ the self, some also spoke of experiencing a connection to a non-material world. This was mainly described as an overall sense of being ‘guided’ through their everyday experiences, and sometimes in terms of finding a place of emotional calm or peace and/or having an unmistakable feeling of unconditional love. Common to all these accounts was the need to connect with nature. This could be for relaxation and contemplation or for forging a transcendental or

‘other-worldly’ connection. For some of the women, being in the natural environment (the beach and the bush being the two most spoken about locations), helped to put their problems in perspective and provided a space in which intense emotions could ebb and flow away. For others, nature was a reminder of the ‘bigness’ of the universe, which helped them to consider themselves and their problems as something small. Overall, the natural environment provided a space in which to withdraw from everyday life, and to allow the mind to achieve some quiet. In this way being at the beach or in the bush led to relaxation and rejuvenation. It also assisted the women in positioning themselves to becoming more spiritually open and able to receive guidance for whatever was needed in their life at that point in time.

Gina recounted how being in and around nature put a helpful perspective on the more difficult issues in her life. She likes “those bigger things” that nature can offer, and talked about watching the moon and finding it a good natural reminder: “It’s just the notion that everything keeps going despite what is going on for me”; saying further that, “those kinds of things help me find peace”. Donna recounted finding peace at the beach in particular where she feels “right at home” in the water and sensing the motion of the waves.

Katie described the pull of the beach where she used to live outside of Perth:

It was the aloneness – it was the sound, it was the smell, it was the feel, and you know the beach opens yourself up to all your sort of senses. And the peace and the perspective you know – we get so caught up in our own worlds but if you stand on the shore of the beach and look out to the ocean, there’s a whole other world under there which you can see nothing

of and you can therefore assume that nothing exists. And it just is like, you know, some people sit down and look at the stars and say ‘oh to put this into perspective I am going to contemplate how many worlds might be out there or whatever’ – it’s a similar thing at the beach. But the smell and the feel and the sound – it allows you to be at peace - but not when there are hundreds of bloody people around.

Ilene spoke about all forms of water for the calmness they provide her. “I think all water because I love going to the beach and taking the kids to the beach and I love rivers and that [...]. I love rain – I love to be able to walk in the rain and I love puddles. I suppose it takes you back to your childhood memories...and my kids love it too”. Water was also special for Elise: “Showers, just love standing in the shower, it is just brilliant [...]. I guess it’s just hot and soothing and kind of feels like it’s washing stuff off that you don’t want hanging around. Negative energy - I guess. And that’s the same as if you plunge yourself into the ocean it refreshes you, [...] perks you up a bit and just makes you feel clean”.

For the most part, when the women were talking about being in nature, they were talking about creating a space where they could be alone and think about things. In recalling the Bibbulmun Track⁷ expedition she had undertaken with her husband, Elise said:

[It] is really uncontaminated [...] [so] then it’s easier to be attuned with it – with that higher thing maybe. [...] I guess that’s why they call it nature

⁷ “The Bibbulmun Track is Western Australia's only long-distance walking trail and is one of the longest, continuously marked trails in Australia. It is named after a distinct Aboriginal language group, known as the Bibbulmun, who inhabited some of the areas on the south coast through which the track passes. This world-class, 963 km long-distance walktrail stretches from Kalamunda, a Hills suburb on the outskirts of Perth, to Albany, on the south coast”. www.calm.wa.gov.au/tourism/bibbulmun (Accessed August 3, 2006)

because it's a very natural state. It doesn't provide any interruptions or clutter – it just is and it always has been - it's just clear I guess. It kind of gives me the feeling if I wanted to, if I needed to think about something, nature would give the environment to do that.

Withdrawal and solitude were thus important to the women. Janine described being in nature as a kind of counter balance to being around people: “If I go into crowded spaces there is a sense that I used to have to protect myself – now I am fine but I just don't want to be around it – it's like it's just exhausting, it's totally exhausting”. When “I am out of balance, I really need to be near trees” for “nature feeds me [...] it's just like I open up and go ‘aah’ [like a sigh of relief]”. Alicia described feeling unbalanced “if I don't have saltwater on my skin for two or three days – I guess it's that sense of healing and cleansing. [...] I find if I haven't got wet I feel like I haven't cleaned myself off of negative energy – of stuff that has been going on”. She feels a special connection to her garden “I think it's a connection, a grounding – I love watering the garden – it's just that time of quietness in the morning, usually in the morning or throughout the day. It's nurturing stuff and then it's just things like weeding and getting your hands dirty – you get a sense of grounding and being connected [...]. I always know how my mental state is by the state of my garden – if I am not going well – usually the garden isn't going well either”.

Regularity

While the women often said they attended to their practices in a non-ritualised manner, fitting them into their daily routines as best they could, their accounts also suggested some regular formats. Alicia and Janine spoke of practicing yoga quite regularly and

missing it when they couldn't. Janine also talked about routinely preparing herself for her healing work by cleansing in sea water and doing yoga and 'sits'. Alicia found regular swimming in the ocean and practicing yoga essential: "doing the yoga and being physical, being in my body gets me out of my head – because my thinking becomes very circular [...]. It's like a space within your mind and your body that takes you away from all of it and you are just who you are".

For Hannah, meditation is regular but not subject to precise rituals. She recounted that:

I sit out on the front decking – last night I meditated on the front decking and I sat facing the sunset and I am not big into even the rituals like – when you do some of these courses they say 'oh you should be facing this direction and you know – so I sit outside on the front decking and face the sunset or just sit at peace. And the cars still go past and the dog still runs around, and every now and again one of the kids come screaming out and goes 'oh Mum is meditating' and they kind of fly off in the other direction.

Brianne said that she was not really bound by any particular ritual. She does "meditate", and "light candles and use aromatherapy even now and then" but doesn't consider anything she does as "really rituals". Instead she describes these things as making "the connection better". She explained that "if it's a difficult issue then I need candles and I need that kind of a ritualised approach – but it's fairly fluid otherwise". This non-ritualised approach suits her personality "which is quite sort of relaxed and I like things to happen wherever – so I don't want to have to go into the whole you know have to light candles and walk in a circle five times [...] I just want to talk [to my guides]".

Concluding comments

It has already been suggested that crisis takes us away from our everyday 'taken for granted' reality where we would (ideally) have a sense of safety and security gained through (reasonably successful) socialisation processes. Berger and Luckmann (1979) would include the psychic, dream and occult experiences the women describe. They contend that we look for ways to interpret these sorts of alternated experiences so they make sense to everyday life and to our sense of self in relation to our daily realities. How we do this, they suggest, is through language where we can access both our own and each other's subjectivities – intersubjectively - in order to make 'real' our experiences so we can begin to understand them. In this respect the women turned primarily to other women for guidance and support and in doing so emphasised the importance of mutuality in the process of seeking to understand themselves and their experiences. The women talked about needing space for self-expression, to be understood, listened to, and guided, which included being able to contemplate new information and draw on the beliefs and experiences of others. This was against the more hierarchical relationships held in traditional priest-parishioner or counsellor-patient representations.

As well as conversing with others, the women describe accessing a broad range of literature in a rather eclectic manner to find ways in which to order their experiences and thoughts. Reading and accessing literature provided them with a sense of validation for their particular experiences and beliefs. In terms of the 'home world' created through

primary socialisation, the women described a sense of knowing or ‘gelling’ with particular ideas and beliefs that resonated with their experiences and understanding.

Many feminists (Smith 1987; Daly 1985; Spender 1980; Christ & Plaskow 1979; de Beauvoir 1949) argue that under patriarchal structures women are removed from the power to name their own experiences and therefore must seek to understand themselves and their experiences in relation to male defined categories and from a position of ‘other’. To combat this they argue that it is important for women to be able to name their own experiences as an empowering and freeing pathway which is essential for an authentic spirituality and an authentic sense of self. It is interesting, then, that when talking about the particular pieces of information that helped shape their sense of spirituality, these women often said it was simply a case of ‘validating what I already know’. In this way, they were talking about the importance of having their experiences named.

The women maintained a self-directedness to their practices which were mostly solitary and done on their own – e.g., - reading, walking, writing, being in nature and so on. Christ and Plaskow (1979) argue for the importance of this kind of spiritual self-direction against unthinking acceptance of religiosity. They also emphasise the importance of using women’s traditional association with nature as a source for transcendence and an opportunity for reversing the use of ‘nature’ (in the sense of biology) to perpetuate women’s oppression. In this study, the women’s link with nature demonstrated a coming together of the pragmatic purposes of religious and spiritual beliefs discussed so far – it provided reflective space, time for contemplation and physical rejuvenation and was

beneficial in maintaining emotional and physical health. At the same time, these practices were also a source of new experience and stimuli for further exploration. Most importantly, nature seemed to provide the women a place for experiencing the essence of their being. In de Beauvoir's (1949) terms, against the constraints of patriarchal society, it is in nature that women who seek a sense of themselves and freedom of being can find spiritual emancipation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ATTACHING MEANING, FORMING BELIEFS, AND ESTABLISHING PURPOSE

Introduction

All of the women ascribed meaning and purpose to their experiences with reflection on childhood events and daily life experiences an important part of this process. As part of this, they used certain beliefs as a guide or code for living and ultimately built them into an overall 'framework' that operated as a point of reference for making sense of themselves and their past experiences, to act as a guide for relationships, and an overall compass for dealing with possible future events.

This chapter focuses on the idea of 'spiritual re-storying', suggesting how the women re-storied aspects of their personal biographies through a spiritual lens and translated it to the everyday. Four key themes are emphasised: reflection and reflexivity, attributing meaning and purpose, forming supporting beliefs, and enacting belief systems. The chapter is followed by a brief postscript indicating how each woman concluded her story and represented her spiritual self.

Hannah's story

Hannah's account provides a good example of the process of 'spiritual re-storying', particularly when she talked about her relationship with her father. Her father was an alcoholic, and by the time Hannah was four years of age, he had been to prison leaving her mother to raise four young children. As a result, the family spent time in Ngala⁸, which, at the time, was a refuge for mothers and their children. Hannah recalled how, at one point, her father kidnapped her and her siblings, and how they were chased and eventually caught by police. She recounted that "I have very strong memories of being in a car and my little baby brother screaming his head off, and we were all crying and he (her father) was very drunk and was yelling at us to be quiet, and then flashing lights, and police cars, and then being taken out". When Hannah, attended a 'Forum' course as an adult, she was required to reflect on her past. She said that it was at this point that she redefined how she had developed her sense of self in relation to her father and the childhood experiences associated with him. She recalled, for example, a moment when her mother had taken her to visit her father in prison and when she was in the car afterwards:

I remember thinking how bad I must have been because my father was an alcoholic and he was so bad he had tried to hurt someone and was put in prison. And I made up my mind that I would be the best I could be. [...] So then a lot of my life was about making my self better. [...] You know, I didn't realise that until I did the 'Forum' and started to look back at why I

⁸ 'Ngala' is a government assisted service in Perth, Western Australian. "Ngala has been providing help for parents and their children for more than 100 years. Established in the 1890's as the House Of Mercy, it later became known as the Alexandra Home for Women. In the 1950's its name was changed to Ngala, an Aboriginal word of the Bibbulmun dialect meaning "we two". The name Ngala reflects the organisation's core mission- to help strengthen the bond between parents and their children" (www.ngala.com.au accessed January 2, 2006).

was making the decisions I was making, and basically I had decided to be the best, because my father was to me, the worst.

Having understood this trajectory, Hannah said she became able to accept what happened to her and to move towards forgiveness. Reflecting on this she told me:

I had never told my father that I loved him – that was something – I really didn't think I loved him I just thought that he was a pretty horrendous person. And because I learned to empathise and look back at what other people's situations were, and how they affected who they became, I started to talk to my Mum about what my father's past was, and what happened to him as a child. [Then] I actually started to realise that there were issues that people really dealt with. And on the very last night [of the Forum] I stood up and said publicly that I loved my father which I had never done in my life [...], and that night he passed away.

The death of Hannah's father on the same night that she made her public statement was, for her, far more than coincidence. She considered it as something that “was meant to be” and talked about her sense of spiritual guidance and emotional healing. She believed that her father had received her message of love, giving her an overall sense of completion: “standing up publicly and saying what I had to say to him really completed a lot of issues with me”.

Integral to Hannah's belief that things ‘were meant to be’ was her sense of being ‘guided’ through this experience of reconciliation. In coming to terms with her father's death, Hannah wrote him a letter and had a photo of him enlarged and mounted on the wall, the first photograph she had ever displayed of him. The photo held great significance for her

as she was “the only one with a copy of it because Mum had gotten rid of everything”. When she lost it at one point she became frantic and recalled “I stopped and took a big breath and went ‘I really need this photograph’ [...] and this little thought came ‘it’s in the back of [the baby’s] photo album - you’ll go and find it. And I went and opened the back and it was sitting there”. In this and other respects, Hannah had a sense of things as they are “meant to be” and with it, a belief in a “greater power”. Considering this, she said:

I believe very strongly that there is a God – whether you believe it is Buddha or whether you believe it’s whoever, you know whoever you believe in, you have to believe in a greater power - otherwise who are we? We are not arrogant enough to think we made all of this without somebody else helping us. So no, I think it was God going -‘just calm down, go and have a look and you’ll find it’.

Hannah’s use of the term ‘God’, to describe her sense of omnipotence, reveals the connection between her current beliefs and her Catholic heritage (a connection that she herself acknowledges). Her mother also stands as an important continuing influence, with Hannah saying “I think I am blessed because my Mum has always been looking for something spiritually, so to me it is not foreign [...] you know things that happen - I just go okay – that’s the way it’s meant to be”. Reflecting more widely on the influence of both her parents, Hannah considered that:

As an adult, I believe that we are all reborn with our past growth. So it’s within you – but you chose to be with who you are to help that growth. So in my opinion I was reborn to be a part of my mother’s family and father’s family because I had a lesson to learn about my father, about tolerance and

about acceptance, and I was born to be with my mother so I could develop a better spiritual understanding and apply that to my life.

