Understanding the Spiritual Experiences of Young Women:
A Qualitative Inquiry of Inner Knowing

by

Karen Margaret Csoli

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF INNER KNOWING
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Karen M. Csoli
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
University of Toronto

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to address the problem of the silencing of adolescent girls and young women by exploring their spiritual experiences and knowledge of their inner selves. Five participants between the ages of 18 and 25 were interviewed 3 times over several weeks about their spiritual experiences, artefacts of spiritual significance, and beliefs about their inner selves. The findings of this study reveal that young women are deeply interested in nurturing their spirituality, which they are not finding in religion, and they are looking elsewhere for a spirituality that embraces a feminine ethic of care and responsibility.
Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my thesis advisor, Dr. Jack Miller. While showing a vast respect for my own ideas and interpretations, Dr. Miller expertly kept me focused on the task at hand, which was to complete a logical, relevant, and original piece of research. His patience, compassion, and deep knowledge of both the field and the role of a thesis supervisor made the process of completing this dissertation one that was challenging, fulfilling, and enjoyable.

I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Brent Kilbourn and Dr. Elizabeth Campbell. Their expertise in qualitative inquiry and qualitative research was invaluable in ensuring that this dissertation met the highest standards. Dr. Kilbourn’s questions about spirituality and spiritual experiences allowed me to strengthen and clarify my knowledge and position, which is reflected in this work.

I must also acknowledge my undergraduate thesis supervisor, Dr. Harry T. Hunt. His undergraduate courses in psychology provided me with the knowledge of spiritual experiences and the theorists that were used as part of the foundation for this research. I was also grateful to be able to talk with him while completing this research and to clarify my understanding of the psychological perspectives.

Most importantly, I would like to acknowledge my partner, Micheal Teal. His love and support carried me through the years needed to complete this research. Micheal was very patient while I spent evenings and weekends reading, writing, and transcribing. Micheal never wavered in his belief in my abilities and my success in this endeavour, which has been a life-long dream.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Elizabeth Csoli, who taught me how to be a spiritual person.
Chapter 1: Introduction: Context, Problem, Concepts

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, scholars and researchers have expressed concern regarding the silencing of adolescent girls and young women, through which both their inner voices, the voice with which they speak to themselves, and outer voices, the voice with which they speak to others, have not been heard (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Pipher, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Ward & Benjamin, 2004). According to Pipher (1994), girls have more freedom to be themselves as children, but when they reach adolescence, these same girls do not see reflections of themselves in society, particularly in positions of power. Not knowing how to reconcile their inner selves and ways of understanding the world within a patriarchal society, adolescence becomes a time of dissociation when girls cover up or forget what they have experienced and known (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Brown and Gilligan (1992) argued that adolescent girls oscillate between speaking and not speaking, knowing and not knowing, feeling and not feeling because they cannot say or do not know what they have experienced, known, and felt. Many girls ultimately turn inward at puberty and do not know how to recognize their inner voices (Gilligan, 1982).

Various fields of literature have attempted to address this crisis for adolescent girls and young women. In education, for example, Sadker and Sadker (1994) examined the experiences of girls in secondary school settings and identified several ways in which girls are praised for their appearance and reinforced for passivity, while at the same time their questions and concerns are dismissed. Sociologists and feminists have addressed the challenges faced by non-white adolescent girls, who experience silencing both due to
their sex and their ethnicity (Gouin, & Wais, 2006; Ward, & Benjamin, 2004). In the interdisciplinary field of women’s studies, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule’s (1997) *Women’s Ways of Knowing* has helped women understand their own patterns of interacting with the world while Pipher’s (1994) *Reviving Ophelia* has helped to bring the issue to the forefront of popular culture. Psychologist Carol Gilligan’s (1982, 1988; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995) multiple works on girls in secondary schools have reshaped Lawrence Kohlberg’s model of moral development by focusing attention on women and emphasizing women’s need for care and a sense of relationship.