Hannah's beliefs of a higher controlling power, being 'guided', and things being 'meant to be', provide a sense of things being preordained – a feeling which meshes with a commitment to, and belief in, self-development and self-growth. Hence, she aligned her spiritual practices (meditation), with her notions of what her life purpose was, or should be. More specifically, she used meditation as a form of communication with 'God' to gain an understanding of what this purpose was. She commented that, "my whole life I have had the need, I have felt that there is something that I have got to do that is bigger than what I am doing". In reflecting on this, and her profession of primary school teacher, Hannah said:

I realise there is something I do need to do, and it's to do with spirituality, and it's to do with children as well. The more I meditate on it the more I see children in need and I think as an educator I'm just disillusioned with the way our education system is working at the moment. I think children need to learn to meditate. I think children need to learn to be accepting of other children and to value people and although it is in the system, it's not happening the way it should be happening.

Reflection and reflexivity

All of the women's responses show how they reflected on particular aspects of their lives and experiences and considered this practice central to their spiritual development. This involved three main components: childhood, adolescence and early adulthood; new

sources of insight (including new experiences); and particular significant events as a guide to future practice, shaping who they wanted to be, how they wanted to feel, and how they wanted to be perceived by others. These reflections were applied in a practical fashion, whether to understand particular emotions or behaviours (their own or someone else's); to find new meanings; and/or to further develop some kind of life direction. The first two of these have already been discussed at various points in this thesis, where we have seen how reflection on childhood and later experiences were an integral part of all of the women's accounts and how the women sought information to help them interpret both new and older experiences. The following discussion therefore concentrates on the third of these elements.

Reflection on particular past events as a guide to future practice

For many of the women, the process of reflecting on the past was a means for guiding future activities and discovering an overall life purpose. In some cases, this involved the recognition that past choices had fallen short of expectation with an accompanying awareness that given their new knowledge, they would have done things differently. For example, in terms of her career Hannah recounted:

I was year 12 and doing quite well at school and it was always expected that I would go onto university [...]. When it came to choosing I didn't have any preconceived ideas about what I wanted to do – but when I reflect back now - I really believe that I chose to be a teacher because I had a limited understanding of what was possible. You know teaching, nursing, police officer, like they were people who were in your life there and then.

In a small country town, she said, “you would never have heard of a naturopath or an iridologist or even things like physiotherapists and stuff – they just weren’t part of my life so weren’t an option or choice. So when I was in year 12 and they said ‘well what do you want to be’, basically I knew how to be a teacher – I had been exposed to them all my life – so I chose that. But I do love it and it was the right choice and I suppose destiny makes you go the way you go”. However, on reflection, Hannah considered that “if I could do it again I would be a naturopath ...I’d do something very different. But at the same time I love what I do and I love children, I am passionate about children and about where they are going and the need to look after the children”.

Brianne’s reflections show how her newly formed beliefs were developed in direct relation to her disturbing supernatural episodes. These served to reduce her fear of those experiences, and the anticipation of a possible recurrence. She explains that since the earlier episodes (that occurred in her early twenties) she hasn’t had anything quite so frightening happen to her but has still had other “scary things happen”. She describes one particular night:

I spent a Saturday night a few years ago talking to a dead body that turned up in my doorway in my bedroom. I just see things – things are here - and I have just learned to talk to them. And I just talk to it because it is there for a reason and there’s something to be learned from it and it’s a messenger of some kind. And stuff that used to frighten the heebie-jeebies out of me doesn’t anymore [...]. So maybe if that experience that happened to me when I was twenty happened again, I would handle it

differently [...]. Usually what is happening is someone is trying to get a message through about something, and if you are frightened and you don't know how to handle it – it feels like you are being attacked somehow – but if you kind of handle it differently it's not like that.

Brianne thus changed her original belief about ghosts as being something to be frightened about to the notion that 'ghosts are here for a reason', coming to her because 'there is a message to be received'. This means that she no longer has to 'keep feeling attacked' and can be open to personal growth. This allows her emotional reality, past and present and future, to be transformed. It is also interesting to note that Brianne's experience of feeling attacked by unforeseen forces and the cuts and scratches spontaneously appearing on her skin, are consistent with the current popularisation of the occult. Her beliefs about ghosts and unfinished business in life, as well as her experiences of being attacked, were present in the movie *The Sixth Sense*, for example. These depictions of the occult and psychic experiences are also represented in a range of popular television series such as *Medium*, and *Ghostwhisperer*. This is not to say that Brianne watched them in particular, but rather to highlight this as cultural content and to point to the process of drawing from a broader universe of meaning.

Somewhat in contrast, Donna's story illustrates how certain personal experiences led her to discard particular spiritual practices in which she had previously believed. Prior to her brother Tom's death in a mining accident, she was involved in practicing Wicca and felt that it was almost a religion to her. While Donna has a personal sense that Tom "is around" and not far from this life, she recalls feeling angry and distressed when a group of her friends (while she was in Year Nine) told her that an ouija board reading they had

conducted the night before had resulted in a connection made with her brother. They said that he had sent a message through to her to tell her that he loved her. Donna experienced this as a personal intrusion, particularly as her friends talked about it in a public place, on the bus on the way to school. Compounding her sense of intrusion, and contributing to the reason that she no longer practices Wicca, came another incident, which occurred when she herself was participating in an ouija board session. On this occasion, she had introduced a friend of her own age into the energy circle (she usually practiced with older people). During the session, her friend became increasingly uncomfortable with the process and broke protocol by standing up, thereby breaking the “safe energy connection” established for the practice. After this Donna experienced a “bad energy” in the house which was “a really cold feeling that would suddenly move over [the senses] where you just felt it was there”. Resulting from these experiences, Donna abandoned most of her Wiccan practices, believing that “you shouldn’t disturb the spirits” and that they should be “left alone”.

Gina recalled how she rejected elements of her Catholic religion when she was going through a difficult time adjusting to her brother’s death in the latter stages of her adolescence. She remembered that, “I decided that I wouldn’t believe in God anymore”. This was because she had a need to be “punishing someone, blaming someone” but eventually recognised “that didn’t work - because I realised that I did [believe in God]. Then I started thinking like, well, He must be evil. But then [I] was too scared to even think that because I thought, if I think He is evil then He is going to punish me, and I was actually...I had fear, I guess [...], fear for a long time. I guess that’s subsided – but I

think it was me trying to give meaning to it – desperately trying to find meaning”. From that point Gina felt that her anger and fear over her brother’s death did not reduce by discarding her belief in God. She has since reconfirmed her original belief in God but she sees this as an on-going process of developing her views in which she can make sense of her life, its experiences and purposes.

The reflexive nature of these stories is highlighted in the way that the women looked into their past and their experiences in order to understand them, explored a range of perspectives through an extended search for knowledge (which then became a point of reflection in itself) and made personal changes according to that information. Two further points come to light here. First, this reflective process is one by which the women seek to mitigate the emotional pain resulting from their personal experiences. Second, in order for this mitigation to occur, the women have to achieve some sense of compatibility between their cognitive processes (knowledge, understanding, beliefs, thoughts, worldviews etc) and their emotional experiences (particularly painful ones such as fear, grief and anger). When there is a sense of cognitive and emotional compatibility, past events and experiences are given retrospective meaning and future events are anticipated with a feeling of composure and a sense of ‘rightness’.

Attaching meaning and purpose

In all of the women’s stories, attaching meaning and purpose to past painful experiences was central to re-interpreting those particular events within a spiritual perspective. This

was quite separate from what they considered ‘meaningful’, in terms of work, family, friends, and so on, as is discussed later in this chapter. While the women spoke about meaning and purpose interchangeably they did in fact attach different meanings to each. Thus for Hannah, there was *meaning* in the ‘timing’ of the events surrounding her father’s death whereas it was the actual process of personal ‘healing’ that held *purpose* (In this sense, purpose can hold meaning, and something considered meaningful, holds purpose). In the ensuing commentary, what I refer to as ‘meaning’ relates to the significance attached to an immediate event, while ‘purpose’ reflects a broader perspective and denotes a guide for possible future action.

Attaching meaning to particular life events was personal to each of the women’s particular circumstances, and was realised by matching each experience with a belief that validated and made sense of the situation. For Katie, breast cancer became a meaningful experience because it gave her the opportunity to find out more about her self and to reassess her life priorities and relationships. Caroline attached meaning to the night that she had put herself in a position to be a prostitute and no clients turned up. In both cases, the women described the recovery from these events as a spiritual or divine manifestation or intervention. Both of these women, and many others, were able to cite particular experiences and the meaning they attached to them as turning points in their life for changing their priorities, directions, and beliefs.

There was also an association made between such significant events and the development of an overall life purpose. The degree to which this link was made varied. Katie, for

example, said that in her experience with cancer and her associated spiritual exploration that she had come closer, but hadn't yet reached, an understanding of her life purpose. Having said that she stated "the ultimate in any lifetime is to find what the ultimate goal is, and reach it"; and reflected, "I think that's what the cancer was all about personally. [...] [And while] I think I am pretty close [...] I haven't cemented it yet, but I know the factors".

We can recall Brianne's version on life purpose in that she believes "we come to the planet with a purpose and that is to put your self back together". Her notion of healing directly stems from her personal experience of sexual abuse, and she uses it to deal with various situations. She says "having this belief really helps when things suck – and frequently they do suck". But like Katie, Brianne believes that life purpose can be elusive saying that "it is definitely up in the air at the moment", even though she knows that part of it "is to be of assistance to others" in terms of helping others heal. At this point her focus was limited to self-healing because "[I have] been on sort of a bent in sorting myself out because I can't sort of help others unless I sort out my own stuff".

Janine also had a sense of the importance of assisting others and of her own capacity to do so. Janine describes how through her childhood, but mostly through her adolescent and early adulthood, she felt she had lost to some degree her natural sense of helping and healing, which she now reclaims. When she reflected on this, she realised that as a child she would try and help people in pain by sending them mental messages: "I would do that for years – and I suppose growing up you don't hear about anything like that and I just

thought ok - [and then] it sort of just vanishes out from you”. Having done years of rehabilitation work at Shenton Park⁹, she believes she just started to “know” where things hurt for other people: “I started knowing where it hurts for people and just clueing in straight away to that – and I just know how to help it because I can feel it in my body”. Yoga teaching also “all just came naturally”. Hence through a combination of work and personal experiences, (including the dream that indicated to her that she would be a healer), Janine believes her life has been patterned towards her purpose of working therapeutically with people physically, emotionally and psychically.

Much in each of these stories points to the women having a sense of purpose from which they link their experiences in order to make them meaningful. Meaning and purpose were thus inextricably linked and dialectical. This points to a broader universe of meaning from which they draw relevant knowledge to fit their experience and to pattern their beliefs. In each case, the associations made between meaning and purpose was underpinned by particular sets of beliefs. Hence forming beliefs and belief systems was inseparable from the process of attaching meaning and having purpose. The following section examines these beliefs.

Core beliefs

As indicated so far, the women’s accounts manifested a strong belief in the importance of ‘healing’ – of healing the self and healing others, underpinned by the belief in self-

⁹ Shenton Park Hospital is a branch of the Royal Perth Hospital in Western Australia specialising in injury rehabilitation.

development and becoming a better person. Both these elements enabled the women to understand various aspects of their experiences. This was part of the broader, yet still personal, question: ‘why am I here?’ Broader still, and less personal, was the existential question: ‘why are we all here’. On this, in most of the women’s stories, there was a broadly held set of beliefs, that ‘things happen for a reason’ and that ‘we are here for a reason’. This suggests a teleological view underpinned by the broader Western cultural investment in reason and rationality – i.e., everything is knowable and must make sense. Paradoxically, it was also the way in which the women admitted to a sense of mystery. In accepting that there is and must be a reason but we don’t really need to know it, they accepted an end-point for which no further exploration was required. However, it was notable that beyond this very broad reference to the universal, all of the women concentrated on making sense of their personal lives.

The women talked of beliefs around three general and interconnected issues: pain and suffering; the nature of existence and everyday life; and death. These three issues were characteristically “answered” by certain recurring beliefs or belief systems, which are illustrated below.

God exists...the universe...whatever

In describing how their beliefs helped them get through difficult times, all the women talked about a transcendental world, often using the term ‘God’, supported by other terms like ‘Universe’ (interestingly none of the women used the term Goddess in describing their personal connection to a higher being). Katie reflected that having this belief – that “there is something more out there [...] - makes me feel comfortable”. Adding further “if

I was to be completely honest – it’s probably a times in need sort of thing”. She also recognised the tensions within her own belief system for she says “if you believe purely in past lives and reincarnation and souls – which I do, continuing on in a journey – there’s not really a place for a God. [...] But I like to think that there is someone ‘more’ out there. It makes me feel comfortable so I don’t have a problem with it”. Katie’s ‘God’ was a very personal one “I don’t have this kind of ‘He’ [figure] – It’s more just a relationship with me and God rather than he created the earth and he makes it rain on this day. You know it’s really kind of a selfish egocentric view. [...] Like I don’t have a global view on God’s involvement with anyone else – it’s just my relationship with him. For her this works in that “there’s someone to talk to you when you can’t talk to anyone else - so it’s almost like an externalising your thoughts or your fears”.

Hannah also describes her belief in a higher power in terms of the support and comfort that it provides for her:

[By believing in God] you are basically believing in a greater power and accepting that you can’t do it alone. And I very much feel sorry for people who don’t have that strength of belief, because when someone passes on, someone you truly love and you can’t understand it or can’t explain why that would happen to you or to them or anything that happens in your life - I don’t know where you would turn unless you had that belief in a greater being.

Hannah went on to talk about her views on a gendered and personalised God and having to reconcile traditional and contemporary symbolism and language:

Interestingly enough that doesn't stress me or isn't an issue in any way, because I don't actually see God as a male or a human at all in any way. I see him as spirituality. It's like I don't think my spirit is female – I think my spirit is spirit -like I don't give it a sexuality at all because I believe in my next life I might be male or I might be female – do you know what I mean? I don't give it any sexuality so I don't give God any sexuality either. I just see God as a name of a being of an all powerful [nature].

Ilene, who has remained Catholic, believed that “there is a God and there is a power up there [...]”. She sees God as “probably more that traditional figure” (the masculine persona of God). Demonstrating her commitment to self-development, she said that for her the ‘God’ figure acts as “the drawing card to your faith”, for “you have to work towards [...] not towards getting there [to God in heaven] but towards making yourself a better person”. God represented “a peaceful life” for Ilene. She saw this as something everyone strives for “that perfect-ness and that peacefulness I suppose, and you know, no matter what religion, when you look around the world whether it be Tibetan monks of Buddhism or whatever, everyone is sort of striving for that [...] peace and harmony”.

Elise's sense that there is some kind of higher being is not attached to a persona but to her notion that “things happen for a reason”. In this respect she said that “there must be something higher than us, a higher being. There is a path that we must be going down [...] but I hate to say predestined and fate kind of thing because it is not that strong”. Related to this, she talked of the ‘guides’ in her life who act as “an intermediary maybe – I feel that they are connected somehow to whatever higher...whatever this thing is”. Talking more about these ‘guides’ she said “I kind of get the feeling that if I wanted

something, if I really with all my heart and soul if I wanted something, then they would find a way to do it. They would find a way to give it to me [...], that there would be help there”.

Many of the other women, who talked about ‘God’ or the Universe, also did so in terms of this sense of support and ‘guidance’. When she was reflecting on those few years “that were appalling”, Caroline concluded that:

I think that I just feel so extraordinarily lucky because in those years I think of the places I was and the things I did and you know that you are just absolutely blessed or that there’s grace. Because I am not a God in the sky person – but I do know that if you are working with grace or that you are aligned with grace, you are ok.

For Alicia “there’s this sense of preordained, that things get set up to support you through the stuff that’s coming up. I really get the sense that life supports you”. Using the song lyrics “I walked under a bus, I got hit by a train” from the song ‘Buses and Trains’¹⁰ to explain this sense further, she said:

The end passage is about how in life there is someone looking after us. Even through all of the difficulty, there’s this element of that it’s ok [...]. And I thought ‘yeah that’s true’ through all of the difficulty there’s this sense of being supported and guided and having to trust that you are being cradled and even in the darkest moments.

However, Alicia went on to comment that:

¹⁰ The song *Buses and Trains* by Bachelor Girl published by Sony/BMG

I am not sure whether it's God, whether it's that Godlike presence - no, I am not sure - I have read a lot on different ideas about what God [is] [...] and I am not actually sure at the moment what it is and whether that definition of God has certain implications. You know, like, we were talking about that on the weekend – you know, 'What is God?,' And [my friend] was saying, 'I see it as nature, as trees – you see God in your child's face as they are sleeping, and you see God in lots of different things'. [But] is it a person? Does it have to be this person? Or, is it this sense of 'all' - of like 'the universe' stuff. I guess I use universe probably more as terminology than 'God' [but] I have always had the sense of being directed somehow through this world.

Most of the women's imaginings of god, universe or higher power, were gender neutral and directed to the sense of there being an overall life plan that was meaningful and purposeful and to being guided through that plan. This was against notions of creationism and broader existential questions.

Guardian angels and their like

As well as talking generally about being spiritually guided through life, some of the women also spoke more specifically about having 'guides' and/or 'guardian angels'. Brianne said that she had been "talking to angels and things you can't see since I was "knee high to a grasshopper". She felt that it was only in recent times that she came to understand that her guides represent unconditional love, that they love her anyway even if she does make mistakes. They also "assist if I ask for assistance". Mostly, they follow her path but "there have been times when they get directive and that's very unusual". After a

“particularly intense healing session”, she has felt she is “getting a really persistent message to go in a particular direction or do something”. One of the examples provided by Brianne concerns cleansing following sexual abuse:

Like when I put together that part of me that I had killed when I was touched – the emotion that came out was pretty big – and they were really directive about how to look after myself after that. [...] It was annoying – it was 11pm at night and they said you must drink water. And they had me up all night – I was up all night drinking glass after glass after glass and going to the toilet, drinking - go to the toilet, drinking – go to the toilet. Flushing...and it was something about if I released all that into my bloodstream, that it was stored in my muscles somehow, if I released it into my bloodstream then it might just run back into my muscles or poison my liver. So I had to drink all this water.

Katie also spoke of her guides. In her case, they played multiple roles that appeared to be on a ‘needs’ basis: safe keeping; holding the keys for life and death (which was, interestingly a male figure); more magical and metaphysical interventions, and a parental force:

I believe that I have spiritual guides. [...] There is a guide which is like a gatekeeper – I always like him to be pretty still actually because he holds the key to life and death, but when I was going through all my cancer stuff I was very much in touch with him. I believe I have a higher power guide, which, for me is represented in kind of a wizard sort of form – it’s kind of an elusive guide. [...] And then I have a parent, like a couple – a parent guide who nurtures me.

While Gina did not have identified guiding figures, she recalled the time when her brother died and a stranger gave her comfort. For her, this person (female) was the embodiment of a guardian angel (human or not) because of the profound sense of calm and enclosure provided by the experience:

My family had been at the hospital by his bed the entire night. He died at about 8am in the morning. I remember it very vividly – shock, grief, sadness, confusion, and an overwhelming feeling of being alone, and of having no-one to comfort me. After some time I went to leave the hospital. I went to the lift and as it opened, I remember a man and a woman already in there. I said not a word, but the lady came over and hugged me [and] she was big and fat and soft. She asked how I was getting home - I can't remember anything after that. I don't know what she saw in me or why she hugged me, a stranger. She could not have known what had just happened. I wonder, even now, if she was some kind of angel – guardian angel.

Finally, Felicity, who shared Gina's sense of the fusion between humans and guardian angels and the capacity to provide love, comfort and wisdom in times of need, spoke rather differently from the others when she said: "I believe there are guardian angels, but I believe that we are each other's guardian angels. [...] We are all here to help each other we are all each other's guardian angels. So I believe we all get our wings when we die. Yeah, so that's kind of my belief – ever since I was really little - I can remember every single birthday wish. Every time, even when I was like three, I blew out the candles and wished for my wings".

Having a belief in a higher power was the primary way in which the women were able to both transcend their experiences of everyday life, relating to it in a very personal and everyday way. Interestingly, these transcendental beliefs provided them with the very things that the women had identified as missing in their lives particularly at times of pain and suffering:— comfort and safety, support and guidance.

Life after death – spirit is around in the everyday

Most of the women held a broad view of the after-life that rejected notions of heaven and hell but embodied some of the current versions of reincarnation. I return to the theme of reincarnation shortly, but first deal with the women who had experienced the death of a very close relative. These women (Gina, Alicia, Donna, Ilene and Hannah) spoke about experiencing the presence of their loved ones ‘around them’ and as being present in the everyday.

Dealing with loss

Gina recalled one of her friends saying, not long after her brother David had died, that after death there was just nothing. This idea she found very distressing: “I got really quite upset about that – the thought that he was nothing – you know he was just in a grave [...] and having thoughts about like [...] decomposing and stuff like that and thoughts which are not nice. So I try not to think about things like that too much”. Instead, the ‘Willy Wagtail’ bird has come to symbolise Gina’s sense that David’s spirit is around in the everyday. She says, “I think his spirit is here [...]. It’s not that I think he is a willy-wagtail – but I think that when I see a willy-wagtail it reminds me and I think of him”.

She chose a willy-wagtail because “they flit around and look happy and carefree” and, “I guess that is what I hope for him that he is happy and not suffering any longer”. Further, her mother had told her that when:

She was walking down by the river not long after [David] had died, and a willy-wagtail had come up and sat in her hand and I think she believed that that was somehow related to David telling her it would be ok. Even now like so many years on, [when] I see a willy-wagtail [...] it allows me that second to remember him, and think of him and think of him as hopefully happy. So in a way, I guess, I think that your spirit is here.

Ilene said that she felt the presence of her mother’s spirit more than ever in her life now, some thirty years after her death. In returning to live in her childhood home she has come to feel very close to her: “I think I always have [felt a connection] but probably being out here [on the farm] heightens that. And I don’t consciously think about it all the time – but I do think that her presence is here”. Further:

I feel like ‘John Edwards Crossing Over’ – but I do feel that those people are watching and you know that their spirit is around here. My grandparents are probably around here too - and I just think that this house has got so much of that spirit. [...] I just think that’s an attraction to here, and it’s probably healing subconsciously as well. And I think it is [too] for [my brother and sister] as well, since Mum’s died. Not that we consciously talk much about those things when they are here, but I think it’s just that calmness of feeling.

The sense of the person “being around” could also be experienced in a more particular way, for example, to provide security in difficult situations. In Alicia’s case, this was

expressed through dreams. This one in particular, which recalled her father, occurred when she was undergoing one of a number of IVF treatments:

[In the dream] we were at a party, and it was the whole family [...], and we were walking down the path and he was limping. I knew that he wasn't going to stay, he was sick, well he had died and he had come back and I knew because of this limp that that is what had happened. I remember sitting on his knee and saying 'why did you go away' [crying]. It was fabulous seeing him again and I knew he wasn't staying but I just had this moment with him sitting on his lap - it was lovely. And it was about being able to be that little kid again and sit there and just [be protected]. [...]
And having this family unit again – it was really lovely.

Reincarnation and new lives

When talking about death and the possibility of an after-life, some of the women spoke about either reincarnation or the person moving on to a new life. Broadly, Alicia said:

Definitely, there is more to this life than we can see. There is more to our physical body and our physical world – I hope there is [...]. And when I say hope, I mean what a waste this life would be if you just died and that was it. You know there is so much that we learn and that wisdom of living through difficulty and you know life is difficult! And I hope that we can somehow take that and it is used for the good of humanity [...]. You know to come back around and somehow understand that. I just think there is this bigger thing going on that's beyond us in the physical world, and we are a part of that, not separate to it – but we come in and forget in our human state.

Felicity held a similar view but described a more ‘astrological’ view of birth, life and death:

I think when you get born you choose to get born and to have an amnesia sort of thing and you get to earn back ‘nesia’ I guess! Because then you just have to start again - but you know how you just meet some little kids and they sort of look at you - and you know they know? I think [it’s] by the time you are about six or seven, when you totally lose all your memories of spiritual self. That’s why you hear of all these little kids who go in their dreams and they astral travel, they fly and things like that, and that’s when I think we lose it, as we get older, because you totally lose all your memories of spiritual self. That’s why you develop it and you learn it, but you need to lose those memories so then you can learn new things – because if you knew everything when you came down here it would be quite boring and you wouldn’t learn anything. [...] I think we come down here for that experience – to learn things, to learn new things.

Expanding on this, and in relation to her own personal experience, she said:

I have chosen to live several lives to learn many lessons, and I think there are a lot of people who have done that - but they are very few and far between. Often you will find that they are the very spiritual people. Because they feel – and that’s why I feel all the time as well - there’s this real sort of, I guess, pattern throughout the whole thing because it’s what people - they know it to true – they just feel this connection to that and they just go it feels right. That’s sort of a spiritual sense I guess.

Similar to Felicity, Janine brought together her belief in reincarnation with her sense of wisdom or ‘knowing’: “because there are so many things that I have felt and experienced

being with different people that I have just gone ‘oh’ and connected to another lifetime so strongly. And so many things that I feel in the body now and about yoga and so much about health that I have just known and it’s just like I have had that wisdom there from before”. She also said that for years, and for one reason or another, she would find herself around people at the time of their death. Initially, she found this quite distressing and thought she was just really unlucky to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Now she believes that death is “one of the most beautiful processes [...] you can go through, so I have no problem with it at all. It’s because I feel so much and I also see it is so peaceful and you feel so much love and you have such trust there, it is no problem at all. And you just go to spirit. In my head, I don’t believe we can understand the full extent and I don’t ever try to - but I know it is just beautiful”. While Janine rejected the traditional notions of heaven and hell, she did believe that “whatever you believe you’ll go to – so I believe if people believe in hell, and they deserve it, they will probably go through a stage of that – but I don’t believe you will get locked somewhere because the soul can’t evolve anymore. I believe all of us go through these many lifetimes – you get more and more evolved and then one day maybe you don’t come back”.

Enacting belief systems

So far I have indicated that making sense of personal experiences and dealing with painful emotions by finding a sense of meaning and purpose was integral to the women’s accounts of spirituality. In this context, particular beliefs were formed to frame particular issues such as grief and pain, existence, and the meaning of death. The process was thus a

mutually re-enforcing one in which beliefs were evolved to deal with particular experiences, with those experiences then re-cast in the light of those beliefs, and the beliefs re-confirmed through the re-cast experiences. But it is also important to note that the women used their spiritual beliefs as a guide for dealing with life in the everyday – a compass for daily living including their personal relationships, and their career, study and work choices. It is to the way in which the belief systems were enacted in daily life that I now turn.

Relationships

Relationships, particularly female relationships, were regularly cited as meaningful for support and validation. It was also through relationships that spiritual beliefs were enacted. Most of the women had a strong sense of living by certain codes and by what they considered to be ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘fair’ and so on for both themselves and for others. Through relationships, beliefs such as this translated to behaviour. Gina said that relationships are a priority in her life and that they “give me most meaning in my life”. Her relationship with her partner and her sister are particularly important: “I find my relationship with my partner important and I prioritise that”. My relationship with my sister - she is one of my main supports and is extremely important to me. My friends are important to me but I get different things from them than I do my sister and my partner”. Gina also has a ‘protective’ role in her relationship with her brother Ken, who is schizophrenic and had some difficult periods in adolescence through anti-social behaviour and drug use. Socialising with her friends when her brother is around can be difficult and she values those who are non-judgmental. On this, she says:

I don't know what's affected him whether it's the schizophrenia that has affected him or his drug use or something, but his affect is very flat, he doesn't speak a lot and doesn't interact so it's hard to explain [to some friends]. I hate to take him around to just anywhere like, I'll take him to places where my friends are a bit more accepting... like asking questions and [being] happy for him to grunt basically. But we'll still include him but I am bit protective of him and that's why I like having [different] friends. Some of them don't even know I guess that I have a brother which is not that fair. It's not that I keep it from them it's just that they don't ask me and I don't tell – I know I get angry if I am judged or he is judged.