While the work of these authors has expanded our understanding of the educational, societal, and psychological influences that silence adolescent girls and young women, few have focused on young women’s sense of relationship with their self and spirit. This internal relationship is essential to healthy development, so much so that silence may even be positive “if this turning inward is construed against a background of continuing connection, [where] it [can signal] a new responsiveness to the self” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 39). While Gilligan primarily studied connection to others and its effects on the self, extending connection to encompass the self, spirit, nature, the sacred, and the divine, which are all components of the spiritual, widens the focus to include the whole person. Pipher (1994) understood the importance of the spiritual, for she stated that while adolescence is a time when girls lose their self-confidence, self-direction, wholeness, and authenticity, they can regain it by ‘owning’ their experiences. Thus in owning their emotions and thoughts, even when they are not socially acceptable, girls and young women are able to stay true to themselves and will “manage to find some way to respect
the parts of themselves that are spiritual” (Pipher, 1994, p. 72). Psychologists have also linked openness to spiritual experiences to positive wellbeing, healthy development, and self-actualization (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Davis, Kerr, & Robinson Kurpius, 2003; Dowling et al., 2004; Hart, 2003; Holder et al., 2000; Hood, 1975; James, 1902; Maslow, 1970; Wilber, 2007), yet young women have not seen reflections of their spirituality in school and in society, and thus have not learned to recognize their own wholeness and authenticity.

In contrast to this neglect of the spiritual, holistic educators such as John P. Miller (2007), Ron Miller (1993), Kessler (2000), Noddings (1984, 2006), and Steiner (1996) have recognized the need to foster the spiritual development of students within the classroom. Their collective works have aided teachers and educators in designing and delivering a curriculum that nurtures the whole student intellectually, physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. Within the literature on spirituality in education, however, we hear very little from the students themselves, in terms of their spiritual experiences and understandings (Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998). Kessler (2000) attempted to do so by including the voices of youth in her discussion on ways of enhancing spirituality, but these were added as a summary of student experiences on her retreats as opposed to an analysis of student experiences.

In hearing more from the students themselves, in this case, from adolescent girls, we may learn how they view spirituality, its significance in their lives, where they search for their knowledge about and encounters with spirit, and how their spirituality shapes their knowledge and understanding about themselves and their inner lives. Educators may then take this knowledge into their educational practice and create classrooms that target
the spiritual needs of adolescent girls and curriculum that encourages adolescent girls to know their spiritual selves and spiritual experiences, thus allowing these girls to hear and know their voices.

**Research Questions and Research Summary**

This study attempts to shed light on the spiritual experiences of females in late adolescence and early adulthood through an exploration of the nature of their spiritual experiences, how they make sense and meaning of their experiences, and how they understand spirituality in terms of their outer and inner selves. The main research question to be addressed is: What is the nature of the spiritual experiences and spiritual understandings of young women? Sub-questions include: 1) What types of spiritual experiences do young women have? 2) In what ways do these spiritual experiences affect the way in which young women interpret or interact with the world? and 3) What are the characteristics or patterns of the spiritual understandings of young women?

For this qualitative inquiry, five young women between the ages of 18 and 25 were interviewed about their adolescent spiritual experiences, as defined by them, and their understanding of their inner selves. Spiritual experiences are a useful means to explore spirituality and inner life because they are direct encounters with a range of possible connections (self, spirit, others, nature, community, the sacred, and the divine) and, according to Maslow (1970), are fairly common. Allowing young women to talk about their spirituality in this way not only permits participants to explore their own voices, but also provides insight for scholars and educators into the difficulty girls and young women have in hearing their own voices. A better understanding of young
women’s experiences during this period will allow those working with girls and young women (educators, counsellors, social workers, and parents) to offer appropriate support.

Chapter 1 reviews the conceptual framework for this research, which must establish definitions of spirituality and spiritual experiences. The remainder of this chapter will address the contextual issues of spirit and spirituality, including the separation of spirit and religion, spirit and the psyche, gendered models of spirituality, and spiritual experiences.