It should be noted that Gina did not necessarily inscribe her protective role in relation to her brother with spiritual meaning, but viewed it as part of a wider frame of things that were important to her. I return to the notion of spiritual/ethical scripting later in this chapter.

While Gina's sense of guiding codes tended to filter the course of her conversation, without necessarily making direct spiritual reference, Janine pronounced clearly that she lived by certain codes, which were integral to her spiritual self. She described herself as “very human, aiming to be free – the codes that I endeavor to live by and breathe by are to have integrity, living by my truth and to take self responsibility”. These ‘codes’ “enable you to have freedom and get out of all the emotional manipulation and game playing that people tend to carry on in their life and tend to create more chaos in their life”. In other words, it allows her to find a way through difficult emotional interactions in relationship to other people and she believes honesty in relationship and freedom from

emotional game-playing and manipulation were important elements of being a spiritual person.

Katie takes matters a step further and integrates ethical codes fully with her spiritual self. She says, “I would like to think that my spiritual self is represented by how I make other people feel, either [by] being around them or talking to them or whatever”. The essence of this for her is to balance the description she holds of herself as being a ‘helpful person’ without denying herself or disempowering the other person in the process. As part of this Katie’s ethical self operates “by not playing political games at work, by not getting drawn into something, by recognising the way that people treat people and how people treat me and not entering into that game”. She elaborated further that this is about “setting the boundaries myself, it’s setting the rules myself, and helping other people by actually sticking to those rules instead of reinforcing their own negative behaviours [...] by playing those games”. This is “how I am kind of translating my spirituality into real life”.

Work and family

While the women’s codes guided their behaviour in the present, they were also used to forecast particular directions for the future. Most notably these manifested through their desires for work and family. The women who had children made very conscious and clear choices about their education and, in some cases about teaching them a range of spiritualities. The concern for the future was embodied through thoughts about what life might be like for their children and what sort of people their children might become. For example, Hannah said:

I just hope and pray my children will grow up to be beautiful people and make choices that are best for, not just themselves, but for the world around them. I mean Ryan and I want to actually buy land, we want to grow organic food, we want to grow organic beef – our beef at the moment is organic - we just want to get back to where we are meant to be. And I really honestly believe that world is going way off direction and that we all need to start looking back to where we should be going and get back on track – forget the materialistic stuff – get over it. You know I don't want my kids to have cancer - I don't want to have their children worrying about AIDS. I mean they are diseases that are there now but there are things that we can do about them to prevent them from becoming any worse.

Ilene recalled some of the benefits from her own childhood, things that she values highly and that are not necessarily available to children today: “I can remember it was just fairly easy going. I can never remember pressures of anything from the whole time we lived out here. We worked fairly hard as kids and we always contributed from a very young age – [...] we were part of the farm and the daily activity of the farm and driving tractors and milking cows and washing out the cowsheds and feeding the calves and as we got older, that became sort of a daily routine and a roster system for us. [...] We played a lot – there wasn't a lot of inside time or watching TV and that – most of our time was outside playing and riding bikes and creative type of play I suppose”. The simplicity of work and play, and contribution to family and community, are things she strives to include in her children's lives.

Katie said that she wanted to convey some of the things that she learned through her spiritual journey to her son. “My relationship with my son is because of what we [herself and her husband] have been through, and the journey we are taking is raising our son with constant positive feedback and a lot of external love like hugging, kissing and encouraging him to like kind of be open with his feelings. If he gets angry, that’s okay - if he has a little tantrum - because he is allowed to do that and you try and parent in a different way I think than probably we would have otherwise”.

Some of the women specifically described how they will pass on their spiritual and religious understandings to their children. Caroline, for example, who has a teenage daughter who goes to a Christian based school, talked of directing her daughter’s attention to certain books and pieces of literature and creating openings for conversing with her about spiritual topics. The value she places on this is in direct contrast to attending church, which they also occasionally do as part of the school community, but finds it boring. Nevertheless, because she found the Christian framework useful for her explorations, she uses it as a basis for conversing with her daughter about a range of spiritualities and religions. Similarly, Hannah talks about passing along certain qualities to her children: “if I can teach them to meditate or just to accept who they are and not judge themselves and judge other people, then I think that will be part of my role as their mother. But I want them to make choices for themselves and I want them to be like I was, not afraid to look into other religions”.

As we saw earlier, Hannah brought her sense of spirituality to her working life as a primary school teacher indicating a work, family, spiritual nexus. In a similar fashion, Caroline brought her spirituality to her writing, teaching and research. Katie brought her notion of life purpose into her work when she moved towards working with Indigenous groups in mining; and Alicia used yoga to bring her sense of the spiritual into her working life by becoming a part time instructor as well as using yoga within her occupation of health promotion. She said that yoga was a way of “bringing out the best in people” and “taking people back to who they are. Getting them to be honest with themselves about themselves is really important”. Talking about the connection between this and her spiritual beliefs, she said:

I have somehow known [how to] bring the spooky into the normal. Like you can have [those people] who do the full on ‘vego’ (vegetarianism), and who talk about the ‘energy’, and that’s all just beautiful and I love that stuff. But there are people out there who just need to get their bodies on the mat and get down there, and I know they will change from their experience with it, but they are not going to trust someone with the fluff. They need the concrete person. [...] You cannot escape the spiritual dimension of yoga even if you are going for a physical practice and believe it is only physical - it is not! It is operating at a level and that’s what’s lovely about it – it tricks people into getting – well not tricks people, [but] before they know it their doing different stuff, they are doing things differently, seeing things differently – it’s magic!

Like Alicia, Janine finds yoga essential. She feels that the practice “has really softened” her and says, “it’s really changed me heaps and I see it changing people heaps”. She attributes this to yoga’s ability to connect the emotional and physical:

That's the [...] thing I absolutely work with - the [belief that] emotion is totally connected with the physical and the physical is totally connected with the emotion. So I see people coming firstly with yoga, and they can't even look me in the eye and they are very timid, and they come out and they start to feel. When you don't feel emotionally, you don't feel physically – and [I know this] when I see them lying there at the end [of the yoga session] in winter and they don't have a rug on! [However], after about a year - you'll see them change, and you can see that their whole emotion has softened and [they will] feel physically [and then they will need to have that rug on].

It is clear from these examples that the guiding beliefs and values, or 'codes' were enacted in individual and personal terms through relationships and in the realms of work and family. There was also some consideration of broader world concerns and socio-political movements such as the environment, health, and Indigenous rights, but these were generally discussed in a subjective manner and in relation to career choices and family. So, even though Janine, Katie and Brianne focus on helping others, they did not comment on the some of the problems surrounding the expression of empathy, compassion, and/or understanding the culturally based predicament of other people. Two further observations can be made. First, the everyday realms of work and family were central to the women's accounts and their sense of personal and spiritual identity. Second, there was a direct relationship between professing a sense of spirituality and its actual manifestation in their present and everyday life outside of those past crisis events that had been endowed with spiritual significance. How the women present themselves as

spiritual persons in the here and now is considered in a postscript to this and the previous two chapters.

Concluding comments

By bringing a shift in perspective the information the women searched out allowed them to redefine their past experiences and to some extent their sense of self. It bought a sense of understanding where they could begin to accept and forgive, and to change how they viewed things in relation others. This bought a sense of completion – or a feeling of status quo –to which meaning was thus inscribed. As all chains of events led to this sense of completion it was considered as such - in a teleological and self-reinforcing fashion – that it was ‘meant to be’. The three main components that enabled this process to take place, regardless of the specificities of particular beliefs and symbols were the notions of a higher power, guidance and healing – which operated together and in process. This was underpinned by beliefs in self-development change and learning to which they were predestined and aided by transcendental forces. Weber (1948) articulates this relationship between cultural contents and individual interest in his notion of ‘switchmen’ where the pursuit of individual interest and the creation of ‘world images’ – switch – and become determining factors in guiding individual interests. In a slightly different way the women’s search and spiritual practices reveal how the marginal realities or altered consciousnesses that they sought to understand often turned into a resource - a source of knowledge in itself - in which accessing became a valid practice. In short, a

consciousness of 'other' became a consciousness of self and featured many of the salutary characteristics described in social work and psychological literature.

As already established the personal changes and transformations were premised on a process of emotional mitigation which was required to make sense in order to understand. It was through a triangular relationship of attaching meaning, ascribing purpose and supporting beliefs, the women stories highlight a process of transformation in which they developed, re-developed, or were developing, a sense of spirituality. Berger and Luckmann (1979) argue that symbolism and symbolic language is an essential ordering constituent in the apprehension of reality. The broad purposes of symbolism they describe – locating the self in the most solitary of experiences, ordering the personal story, integrating marginalities back to the everyday to reestablish a 'taken for granted' and secure reality, and to accommodate discrepant views - were processes of ordering undertaken by the women in this study. The personal inscriptions of meaning and purpose the women have drawn through here indicates also how the symbolic universe can at the same time legitimise identity from the most 'real' to the 'fugitive' so the sane apprehension of the self as definite and recognisable creates some reassurance that she is who she considers herself to be (Berger and Luckmann 1979).

Reflection and reflexivity was vital to this process of believing, attaching meaning and forming purpose. It was upon reflection that their personal stories were intelligible and projected into the future some ultimate coordinates for unfolding their personal story (Berger and Luckmann 1979). As McLeod & Malone suggest, "revisiting the past offers

the power to reposition the individual with the present” (2000 p, 13). These ultimate coordinates were evidenced in the codes that encapsulated the women’s beliefs about their personal life purpose, universal purposes and their ‘reasons for being’. This allowed them to place the personal within the universal in a way that made sense of their own experiences while both generating and validating their chosen life story scripts. This process reflects how symbolic interactionists see the self as first and foremost a reflexive process of social interaction where one becomes “an object to one’s self, to be both subject and object” which arises from social experience (Callero 2003, p. 119). According to Mead (1934, p. 134) “it is by means of reflexiveness – the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself – that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it” (in Callero 2003, p. 119). Thus these women’s stories reflect a process whereby they located their selves in a personal and social context with belief, emotions and contemporary culture interacting in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Durkheim (1995) was interested in the ordering properties of religious beliefs in light of an increasing division of labour characteristic of modern society. While he viewed religion in an evolutionary sense and ultimately believed it would become defunct, he saw the ongoing relevancy for the ordering of beliefs in terms of the sacred in terms of its capacity to reaffirm collective community values. Contrary to the theories that suggest religious ideas are born through fear generated by contact with the natural world, he contended in his totemic studies that funeral rites aside, gods were imagined as friends, were supportive, protective and near, and bestowed upon the people useful abilities

(Durkheim 1995, p. 225). The women's stories reveal imaginings of God in this friendly and accessible and very personal manner, and in some cases, alongside 'guides' and other spirit forms, as the resource for finding purpose thus indicating a level of corporeality rather a view of untouchable sacredness.

Further to this Durkheim argued that belief in the soul serves to explain the continuity of life after death – and is a belief not necessarily specific to religion. In contrast with his focus on life after death the women's stories highlight a more cyclic belief embodying the soul with both a sense of preexistence and predestination. They also invested reincarnation with the possibility of 'more', that there has to be more to life than what we can fathom. In such ways their religious beliefs, as Durkheim contended, were indeed a way of knowing and thinking about life, but in a way in which there was no clear distinctions between sacred and secular.

POSTSCRIPT

CONCLUDING THE WOMEN'S STORIES:

SYMBOLISING SPIRITUALITY AND THE SPIRITUAL SELF

Introduction

The previous chapters have suggested that each woman's spiritual identity developed through re-storying personal experiences in relationship to their social, religious and spiritual context. They also showed that the women's sense of identity was related to the beliefs and values that they enacted in everyday life. While none of the women described themselves in the first instance as 'spiritual', they lived out various beliefs and codes in their daily lives and relationships, which led to understanding themselves as 'spiritual'.

The content of each woman's story was a collection of understandings and beliefs objectively apprehended and subjectively validated through personal experience. These were played out in interaction with the self, through relationships and on the stage of everyday life. Central to this interaction was the notion of healing and reconciliation. The manner in which these were experienced directly relates to how the women perceive their spiritual self and how they represent their spiritual self. In this concluding discussion, I explore how the women legitimise their belief systems and reinterpret painful experiences within a new spiritual frame, thus finding a sense of completion. Essentially this included a return to childhood and childhood experiences, sometimes not directly

related to the most traumatic experiences, but cited as contributing reasons for aspects of the women's identity. All experiences were overwritten with new spiritual meaning creating a rupture between how things were viewed then and how things are viewed now. In other words, the personal narrative was overwritten with spiritual significance using spiritual language. In concluding this part of the thesis, I indicate some of the ways the women chose to symbolise their spiritual self. I start by considering notions of healing and reconciliation, central to all the stories. I then focus briefly on certain problems of social acceptance experienced by the women before returning to the symbolic representation of the spiritual self.

Completing the story - healing and reconciliation

*Let us shut the door on the past, not to forget it, but to allow it not to
imprison us*

-Archbishop Tutu

In describing times of difficulty and how they feel or think about them now, most of the women suggested a sense of resolution or completion. Their core beliefs were a central component in bringing an understanding and acceptance of the experiences and a sense of emotional calm, which provided a way to move beyond the experience. This process was generally described through the notion of 'healing', which included an understanding of others and a move towards reconciling fractured relationships. The women gained new understandings from their experiences and valued them as something that contributed to personal and spiritual growth.

For Donna, part of the process towards coming to terms with her brother's death lay in reestablishing her beliefs around death and the spirit world. She explored this through her writing and by talking with the friends with whom she feels a spiritual connection. She said that accepting Tom's death, even though "it was a hard thing to come to terms with and accept", lay in the understanding that "maybe his time had come [...], and that he may be happy and around", even though not physically there. She also reflected on his death as an important part of her life and self development and looked at it in terms of what this experience had taught her. While an extremely painful time, she recognises that the experience of losing her brother has made her value things - and particularly people - more than she would have otherwise. She has learned not to take her loved ones for granted because "you don't know how much you love someone until they are gone".

Katie also talked about being able to really understand, through experience, the value of life and see this as one of the big challenges for her and many others. By this she meant really knowing how to live life and enjoy each day to the fullest. This means "waking up every morning and saying 'wow look at the people around me I love them I need to tell them that'". She reflected that "older people get it because they are closer to dying - but it's hard for young people to get it and I certainly wouldn't have got it unless I had to contemplate dying. And it's like people say 'yeah live life to the fullest and stuff' but it's genuinely knowing what that means and doing it".

In parallel, other women described a sense of accepting life situations and coming to terms with them. Janine said that “I’ve always wanted to learn to say no – I want to keep in balance myself and then that’s the only way I can help is to not take their stuff on – and so that has been the biggest lesson for me”. Part of her work in using healing modalities relates to discarding the sense of overbearing responsibility she formed in childhood. She remembered that “growing with my sisters and the way it was - was where I learned coming into healing - because I was still carrying that mode of protecting everyone and so I had to learn”. She also commented that the people she meets who are on a spiritual journey and “in this path” have often had a “hard time”. But the key is that “you need to have that to learn, to open up and soften and then receive, so you certainly need those lessons”. As part of this, Janine spoke of reconciliation between her and her father:

Now I see in my Dad, who I just adore, [...] the most beautiful heart and that’s all he was ever doing – he just didn’t know how to be emotionally available and to be soft and all of that. So he comes to yoga – I only do one class a week where I teach yoga – and he comes there and he is just beautiful. He has got a new partner who is just lovely too – she was so in a box but she has actually softened up a lot and my Dad has mellowed so much thanks to Mum leaving...It’s just awesome how life works – really awesome! And my Mum has changed a heap too.

Ilene found that moving back to the family home stimulated a sense of healing for her entire family and that she now has a greater understanding of her Dad’s emotional pain at the time of her Mum’s death. He, she realises, “was only coping with things the best that he knew how. [...]We never talked openly much about Mum’s death because I don’t

think Dad could emotionally handle it – so it was never really an approachable sort of a subject for a long time [...] I couldn't imagine how extremely difficult it would have been for him”.

Elise, while still estranged from her father, recognises the sacrifices he made for her, particularly in not forming any new relationships after the divorce from her mother and throughout her childhood and adolescence. This awareness has grown as she entered adult life: “I didn't sort of really think about that until – you don't really think about that when you're a kid you just take it for granted”. Undertaking her massage course and learning dream analogy, led Elise to sort certain things out and one of her biggest realisations was about not taking emotional responsibility for her Dad. In talking about this, she remembered a time when:

I was really young when my grandparents (my Nanna actually, the one I was telling you about) picked me up from my Dad's place and took me out to Kellerberrin, as that's where my Mum was living at the time. And she said - I was sitting in the back seat – and she said she looked in the rearview mirror and saw me just bawling and she said what's wrong? Apparently I said I can't leave my Dad coz I don't know who will look after him. And so I think that it even started from there because there was only the two of us I have grown up thinking that I am responsible for his happiness as well [...]. So it has been a big thing.

Gina, in recounting her adolescent experiences and her Dad's violent behaviour, said that she has come to know that “he was acting out of pain. And I suppose [he] wanted to control the situation but he couldn't”. However, she experienced difficulty with what she

described as a lot of ambiguity in reconciling her brothers death, and then later her father's death, saying that "now, I have some acceptance of it – I mostly accept it but then there are times when I don't. Like I still miss him and it has been twelve years coming up in May which is interesting because my Dad died as well a couple of years later and I don't have the same feelings and I don't really know [why] – I am sure there are lots of reasons for that.

An ongoing journey

Most of the women, at some point, described feeling disrupted in their healing process even after they had felt a sense of completion with whatever particular difficulty they may have been dealing with initially. For example, Katie recalled how difficult it was for her once she was back at work to continue to prioritise the healing process, even after all the prioritising she had done in recovering from cancer. "My husband lost his job before for six months so I had to work three days a week instead of two and I also had to commit to more work, which I am currently doing [...]. So unfortunately I am in the place that I always said I didn't want to be where I am working more than what I would like". Janine remembered that because of her past she reacts very strongly to parents hitting their children: "I must say it still disturbs me if I see any parents hitting their child – that totally rips my heart out I must say. [My husband once] had to physically stop me from sorting out a father – I just wanted to go and intervene". She also said that achieving balance in relationships and emotional calm and peace, "can always change" just because by nature "she is very human".

Donna said that she feels down about the loss of her brother whenever she hears the song from the television show *Ally McBeal*, as that was the television show they were watching when her Dad came over to tell the rest of the family that Tom had been in an accident. The song still reminds her of this time. Gina's said that for many years after her brother's death she wanted to reach out to sixteen year old boys who looked like similar to her brother. She said "I remember for a long time, for years and years after he died, sixteen year old boys, I just wanted to bring them home and feed them, give them a cup of tea – I just had this fondness - I don't know if that's the right word, but I just wanted to nurture them and make sure they were ok. I mean that's the age David was and particularly if they had like similar kind of hair and build as him, it brought out some really strong feelings for me". Gina observed that her Mum is "just sad – just [has] a deep, deep sadness about her, so that brings up a lot of stuff for me. So when I am confronted with that – that's the time I start thinking".

In such ways, the women saw their spiritual lives in terms of disruption and challenge, by no means feeling that they were at the end point of their journey. Practical considerations came into this too. Katie pointed out that talk of spiritual life can "all be very idealistic" and that "some people have to work, and they have to work full time because they have got a family and they need to support that family; or some people have other demands, they might have a sick parent and have got to care for them. So it's all very fine to talk about that sort of thing if you are in a situation where you have those choices [...] – I think it's more difficult for people to take on this sort of thing if they are in a different

place”. To illustrate the contradictions that can exist between living a spiritual life and some of material and physical realities of everyday life, Katie observed:

Say, for example, you are a single mother – how much flexibility do you have when you have a child dependent on you and you have got to work. Spiritually you might just want to be a mother and you know that’s where you get your spiritual fulfillment, but you need to support that child. So, imagine living a life where you take that child to daycare everyday just because of your circumstances and if that is in complete conflict with who you want to be and who you spiritually are?

Gina and Ilene both said they wished to undertake more of the practices that brought a sense of peace and harmony into their lives. However, they found that difficult because time is limited and they are both already busy. Ilene talked about yoga and mediation – “time permitting like most people”, while Katie said she wished she had “more time” to contemplate about life and feel at peace. For her: “juggling work and my son – you don’t [...] get a lot of time on your own and so at the moment I am negotiating getting rid of work to free [some] up. I used to get [a sense of peace] from the beach – [...] nowadays it’s hard to say because I really don’t get the time alone that I want. So I probably get it now from my counselling sessions because I can really go into a peaceful place in an environment that I trust. But that is nowhere near enough to sustain me”.

Problems of acceptance

Social acceptance was an issue for many of the women with some of them expressing diffidence about their views, particularly some of their more radical spiritual experiences.

This was indicated by uncomfortable laughter, and/or by acknowledging they didn't speak to many people on such things for fear of ridicule. Brianne, for example, when talking about some elements of her spirituality, was quick to reassure me that she was "a very ordinary person" who "likes the beach – [and is] not about all this other kooky stuff that goes on in my life". She made light of what she is saying by laughing and interjecting comments into her story like "please don't sign me into Graylands¹¹" and "don't hand me in!" She suggested this lack of acceptance by others occurs because "we have a very unimaginative kind of unilateral view of life – you know – sort of the arrogance of the Western world that if you can't see, hear, smell or touch it – really, it doesn't exist and I just find that incredibly arrogant". This leads to there being not a "lot of real assistance for people" and that her form of spirituality is "so not allowed".

Similarly, Janine has found talking about her alternative healing techniques difficult to the point that she has said to herself "'what am I doing,' and I hold myself back. Especially coming from where I come from - it's like 'you act properly' - and so this is really cool you know being a complete, as my friends would say, 'hippy'". She believes not conforming to social expectation a big part of the spiritual journey for many people "because they have this pressure that you have to conform to some sort of idea – but you don't. The whole thing is a journey and if you give yourself that time and patience and just go with it – it's just awesome".

Hannah, however, found the experience isolating. An example of this can be found in her not being able to share her experience of seeing a spirit. "I have actually seen a spirit here

¹¹ Graylands is a hospital in Perth Western Australia for the treatment of mental illness

in the house and it's a new house and I didn't think that kind of thing would happen. [...]

And [my husband] listened and understood and went 'wow'. But there are so very few people I would talk to because, you know, as a teacher of their children I don't want them to think - 'she's a bit different what is she actually teaching our kids'". More generally Hannah finds that there are only a few people that she can talk to about her spiritual concerns. While her husband is generally supportive of her, he finds her reliance on signs and intuition irrational. In addition, Hannah described feeling "very closed at the moment because I used to talk a lot to [my friend] Kathy about it because she was really on a real journey for herself [but she has recently moved]. Being a teacher in a small country town I also feel very limited to who I would be prepared to say things to". This could lead to self doubt: "you know there are times when I think it's just all a whole lot of rubbish and then something will happen and I will go ok – alright I'm listening!" For instance:

I am truly open to the point where like I was going ok is this just a whole pile of stuff and guff that I am reading like what am I doing – and I opened to the part where Jesus is walking on water and there a disciple in the boat and Jesus invites him to walk beside, walk in the water with him and starts to walk across and the water starts to get a bit rough and the disciple starts to go down and calls out, 'Jesus please help me I am going down,' – and Jesus just shakes his head kind of thing and goes 'ye of little faith' and walks to him and puts his hand out and then walks him back to the boat and it was like 'ok – I am just going to believe' and whatever happens in my life will be.

Describing my spiritual self

At the close of each interview, I asked the women if they could symbolise their spiritual self or talk about what in their lives they considered spiritual. The words and notions they used were varied including flowers, breath, water and wholeness, but all connected these symbols with a sense of personal growth and some form of connection with the transcendent.

Janine and Katie symbolised their sense of spirituality through self and behaviour. Hannah talked of her spiritual life in terms of growth and unfolding. She said that it had been quite short as it began with the death of her father and has therefore, “only really been a 12 month growth”. At the same time, she had the sense that her spirituality had always been there but needed to be unlocked. She reflected: “there’s so much there already for me – [so] that once I opened the key, and once I learned my major lesson which was basically acceptance of my father and of who I was - it’s just kind of flown, it’s just been there and things have just been happening all around me”. In summarising this, she symbolised her spiritual self as a rose:

And I would say that because the bud when it’s young is still beautiful but it’s just not open - it just hasn’t got where it has to go - and it’s not until it’s in full bloom that you actually get the full picture of what’s there. And at the moment I am still growing.

Gina symbolised her spiritual self as breath: “You know when I have that in the forest like when I breathe very deeply [...] that sense of peace and being at one and feeling as

though I am in my place, and rather than think of a name – it just is – just being ok with everything”. The key for her is “taking meaning from all the stuff that has gone on [...], knowing that I can’t take it for granted that I will be happy in my life. That I need to work at that and I need to enjoy what is happening in my life, and I will go out of my way to have those experiences and I appreciate them”. Brianne symbolised her spiritual self as “a priestess”. This represented for the fact that a priestess “has been through the trials, she has been trained, she has knowledge and she has been initiated – so she is there to share the knowledge really”. Ilene said that the symbol that represented her spiritual life would have “something to do with water – it would have to a waterfall or something like that because it brings me lots of peace – and because I am a Pisces sign and I have got this affiliation with water. [...] I get a calmness around water”. Alicia symbolised her sense of spirituality as a tree explaining, “I’ll notice trees – I’ll be driving along and go – look at that tree it is so beautiful – check that out. You know you can feel it and hear it”.

Caroline gave a more academic account of her spirituality, reflecting her work as well as her background. She said that in some of her work she had been exploring Celtic spirituality and within that reworking the ‘trinity’. For her this meant “having your maiden and your mother and the crone, [which] is all one, and for me I would be seeking an expression of that as a trinity – of being able to be wise but also being able to be joyfully young and also be maternal and nurturing not only to other people but to myself”. As part of this she acknowledged the pain of her experiences and how this has made her feel “extraordinarily excited about life”. [...] and on the surface you could think that life was absolutely appalling – but there has been real tragedy – and yet I am really

optimistic. [...]. I am not unrealistic about things [...], I'm really aware about what I said about that bottom level – what's there and some of it is horrible – but I think it symbolises, is a symbol for some of the main things about hope”. Later she also described having an affinity with the colour green which also related to her interest in Celtic spirituality.

Difficulties of expression

Despite their readiness to talk about spiritual matters and symbols, a number of the women felt reticent about the term spirituality. When directly asked about it, Elise said she found the term difficult to define but suggested that, “I guess the points when I am – when you have those really clear moments, they would be spiritual. I guess because you just feel so close to that higher being or whatever that is you just feel more connected and that you are here for a reason I guess – that you are part of a big picture. So I guess those really clear moments give you that”. She also mentioned “the kind of the spiritual things in term of like there's connections that I have had with my Mum that I think we must be connected in some way...and I think I would classify that as spiritual.” Difficulties were also experienced in talking about the transcendent, particularly the notion of ‘God’. In Felicity's case this related to the gendered basis of both traditional and her own apprehensions. She said that her sense of ‘God’ “felt very ...it felt like a father. That's hard to describe because it wasn't – it was fatherly in a way that it was so protective and so everywhere and so overwhelming; but it was motherly in a way that it was so soft and so gentle. But I have to say, I always say He, but it's not a ‘he’. I guess that comes from my Christian background”. In response to a comment of mine probing this representation

she answered “it is a learnt way of saying it, but it’s not a He, it’s not She, it is not an anything. It’s not even a person – it is a feeling. It is so hard to describe! [...] If I could push this feeling over there – that would be wonderful – then you’d go - oh yeah!”