Context and Concepts

According to Gilligan (1982, 1988) and Pipher (1994), adolescent girls do not see true reflections of themselves in society and are thus silenced by their lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, and lack of experience with their authentic selves. One way to connect to the authentic self is through spirituality and spiritual experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1970; Pipher, 1994). However, the definition of spirituality and spiritual experiences is one that could be open to theoretical and personal interpretations. Below are two examples of experiences that are not normally considered to be spiritual, jazz and basketball, but can be infused with spirit. The first example of playing jazz is discussed within the context of reflection-in-action, which is the fluid and intuitive experience of the professional where the practitioner can reflect upon an action while in the process of performing the action (Schon, 1983). Schon (1983) described reflection-in-action as the deep experience of professionals in which actions or recognitions are characterized by the practitioner not needing to “think about them prior to or during their performance” (p. 54), the discovery of “simply find[ing] ourselves doing them” (p. 54), and the general inability “to describe the knowing which our action
reveals” (p. 54). Reflection-in-action takes place when the practitioner’s theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge weave together to create a surprising and unexpected outcome.

Schon (1983) described the process in jazz musicians. Jazz musicians will reflect-in-action on the music being created, their personal contributions to the music, and their evolving way of doing it while playing, so that the music develops out of “their interwoven contributions” (p. 55). Schon (1983) argued that this is much more than a technical exercise in the playing of music, and is an intuitive rather than verbal knowing and understanding. John P. Miller (1994) recognized that reflection-in-action can occur at a spiritual level, where reflection-in-action involves a “quality of depth” (p. 21). According to Miller (1994), when the duality of the musician’s theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge disappear, there is an experience of nonduality or unity which some people experience as spiritual. Thus, reflection-in-action can become a spiritual experience because the action is characterized by an unmediated awareness of “openness, a sense of relatedness, … awe and wonder” (p. 25), which also characterizes spiritual experiences.

Jazz musician John Coltrane described his own example of this experience (as cited in Blanning, 2008). Coltrane (as cited in Blanning, 2008) reflected on the process of creating and performing music:

To be a musician is really something. It goes very, very deep. My music is the spiritual expression of what I am – my faith, my knowledge, my being … I’d like to point out to people the divine in a musical language that transcends words. I want to speak to their souls. (p. 115)
Blanning (2008) related Coltrane’s story of a spiritual experience while working in the studio soon after the birth of his son. Coltrane stayed in the studio, alone except for his saxophone, for several days. His wife explained that when he emerged, “it was like Moses coming down from the mountain, it was so beautiful. He walked down and there was that joy, that peace in his face, tranquility” (Blanning, 2008, p. 115). Coltrane (as cited in Blanning, 2008) stated that this was “the first time that I have received all of the music for what I want to record, in a suite. This is the first time I have everything, everything ready” (p. 115). During this experience, Coltrane did not focus on his theoretical and practical knowledge of music, but instead he experienced unity in the music so that it became a spiritual experience.

Phil Jackson is known primarily as the coach who led the Chicago Bulls to three consecutive National Basketball Championships in the early 1990s. In his book *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*, Jackson (1995) described his spiritual philosophy of basketball and how he used various spiritual faiths and teachings to create a team that was selfless, compassionate, and connected with spirit. Jackson had felt disconnected from his Pentecostal faith because he seemed unable to receive the Holy Spirit, characterized by shaking and speaking in tongues (Jackson, 1995). Jackson (1995) reached a turning point when he came to realize that a spiritual experience did not require this Pentecostal-style catharsis or even drugs, that “it could be as uneventful as a moment of reflection” (Jackson, 1995, p. 46). After this revelation, Jackson was immediately able to notice spiritual experiences in daily life, including on the basketball court. For Jackson (1995), basketball is a spiritual experience when the players are present in the moment and connected to spirit, thus allowing each of the moves and plays to unfold naturally.
Jackson (1995) argued that, in general, “things are more likely to go your way when you stop worrying about whether you’re going to win or lose and focus your full attention on what’s happening right this moment” (p. 4). Being in the moment is key for Jackson because a player can then be spiritually present rather than intellectualizing the game.

While jazz and basketball are not normally perceived as spiritual experiences, they can be as long as the practitioner or player is in the moment and connected with spirit. Key for both Miller (1994) and Jackson (1995) is the merging of theoretical and practical knowledge so that the person connects to something greater than the sum of the original parts.