These accounts reflect the language difficulties many of the commentators on spirituality described in Chapter One. Bishop Spong (1998) for example points to limits of ordinary language, and in particular to the terms religion and spirituality, to describe the transcendental aspects of human experience. As part of the concluding discussion in the interviews I asked the women about their thoughts on the connection between religion and spirituality. In some cases, they connected the two, in others, they clearly distinguished between them. Gina expressed a level of connection saying that, “I think that religion is still a part of my life [...] I think that I do practice it but not in traditional overt ways like attending church. [...] Thinking about how I practice now, I would say that the notions of good vs bad, respecting self and others, acknowledging good in others, enjoying nature and surrounds, are all related to my exposure to religion. I also have a strong belief in the after life”. She also said that she was “very aware that it [religion] can be used for power and control – and open to interpretation. I guess that I take what I want/need from it and interpret it in a way that serves my purposes”.

Hannah distinguished between religion and spirituality saying that:

I see religion as rituals and I see religion as having boundaries and this is what our religion says – you know whether it be Jehovah Witness or whether it be Roman Catholic or whatever religion - they have boundaries,

they have specified rules and regulations. Spirituality doesn't have rules and it doesn't have boundaries and it's all based on who you are or where you have come from in your past lives and where you are going.

In contrast to Hannah, Ilene felt that there has been some significant change within the church: "I just think in this day and age they are getting away from these old Irish priests that just read the gospel and this younger generation that is coming through is preaching to people more about, you know, lifestyle type of problems and issues – and it's more down to earth and it's more appropriate to a lot of people and you can associate it a lot better than reading a gospel and trying to understand that". She also thought that "religion isn't going to church and the praying and the, you know, the four walls and everything – I think it is what you do everyday and how you interact and relate to people and learn and grow in everyday life. And your religion is what you make yourself to be – you know it's that striving to get to that perfect person". This linked to her sense of spirituality which, at the same time, was more diffuse. Spirituality, she said "is such a hard thing to [describe] and it's so changing all the time and it is how you are feeling at the time".

Finally Donna, the youngest of all the participants, volunteered some reflections on her current life's experiences. Her comments are a good way to finish the women's stories as they illuminate the way life moves and shapes us and they way we also move and shape life:

I'm learning that life brings us challenges and as I am getting older and having to take more responsibility for myself, I guess my attitude on life has changed. I've learnt now that I have been away from education (high

school) for six months [that] it's something that I value more than I really thought, because I like to learn and quite frankly [I] am getting bored. I love to work and maybe I love the money side a bit too much, but since Tom's death and him earning such big money (in the mines), I realise that money isn't the key to happiness and in this society I see so many of my friends falling into the trap of it. Since Justin had his car accident, and a few close friends that I have been to school with, life seems a lot shorter. I've had one friend try and commit suicide however was unsuccessful but is doing okay now. It is totally odd now I am 18, I guess because when you are a kid it's always cool to be "18" because you feel as if everybody else is. Now that I'm 18, I don't feel any different from the day when I was 17.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Introduction

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to explore contemporary spirituality as experienced outside of religious institutions. In attempting to build a phenomenological study, I have focused on some core theoretical areas that have served as stepping stones towards understanding consciousness, experience, meaning, belief, self and identity. In the empirical side of the research and in talking in-depth to women, I have tried to ‘get underneath’ the definitions and debates surrounding the contemporary nature of spirituality, engaging instead with the processes the women employ with regard to spirituality and spiritual practice.

In presenting each story, I showed how the women re-storied significant and difficult events in their lives with meaning, purpose, and ultimate spiritual significance, and how in this process, and to varying degrees, they re-storied their sense of self and identity. In the chapters dealing with difficult experiences (Chapter Five), searching (Chapter Six), and attaching meaning and purpose (Chapter Seven), I suggested a number of steps were undertaken in spiritual re-storying: identifying cognitive and emotional discrepancy; accessing new knowledge; gaining self-understanding and validation; reflection and reflexivity; transformation; and using spiritual language. I suggested that the women

developed and articulated their sense of spirituality through disruptions or crises that created emotional turmoil and stimulated the need to find meaning for, and to make sense of these experiences. Thus, it was from the basis of discontent that a new search began. Feelings of dislocation arising from very personal experiences, often from within primary family relationships, also arose through interactions with formal institutions which often not only failed to help but sometimes deepened the sense of crisis.

In this conclusion, I highlight four key themes and reflect on these in relation to the women's stories – these are: daily experience, suffering, consciousness, and personal change. Each theme embodies personal, social, and gender dimensions played out in the realm of spirituality. Finally, I provide some feminist reflections and raise some questions, concerns and areas for further consideration.

Everyday experience

Spirituality has found a place in the areas of death and dying and catastrophic illness or life events, but it has not been fully examined for its application in life and living.

(Sermabeikian 1994, p. 178)

Everyday life has become the site of empowerment, the only place where one can find the energy to act in any way against the grain of social tendencies, the only place where one can struggle to gain a bit of control over one's life.

(Grossberg 1992 in Parkins 2001, p. 146)

The women's accounts revealed the gendered nature of their everyday lives through their involvement in female roles and activities in both public and private spaces and the importance they placed on their relationships. However, this was unacknowledged in the sense that it was present as background as the women reflected on their sense of spirituality (Nielsen 1996). There is a vast body of literature that suggests why these gender dimensions of everyday life arise and persist. Feminists argue that patriarchal sanctions create a sexual division of labour underpinned by a split between public and private spheres, whereby women, because of their basic biology and childrearing abilities, are by-and-large relegated to the personal and private world of family and relationships (Rowland 1998; Gilding 1997). Socialisation plays a major role where in learning what it is to be female, young girls are predisposed to take up particular social roles that align with the female sex and from a young age are taught to be emotionally responsible through the development of skills such as empathy and emotional expression (Rowland 1988). This means that females generally have a stronger basis than men from which to experience themselves as continuous with others in relationships and predisposes them to connecting with and experiencing another's needs and feelings as their own (Parkins 2001; Rowland 1988). This was reflected in the women's sense of spirituality in the importance they attached to *relationship* as central to their spiritual lives – and relationship, moreover, to material others (partners, children, parents, friends) rather than a significant relationship with an abstract god.

Weber's (1978, p. 23) notion of meaningful action helps illustrate how this sense of connection with and responsibility for others played out in the women's lives and sense

of spirituality. Central to Weber's view is that things become meaningful because we bestow meaning upon them in order to make them real (Jureidini 2000). He suggested that the spiritual beliefs to which we give subjective meaning assist us in guiding our daily behaviour. In identifying relationships as an important life priority the women thus imbued them with a sense of more ultimate meaning and purpose with their spiritual beliefs standing as a guide on how to relate to others in an authentic way. Weber (1963) also emphasised how our social position and daily needs interact with the formation of our beliefs, suggesting, for example, that the privileged were predisposed towards beliefs that serve to justify and validate their position in the social order. On the other hand, those in disprivileged classes (where he positioned women), showed more of a propensity towards relieving their suffering in connection with their daily struggles of survival. In the women's accounts there was little or no sense of the justificatory beliefs Weber attributes to the privileged. Instead there was a constant search to make sense of suffering, often experienced as a form of oppression and as a result of relative powerlessness in both intimate circles such as the family and wider institutions such as school or church.

Throughout their stories the women talked about dealing with their own particular needs arising from their daily circumstances, and family and other significant relationships, and work and career (as well as those arising from painful experiences which I discuss later in the chapter). They described having feelings (or having had feelings) of conflict and burden in dealing with multiple social roles and balancing those with a sense of self and identity. They also described having difficulty in fitting in their spiritual practice, or what

they would like to do for spiritual practice, and their many daily responsibilities. As many feminists point out the vast majority of working women who live in heterosexual partnerships suffer a ‘double shift’ of paid and unpaid work with the movement of women into the workforce unmatched by a movement of men into unpaid work. This invariably means ‘juggling’ or ‘balancing’ competing demands of home and work (Gilding 1997, p. 199). In this respect the clear implication for our understanding of contemporary spirituality is the amount of time and energy that women have available for spiritual practice. This study suggests that how people choose and participate in spiritual practice is related to their ability to engineer space and freedom in their daily lives.

Most of the women in this study chose careers or were studying towards careers in traditionally female dominated professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work, and in occupations associated with ‘helping’ others such as psychology, health promotion, and rehabilitation, with some also combining alternate healing modalities. This had implications for their spiritual beliefs for as Berger and Luckmann (1979) suggest it is through the internalisation of social roles that we gain access to certain knowledge, values, and beliefs. Following from this we can say that the working lives of most of the women predisposed them to helping and relationship discourses, which were central to their spiritual beliefs and were held with a sense of familiarity. More specifically, the women often applied the notion of ‘healing’ in relation to their fractured relationships – of self and other – and placed other significant women or themselves in the position of healer, rather than traditional ‘saviours’ or priests. Their sense of spirituality was thus shaped by connections with other women, embodied notions of

helping and healing themselves and others, and was directed towards managing relationships and the multiple roles they fulfill in daily life.

Suffering

I have experienced transcendent moments – of being in Spirit, suffused with love and light – quite regularly in the past few years, often in a peaceful contemplative state. But the transcendent moments that in retrospect transformed my life came as a complete surprise, at the worst times, as an unexpected gift. I do not mean that suffering is a precondition, of course, I do not believe that, just that when the gap between the reality of suffering and the ultimate reality (of love) is so large, it is extraordinary and life changing.

Caroline – Research participant

Links between suffering and religion and spirituality are made in a number of theoretical traditions. Marx, Durkheim and Weber, in different ways, each suggest that industrialisation and modernisation have the capacity to produce feelings of alienation, anomie or meaninglessness. While Marx (1955, p 42) pointed out the oppressive characteristic of religion in his *opium* analogy, believing it to be a form of false consciousness, he nevertheless saw religion as an *expression* of distress and a *protest* against distress, and to have a place in alleviating the fear and anxiety inherent in the nature of living. Durkheim (1995) also took the view that religion responds to experiences inherent to human life. He contended, for example, the notion of the soul, was developed to deal with the inevitability of death and to explain the continuity of life. In his turn, Weber (1978) stressed the ways in which individuals as social actors, actively

make meaning – religious and otherwise – to embrace their lives with order and a sense of purpose and control.

In the women's accounts suffering was related to their feelings of burden in managing their various roles and relationships and, more deeply, to a sense of feeling unsupported and isolated, particularly during times of crisis. Caroline, for example, found herself almost totally alone and unsupported from an early age, while others (Alicia, Katie) had to deal with major health issues in a profoundly solitary way. This lack of support was an important factor in the women's move to a personal sense of spirituality which gave them a sense of control over their circumstances. Suffering was also linked to violence and abuse. Felicity, Brianne, Gina, and Hannah, experienced direct violence in the form of physical and sexual abuse, and in Hannah's case, her father kidnapping her and her siblings. In this case, spirituality provided a means of coming to terms with what had happened and providing the strength to deal with the trauma involved.

In a broad sense, Durkheim's (1975; 1995) suggestion that religion is a support for people in times of crisis through ritual and the provision of some kind of order is relevant here. Against this, the women in this study found that the formal religious institutions failed them, and failed them precisely in terms of crisis. Their experience is reflected in feminist accounts where theorists such as Mary Daly maintain that institutional religion does not speak to or support women's experiences and indeed, remains silent or moralises against them (familial abuse, divorce, sexuality and fertility). Both Daly (1985) and de Beauvoir (1949) argue that the Church actively impedes women's freedom through its

views on technologies relating to contraception, abortion and fertility treatment. In tandem with this the women in this study who engaged with religion at the time of crisis found that it often added to their confusion or emotional woes. More generally, they talked about feeling disconnected from church doctrine and practices and not 'feeling right' in church.

Dorothy Smith (1987) would argue the domains of meaning offered by the church through its scriptures, symbolism and rituals represent and symbolise the dominant class and essentially male experience. In this way they radically failed to connect with the women's experiences. In a similar way to Smith, Dale Spender (1980) and Merlin Stone (1976) argue that religious doctrine is fashioned on male experiences meaning that women can only relate to it from the position of 'other', suggesting, further, that women have been removed from the power to name and to imagine the sacred. This can have profound implications for the 'excluded' when contemplating questions about the purpose and end of their life: Katie for example, found that returning to the Catholic Church, her religion of origin, when contemplating her own death did not provide her solace or alleviate her angst.

This can be more generally related to the services offered by psychologists, social workers and counsellors. Though her notion of the 'line of fault' Dorothy Smith portrays how women's consciousness is developed in a situation which locates them as 'other' and non-participatory, in the sense that there is little opportunity for them to practice "mastery and control" over their own circumstances (1987, p, 66), except in a loose and episodic

fashion reflecting “the ways in which their lives are organized and determined external to them and the situations they order and control” (1987, p. 67). In this respect it is interesting that the spiritual practices, including tarot, dreams, meditation, writing, and being in nature, were undertaken in a solitary way and as an attempt to exercise some kind of self-determination over their circumstances.

Many commentators suggest that the personalised nature of spirituality is tied up with the growing cult of individualism (e.g., Bouma 2000). This may be so. However, the personal and often inward looking nature of the spiritualities practised by the women in this study also arise from the isolations they suffered and, more crucially, the fact that their suffering was not relieved by social institutions – including psychology, social work and counselling as well as the Church. Thus their turn to their *own* spiritual solution reflects a search not just for mastery and control but also for ongoing support, understanding of both self and situation, and emotional relief.

Crisis and meaning

Berger and Luckmann (1979) suggest that the trauma caused by illness, divorce, grief, and death – the threat of one’s own death or the threat or actual death of another -, remove us from our everyday ‘taken for granted’ world, and cause a significant disruption to our perception of reality. They describe the experience of these sorts of events as laden with reactions such as fear, terror and anxiety, and as challenging to identity and the apprehension of the self as a normal and socially recognisable person. The essence of the search for meaning, they suggest, is the drive to find ways to return to

a sense of normalcy in order that we may be able to go on living in society and carry out our roles and responsibilities and routines post crisis. The way we achieve this is through drawing on the ‘symbolic universe’ – that is, the collective expression and cultural container of human experiences inscribed with knowledges from which we draw to understand and express personal experiences. Drawing on pre-existing symbolic representations to understand our own experiences, Berger and Luckmann argue, allows for integration - it makes these experiences ordered, intelligible, and thereby less terrifying (1979, p. 119).

Berger and Luckmann (1979) also suggest it takes severe biographical shocks to disintegrate the internalised reality of childhood, to which everything is contrasted, and much less to destroy secondary ones. In this sense, they position childhood as a safe and idealised time. But what if childhood itself is uncertain and biographical shock *is* the internalised reality? For many of the women in this study childhood and/or adolescence were characterised by considerable uncertainty and anguish, and to what Tomka refers to as “disturbed socialisation” (1985, p. 70). The particular events surrounding the traumas they suffered also made a significant impact on everyday reality through the alteration of daily routines, rituals and relationships. This involved both small and routine changes (such as who drove them to school), to large relationship changes leading to experiences of abandonment, physical and emotional dislocation, and/or fear for safety. In other words, everyday interactions and functions changed in direct relation to the fracturing event. The same applied to crisis events experienced in adulthood with significant

alterations occurring in relationship with partners, husbands and children, as well as their self-relationship.

These events caused a catapult away from a sense of everyday normalcy and into an often unsafe, marginal reality. Berger and Luckmann (1979) suggest that a return to an everyday reality from these kinds of alternated experiences is like returning from an excursion or journey and requires a deliberate or spontaneous transition of consciousness. While this occurred for the women in this study, it is also the case that meaning was drawn retrospectively long after the event, in a continuing attempt to not just 'function' but also to live well. The women also linked their experience of trauma with the notion of an overall life purpose. This notion of 'life purpose' is important here in light of Berger and Luckmann's suggestion that it is through internalised 'social roles' that we apprehend meaning as both a subjective and objective reality. Many of the women imbued their everyday lives and activities with this sense of ultimate purpose, allowing them to order the conflicting aspects of those roles and concentrate on what was most important to them.

In essence, then, the women's experiences of personal and social disjuncture to their 'world taken for granted' were underpinning motivations for seeking ways in which to alleviate the impact of those events and to order other aspects of their lives and experiences into some sort of meaningful whole. It was this process, in part, that underpinned their notion of a 'spiritual journey'. In addition, the ordering process was about developing a sense of continuity and personal biography, as the spiritual meanings

drawn from the events were not only related to the self, but were also an important aspect of describing and storying the self.

Consciousness

As we have seen Dorothy Smith (1987) maintains that for women there is a gap between personal experience and the meanings socially ascribed to such experiences because females are excluded from the production of knowledge and language construction. This, she argues, often renders women's experiences unintelligible with women becoming separated from their inner reality. It is along this gap – the line of fault – that Smith asserts women's consciousness forms effecting a bifurcation.

While Smith (1987) talks of bifurcation specifically in relation to the transition between work and homelife, some of the women's stories reflect a bifurcation more generally and within their life circumstances. In terms rather similar to Smith's analysis, they talked about a 'gap' between their inner emotional world and their outer reality and circumstances. This gap could also be related to particular circumstances such as dealing with grief when at work, coping with personal difficulties while supposedly occupied with family activities or meeting the needs of others, or experiencing profoundly alien social situations. In many instances, these kinds of disjunctures – the sense of being there but not being there – were important factors in the women's search for spiritual understanding. And, in Smith's terms these experiences are always/already gendered given that the female consciousness operates across a private/public - feminine/masculine

divide. Moreover, as de Beauvoir (1949) points out, women's consciousness becomes consumed with not only trying to understand this divide, but also with translating dominant masculine discourses leaving little room for pursuing creativity and freedom.

The kind of bifurcation described by Smith (1987) was also echoed in the women's accounts of their earlier interactions with institutional religion where they found an unbridgeable gap between their own consciousness and the symbolisms, teaching and meanings of the Church. The women whose own mothers had had poor experiences within the church, incorporated this experience into their own personal story as 'telling' points and as a basis from which to talk about their own decisions. More broadly, the women described a sense of separateness from religious tradition, and spoke of the decision to no longer participate as a *conscious decision* in response to personal experiences and observations. In *Memories of a Dutiful Daughter* Daly (1985) suggests that de Beauvoir described her decision to reject Christianity as an adult rejection following childhood experience. For the women here too there was a sense of gap arising from a religious world 'inherited' from childhood and the world of adult experiences and reflections.

When the inner views of the women clashed with the outer religious and cultural world, they withdrew and began to search new ground for compatibility and validation. In part this corresponds with the views of the commentators cited earlier in this thesis who posited that one possibility for the move towards the new spirituality was in response to a 'void' that needed filling (e.g., Mackay, Kelly, Tacey, Interviews, CS 2003). Their

suggestion was that this void was caused by a lack of religious heritage given an irreverent baby-boomer generation. On the surface this would appear true here, as the majority of the women's mothers did not attend church (or they used to and for various reasons now chose not to). However, more relevant from the women's point of view was the fact that the traditions did not match their own consciousness while the images, explanations and narratives - passed along woman to woman - did. Finally, in terms similar to those suggested by Berger and Luckmann (1979), the women actively worked to achieve a balance between subjective and objective realities as well as a sense of symmetry between them. Beliefs were tested against personal experience in terms of whether they promoted emotional calm, helped make sense of those experiences, while experiences themselves provided the basis from which to develop and test new beliefs.

Consciousness and freedom

As discussed in Chapter Three, de Beauvoir (1949) suggests that religious beliefs and symbolism contribute to the socialisation of girls and women as the second sex and reinforce a passive and non-participatory social position. Belief in the 'after-life', for example, reinforces the public/private divide and the passive and non-productive position of women as the promise for self-realisation is deferred. Such things, de Beauvoir is adamant, translate into a mutilating passivity for a woman for they stifle her full conscious being and limit her aspirations of liberty and full personhood. On this count it could be said that the transcendental beliefs described by the women in this study - of a higher power, life after death, the predestined soul, guardian spirits, reincarnation and so on, - served as the means through which personal control was relinquished. De Beauvoir

(1949) also posits however, that if women participate in religion it is because it fulfills a profound need through aligning with the sacred. For her, women have a dual and competing consciousness. Where Smith's (1987) bifurcation traverses public and private work domains, de Beauvoir's "double allegiance" traverses everyday life and the transcendental world, where a woman struggles to combine the two with sacred alliances becoming a matter of social occupation. While the women in this study did struggle with this dual allegiance in very much the way de Beauvoir suggests, they did so with more autonomy and in a more practical manner than she would allow.

In reflecting on women's lack of, and yearning for, freedom de Beauvoir refers specifically to the importance of nature:

Enslaved as she is to her husband, her children, her home, it is ecstasy to find herself alone, sovereign on the hillsides; she is no longer mother, wife, housekeeper, but a human being; she contemplates the passive world, and she remembers that she is a wholly conscious being, an irreducible free individual. Before the mystery of water and the leap of mountain peaks, the male's supremacy fades away. Walking through the heather, dipping her hand in the stream, she is living not for others, but for herself.

It is interesting then, that when the women described – as they all did - their search for a sense of escape and freedom and a return to the self 'in essence' that nature was their method *par excellence*. While all of the other practices the women mentioned provided the means to fulfil a multitude of needs – space, perspective and order, transcendence, expression, physical rejuvenation and connection - only nature afforded a full sense of

freedom and that without an overt and ritualised conscious effort. In contrast to religion, it was a domain of whole and meaningful being.

The broader cultural context

*And there were so many fewer questions
When stars were still just the holes to heaven*
Jack Johnson (2003) Album 'On And On'

Berger and Luckmann point out that industrialisation leads to an explosion of knowledges and increased knowledge differentiation leading to problems of “providing integrative meanings that will encompass the society and provide an overall context of objective sense for the individual’s fragmented social experience and knowledge” (1979, p. 102). This sense of competing knowledge and the different ways of categorising meaning available also affects spiritual and religious beliefs – both in terms of their content and in what they have to deal with – and is reflected in theoretical commentary as well as the women’s accounts. While Weber contended that increasing rationalisation and the tendency towards order created disenchantment with no room for the mystical and non-rational, he also believed that rationalisation could create the impetus for religious innovation (Swidler 1993). This has implications for the new spirituality, where a significant part of the dialogue is concerned with its capacity to reclaim the mystical. Tacey (2003) posits that the new spirituality is moving towards a cultural revolution in its reclamation of the mystical while Kohn (2003) hopes that it will promote spiritual vibrancy and personal relevancy.

Tacey (2003, p. 82) suggests that one of the key characteristics of the new spirituality is an inner search for the 'true' self through which God is to be discovered and engaged. Thus in a mystical sense it is the true self that is the mechanism for transcendence "to move beyond the personal into the transpersonal and the numinous". In their accounts of particular spiritual experiences, the women often described this sort of transition, and it was particularly evident in their practices whereby they sought to find space for just being themselves. For most of the women in this study, finding this space was important in terms of placing themselves in connection with other – a higher power, higher inner self, higher wisdom and knowledge. They described experiences of transcendence as bringing about a sense of clarity. Alongside this, all of them spoke about feeling unconditional love, or a sense of peace and calm. It was these experiences that the women trusted as higher connection and guidance. The women's stories reflected Dupres' (1987) five characteristics of mystical experience as outlined in Chapter One of this thesis. That is, it is private and difficult to communicate without symbolism and metaphor; has a sense of all encompassing order and integration; it is experienced passively – often as a gift; has a transient and fluctuating course; and, may result in a profound transpersonal communication with a more complete realness than is experienced ordinarily (in Canda 1997, p. 304).

Dupres depiction is one of a personally activated transcendental connection. Durkheim however, suggests that this form of consciousness cannot exist solely in the mind of the individual, arguing that when we experience ourselves transformed it is an experience that is shaped by the *conscience collective* (1995, p. xli). The transforming capacity of

community ritual – a force experienced as external to each individual at moments of collective *effervescence* – becomes cultural artefact and available for reactivation. Thus in Durkheim's terms we personally experience a real sense of transformation or connection but the real experience is a collective one, in both consciousness and conscience (1995, p. xlii). The women's beliefs and practices support this in that they were experienced in a very personally and solitary manner, yet held similar feelings and were invested with similar meanings and translations.

Hodge (2001, p. 35) points out that in much of the spirituality literature the emphasis is on the isolated individual with the implicit message being that community is extraneous. While the women's stories often expressed feelings of isolation and separateness from the social and community, this does not mean community was extraneous to them – rather the women's sense of spirituality was 'grounded' in community and often through their isolated experience of it. It is for many of these reasons that Miller & Miller (2000, p. 3) suggest that this particular age group is sometimes described as the 'lonely generation'. As Erricker and Erricker assert, "it is in community that one makes the spiritual quest" (2001, p. xv). More specifically, for these women, community was other women, their children, family and friends, and their work and career. The spiritual/community nexus is perhaps an area for further study and a potential site for exploring further the localised factors of resistance and change.

Personal change

One reason why an emphasis on self transformation in women-directed texts does not necessarily imply narcissistic navel-gazing is because [...] historically women's sense of self has been bound up with a sense of others

(Parkins 2001, p. 148)

The women's stories revealed a capacity for personal change, which was a key feature in all of their stories. Berger and Luckmann (1979) contend that real change or full transformation can only be realised in community, as it needs legitimation and reinforcement of others. For religious conversion to be successful, they suggest, one would require a process of re-socialisation in an affectively charged (community or group) environment where there is a relationship with a significant and socialising other reminiscent of primary socialisation. The transformation can only be complete by the use of shared language in community and constant reinforcement. Partial transformations on the other hand, are less intense. While the transformations shown in the women's stories were, on the whole, less intense and absolute than religious conversion, they embodied considerable retrospective reinterpretation of events and perspectives.

Broader questions about the relationship between spirituality and personal change are raised in the wider literature. On the positive side, much of the social work literature described in Chapter One acknowledges and attempts to draw on the transcending ability of the spiritual and its capacity to assist people make real changes in their lives (Hodge 1999; Sermabeikian 1994). Against this, critical theorists from Marx to de Beauvoir,

while recognising the transcending element of spiritual beliefs, suggest they operate to mask oppression and leave people ‘coping’ with unsatisfactory circumstances rather than challenging them. In the women’s accounts both elements prevail. On the one hand, no significant structural change was taking place, on the other, they showed an awareness of the gendered dimensions of their worlds, and indicated that important personal change occurred and was continuing to occur.

Women talking to other women was a pivotal factor in achieving such change. Conversation was critical for self-expression, being understood, and seeking to understand. This, however, was rendered the more difficult as the women struggled to find a language through which they could express their sense of self and their spiritual beliefs and experiences. There was also a sensitivity about articulating beliefs and experiences that might be considered ‘lunatic’ or ‘unreal’. The women owned that they were cautious about whom they spoke to about beliefs, and said that their conversations were usually in small and select groups of women, rather than ‘other women’ in a more general sense.

Janine, Brianne and Katie, who experienced the support of spiritual mentors, as well as having grounded connections with alternative spiritual communities were the most definitive in their use of spiritual language. The others, who did not experience the endorsement of mentors, or have regular access to a spiritual community, had less clearly demarcated and articulated spiritual scripts. This, in short, underlines the importance of a shared language – endorsed through and by a common community, albeit situated outside

the mainstream – in both articulating and maintaining a sense of spiritual change. On this, Berger and Luckmann (1979) argue that language is the crucial medium for the expression and sharing of experiences and for understanding self and others. It is through language and the process of objectivation and internalisation that the self becomes available for reflection and therefore real. In the main, the women in this study struggled to make their experiences ‘real’ in the relatively solitary manner described earlier in this concluding chapter and without much, if any, external validation.

Finally, I note that the use of terms such as ‘I am spiritual, but not religious’ had a double place in these women’s stories. For as well as representing the split between religion and spirituality found in theoretical accounts it was also a way of defining the individual self as separate from the social order and its institutions. As with Christ and Plaskow’s (1979) ‘revolutionaries’ the women sought alternative spiritual sources other than traditional theology, rejecting traditional religion on the basis of factors such as hypocrisy, boredom and irrelevance. While they mostly chose a gender-neutral imaging of God, they did not use the term ‘Goddess’ and still tended to favour ‘He’. Nevertheless, in undertaking a spiritual search outside of orthodox religion the women drew strongly on their own experience and searched for sources that would validate and name that experience. In this way, they validated feminist propositions and undertook measures that could path the way for an authentic feminist spirituality.

* * *

Postlude

There is no easy way to conclude a thesis of this nature as it has tapped into and sought to describe a moment in time in the perpetuity of life. This thesis began with my wonderings about how people deal with difficult and painful experiences and how their particular beliefs assist them during these times. In the very beginning stages of my research I observed how popular epithets or what I called “tag philosophies” such as ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’; ‘the world works in mysterious ways’, ‘it was meant to be’ and so on, were used by people who were suffering, or by those around them who were trying to alleviate their suffering in times of duress. Having started this thesis with these wonderings, I feel it is appropriate to close with some kind of comment on them.

What surprised and enamours me most about the women’s spiritual accounts in particular, is the resilience that occurs throughout. This, I believe, was not so much a result of the actual beliefs that each woman held, but rather of the *process* of exploring their sense of self, their experiences, and their knowledge and understandings through the meanings and purposes they gave to them. In realising their self-in-process, subscribing to a particular spiritual belief or practice was not enough – congruency and some form of symmetry in subjective and objective reality was essential for all past, present and future realities to be authentically transformed. The spiritual journey as described here was a gradual and conscious unfolding of the relationship between raw experience, on the one hand, and imminent beliefs on the other. When experience hits - ‘tag philosophies’ might

assist in transforming difficulty into a positive and purposeful light. However, if left unexplored they can prevent the kind of growth and insight these women searched for.

In the Australian movie *Look Both Ways*, there is a scene that shows how a sense of symmetry between belief and experience can inform the choices we make, our behaviour, and our sense of resilience. It also illustrates the ongoing and often compounding nature of our experiences which in itself can push us to action. In the movie the two lead characters meet as he is the journalist covering the story of the death of a man who was killed by a train, an event to which she was witness. She is an artist and is suffering some sort of post traumatic stress disorder and/or depression, and in the past fortnight has been grieving the death of her father. In talking about this man's death she suggests that it might have been 'meant to be'. The scene then flashes to an animated sketch of her telling some small black children living in poverty that perhaps their circumstances were 'meant to be', thus recognising the futility of her words.

Their relationship develops. He discloses to her, after a heady few days of intimacy, that he has cancer, which we take to mean the inoperable kind, and so cannot continue the relationship. The fall out from his disclosure is miserable on both sides and she runs from him. Blinded by her despair she slips on the road and is nearly hit by a car. With bloodied knees she hobbles around a corner and sits defeated - ragdoll-like - on the ledge of a wall. It begins to pour with rain. She reflects on the pain and the loss and sobs. He too runs – having lost his father, only a year ago, he dreaded having to tell his mother that he too would most likely die. She still sits in the rain racked with grief. In this moment, a car

goes past and throws up a sheet of water – all over her. She begins to laugh at the absurdity of the continuing and compounding nature of her difficulties. As she laughs, the animated sketch of the black children returns and she hears them laughing as they return the sentiment ‘it is meant to be’. She goes to find him – and him her. The movie ends with a scene hard to interpret – it could be a dream it could be reality – with a fast flash bulb of their short life together - of travel, cancer treatment, laughter and tears.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – Commentator Interview Schedule

Introduction

Thank you for offering your time to discuss my research.

Current title: ‘Awake the Sleeping Giant’ – Contemporary Spirituality in Australia: Implications for Social Change.

Purpose - The interview is intended as more of a discussion than an interview:

- It will be used to add to the background of my research and understanding of contemporary spiritualities within the Australian context.
- It will help to provide the context and shape the direction of the next empirical stage of the research, which will look at the spirituality of young adult Australians.

Discussion Content - Our discussions will explore:

- The concept of spirituality in Australia in relation to current social trends and social change movements. Here we will focus on some of the key debates and public dialogue surrounding spirituality, its meaning, purpose, changes in practice and any potential ramifications of those changes taking place, in contemporary Australian society.
- The individual- societal relationship to seek a more in depth understanding of spirituality from the individual perspective. Here we will focus on the individual’s search for meaning in response to modern day society. We will explore your observations and insights into the beliefs, values and spiritual practices of Australian people (the 18-38 year age group in particular). What sorts of information, meaning, purpose etc are people looking for, where are they looking for it, and why?

Key Discussion Areas

Please note: This list of key discussion areas and prompts provides a guide to my current research direction. It is meant to facilitate our discussions only, and is not an exhaustive list of the topics to be covered during our time together. You may wish to have a read through prior to our meeting and select some prompts from each discussion area relevant to your own particular expertise and on which you may like to focus.

Identifying Contemporary Spirituality

- Description and characteristics of contemporary spirituality
- Any significant changes in worldview, belief, values and philosophies
- Any changes from previous generations (post war – current)
- Ramifications to individual/ society
- The relationship between religion and spirituality (definitions, understandings)
- Experiential versus transcendental spirituality (Prescriptions for living vs belief in God)
- The paradox of consumerism and marketed forms of spirituality
- The relationship between culture and spirituality (high, popular, low)

Contemporary Spirituality and Australian Culture

- Social change movements and spiritual characteristics unique to Australian culture
- Goodbye organised religion: Why have they gone? Where have they gone?
- Current social forms of Australian spiritual expression
- What is changing in our systems of belief?
- Eclecticism – What's the attraction to exploring new and different forms of religion and spirituality? What are people looking for?
- Is there increased spiritual interest or just new forms of spiritual expression?
- Age/ Gender variances in spiritual exploration
- “I am spiritual, but not religious”: What do Australian's understand as being spiritual?

The Search for Meaning - Personal and Spiritual development

- Meaninglessness of modern society: The individual's experience and response to Australian culture
- How do we find meaning? Materially? Transcendentally? (forming, establishing, and expressing worldviews, beliefs, values, philosophies)
- Where does spirituality fit in relation to finding meaning and purpose in life?
- Relationship between: individual search for meaning spiritual development
- Relationship between: personal development and spiritual growth?
- Triggers for personal and spiritual development

Individual and Social Spiritual Relationship

- Are human beings essentially spiritual?
- Is reflexivity an inherently human characteristic?
- Is shared meaning and having a shared spiritual language important? What are some contemporary forms of shared spiritual language? Where is it found?

- What is the role of popular culture as a site for spiritual development and expression

Youth Spirituality – Spiritual Lives of Young Australian Adults (18-38)

- Social, psychological, and cultural Influences of this age group (lifestage development, generational influences, socio-economic influences)
- Sites of spiritual exploration
- Level of spiritual exploration - triggers for spiritual exploration
- Terminology – what is spiritual - without being called spiritual
- Inherent worldview, beliefs, philosophies
- How are these used to find a sense of place, meaning and belonging (materially and transcendentally)

Assisting the Research Direction

- How would you go about exploring the spiritual lives of young adults and how they find meaning and sense of place?
- How would you deal with definitional difficulties and the non-identification of this age group with the term ‘spirituality’?
- How can we identify forms of spirituality that may not be considered spiritual in a traditional (i.e., religious) sense?

Closing

Is there anything that we haven’t covered that you would like to raise or comment further on? (Suggestions for further readings and resources etc, are very welcome)

I will be contact with you again in the next few weeks to follow up on any additional thoughts or comments that you may wish to add, or clarify, as a result of our discussions.

Thank you for your time and participation.

APPENDIX B – Commentators Information

HUMAN ETHICS
INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM
PERMIT: 2003/125

*Project Title: 'Awake the Sleeping Giant' - Contemporary Spirituality in Australia:
Implications for Social Change*

My name is Kim Hudson and I am a PhD student at Murdoch University. I am investigating the nature of spirituality in contemporary Australian society with a view to highlighting current social trends and identifying social change movements. The purpose of the study is to explore how we, as people, make sense of our own reality and create meaning in our lives through our philosophies, beliefs, values and practices. What are people looking for?

You can help in this study by consenting to participate in an interview. The time to complete the interview will be approximately 1 hour, and held in a place of your convenience. This interview will involve a general discussion about your observations and insights into the concept of spirituality in the Australian context. It will contain open-ended questions primarily drawing on your observations and insights into spirituality as a social and individual phenomenon, and any insights on the beliefs, values and practices of Australian people.

As a participant you may withdraw your consent from the interview at any time. All information disclosed during the interview may be considered confidential if you so choose. No names or other information that might identify you would then be in the thesis or in any publication arising from the research. However, I ask that you do consider making available your identity and allow some statements ascribed to you to be transcribed into the PhD thesis and resulting publications. If you are quoted within text, you will be properly referenced in accordance with academic referencing and copyright criteria. If quoted, you will also be provided with a copy of the interview transcript and the opportunity to ensure your comments have been taken in context, prior to final thesis submission or any publication.

After your interview, I will make contact with you a second time (within a two-week period), to see if you have any other thoughts or further contributions as a result of our initial discussions. Once the research is compiled I will share with you an overview of the results.

If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details attached? If you have any questions about this project, or concerns on how this study has been conducted, please feel free to contact either myself, Kim Hudson, on 9360 6702 or my supervisor, Prof. Patricia (Trish) Harris on 9360 2252, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6677. Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely

Kim Hudson
PhD Student
Sociology Programme
School of Social Inquiry

Appendix C – Commentator Consent Form

I _____ have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time.

I choose for my interview to be (please read the conditions below and circle your choice):

Confidential **Open Interview**

Confidential Interview: I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law.

I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information, which might identify me, is not used.

I agree for this interview to be taped and transcribed.

Open Interview: I understand that if I am quoted in-text of the PhD dissertation, or any other publication arising from the results of this research, that I will be referenced in accordance to academic requirements and copyright criteria. I understand that I will be provided with a copy of the transcription of my interview and the opportunity to ensure that I am accurately quoted in-text in the PhD dissertation or any subsequent publication.

I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published, my name used and my comments quoted subject to these conditions.

I agree for this interview to be taped and transcribed.

Participant/Authorised Representative:

Date:

Investigator:

Date:

Investigator's Name: Kim Hudson

APPENDIX D – Women Participants Written Information and Consent Form

HUMAN ETHICS
INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM
PERMIT: 2003/294

Project Title: ‘Contemporary Spiritual Dimensions’: Meaning in the everyday lives of Young Australian Women.

My name is Kim Hudson and I am a PhD student at Murdoch University. I am investigating the concept of ‘spirituality’ in contemporary Australian society. This project considers the complexities of everyday life in a predominately Western society and aims to highlight some of the prevailing philosophies, beliefs and values that may influence our understanding and sense of the material and non-material world. More specifically, it seeks to explore and articulate the everyday lives of young Australian women and the many ways in which women make sense of life and find meaning in an increasingly complex world.

You can help in this study by consenting to participate in an interview and possibly a discussion group. The time to complete the interview will be approximately one hour, and held in a place of your choice. There may also be some follow-up discussions required to clarify your story. The interview will involve a series of open-ended questions about your life experiences, significant events, your beliefs and values and how these may be important to you in connection with your daily life. Prior to your interview you will be given the interview schedule and asked to reflect on the areas of discussion. As a suggestion you may wish to write some notes or a journal entry, draw a picture, or undertake something creative to help you to uncover your story and thought processes. This will serve as a catalyst for our discussions and provide me with a partial record of your thoughts (if you choose to submit them). Following the interview you will also be asked to join the other research participants to talk about some of the more social aspects of your lives in a friendly group setting. With your permission the interview and discussion group will be tape-recorded.

As a participant you may withdraw your consent from the interview at any time. All information disclosed during the interview is confidential and no names or other information that might identify you will be used either in the research thesis or in any publication arising from the research. I will make contact with you a second time, within two weeks of the interview, to see if you have any other thoughts or further contributions as a result of our initial discussions. When the research is compiled I will share with you an overview of the results.

If you are willing to participate in this study, could you please complete the details below? If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact either myself, Kim Hudson, on 9360 6702 or my supervisor, Prof. Patricia (Trish) Harris, on 9360 2252.

My supervisor and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have on how this study has been conducted, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

Appendix D (cont) - **Participant Consent Form**

'Contemporary Spiritual Dimensions': Spirituality and meaning in the everyday lives of Young Australian Women.

I _____ have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time.

- I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law.

- I agree for this interview to be taped.

- I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or other information which might identify me is not used.

Signed Participant/Authorised Representative:

Date:

Signed Investigator:

Date:

Investigator's Name: KIM HUDSON

APPENDIX E – Participant Interview Schedule

Contemporary Spiritual Dimensions: Meaning in the everyday lives of young Australian women.

Please take some time to reflect on the following questions and discussion topics before our allocated interview time. As a suggestion you may wish to write some notes or a journal entry, draw a picture, or undertake something creative to help you to uncover your story and thought processes. If you do this, you do not have to submit them (although any submissions would be gratefully received), but it may be helpful for you to bring to our discussions as a catalyst for your thoughts.

The questions centre on the assumption that people tend to draw from both the material and non-material realms to make sense of their world. Questions surround three base levels of spirituality:

- The Spiritual Self – perceptions of self, identity and place
- Spirituality in the ‘everyday’ – exploring meaning through life experience and significant events
- Transcendental Spirituality - the exploration and sense of the non-material world

1. How would you describe yourself? (personality, likes, dislikes etc)

2. What is everyday life like for you? (responsibilities, activities, work, friends, family etc)

3. Describe what life was like for you growing up? What do you remember socially or culturally as significant about this era? What were the major influences for you (school, church, family, friends). How do you think these influenced your personal development?

4. Are there any significant experiences and/or events that have occurred throughout your life that have shaped you as person? How have these impacted on your values, beliefs or worldview about life?

5. What supports do you draw upon in the everyday to deal with life’s challenges (philosophies, beliefs, strengths, rituals etc)? Can you give any examples?

6. Where do you feel most at peace with yourself and the world? Where do you go to contemplate and think about life? Do you have any daily/ weekly/ monthly rituals that serve to connect you with a sense of self and place?

7. Do you have a sense and/or connection with a transcendental world (another world/ existence/ sacred being) in your life? How do you describe this?

8. Would you describe any element of your life and life experiences as spiritual in nature? If you were to choose an object or something to symbolise your spiritual self, what would you choose?

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