*Spirituality and Religion*

The term spirituality is so intimately intertwined with religion that it is difficult to determine the boundaries between the two, or indeed if there are any. In western civilization, both have suffered from a great deal of criticism over the last century. For some, spirituality within religion is superstitious and anti-scientific, which could be the result of a mistrust of religions; for others, spirituality without religion is instead linked to the occult and is equally mistrusted (Lesser, 1999). Spirituality and religion have been objects of scepticism in part because modern western civilizations have viewed spirituality, religion, and the sacred as distinct from the known world (Griffiths, 1982). Through this reductionistic split, spirituality has become the domain of religions and spiritual leaders, while the mundane remains the domain of scientists and politicians in modern western society (Tacey, 2004). Tacey (2004) asserted that the modern secular state “has chosen to put ‘religious matters’ to one side, so that the business of living, educating, informing and governing the people can take place ‘unimpeded’ by irrational
impulses” (p. 12). By relegating religion and spirituality to the boundaries of the credible, religion’s role in society has been weakened (Tacey, 2004).

Australian researcher David Tacey (2004) has explored the overlapping concepts of spirituality and religion as seen through the eyes of modern youth, and offers a means of understanding their conceptual relationship. After spending many years studying spirituality, Tacey (2004) noted an exodus of youth from traditional formal religions. He observed that while religion and spirituality were once synonymous, even if they were considered to be irrational impulses, today a rift has grown between them. Youth have adopted the perspective that spirituality and religion are independent of each other, in that spirituality is a more personal experience and religion is a system of faith or worship based on an organized doctrine and scripture that may or may not include spiritual practices. Tacey (2004) explained that according to youth, “spirit is felt to be spontaneous, freely available and democratically structured, whereas religion is perceived to be doctrinal, regulated and authoritarian” (p. 30). Tacey (2004) suggested that the personal spiritual journey does not always fit neatly within collective and devotional traditional forms of worship. This does not mean, however, that spirituality is necessarily better off without religion, as Tacey (2004) argued that spirit and religion are fundamentally connected. A spontaneous and free spirit is the emotional core of religion, and religion is the form that gives shape and expression to spirit (Tacey, 2004).

Tacey’s (2004) definitions of religion as form and spirituality as a free and emotional experience clarify these two connected concepts and allow us to focus on the single notion of spirituality. Other scholars have also attempted to focus their definitions of spirituality as free and emotional experiences; for example, John P. Miller (2007)
stated that it is “a sense of awe and reverence for life that arises from our relatedness to something both wonderful and mysterious” (p. 4), and Ron Miller (1990) defined spirituality as a “recognition that our lives have a purpose, a direction, a meaning, a goal that transcends our particular physical and cultural conditioning” (p. 58). Ursula King (1993) viewed spirituality as “a process of transformation and growth, an organic and dynamic part of human development, of both individual and society” (p. 5). Spirituality, then, is defined here is an innate, fundamental part of human nature that connects us to our self, spirit, others, communities, animals, nature, and the sacred. This unifying relationship inspires awe, wonder, joy and creativity, and allows for transcendence. Spirituality is also an awareness that our lives have purpose and meaning, that can be found in the relationships in which we recognize the other as connected to ourselves.

*Spirit and self (Self and Ego)*

When stating that spirituality is a connection to our self and our spirit, a brief explanation of these terms is necessary. In its broadest and simplest sense, the self is the ego (Wilber, 1995). Jung (1976) defined the ego as that part of the personality that allows us to be self-aware. It is the point of reference or the *subject* of awareness that allows us to recognize ourselves as individuals; as well, the ego filters what we are aware of and what we pay attention to (Jung, 1976). If the ego does not acknowledge something as a subject, we are not aware of its existence. Ego allows us to talk about an external “I” and to use it as subject (as in “I want” or “I desire”). The ego is “a rational, individuated sense of self” (Wilber, 1995, p. 229) that gives us our sense of individuality and allows us to know ourselves as separate from others by being the subject of our awareness (Miller, J., 2000; Plotkin, 2008).
The spirit, or what is also called the Self, is distinct from the self or ego in that the spirit encompasses both the conscious (what is known) and the unconscious (what is not yet known or is incapable of being known), whereas the ego encompasses only conscious material (Jung, 1976). Spirit has been called the atman (Hindu) or the Buddha nature, since it is the divine essence within and the highest, finest, and most subtle nature that allows us to experience unity with the divine (Jung, 1959; Miller, J., 2000; Wilber, 2007). Spirit is the sense of what all people and all things have in common, and is thus independent of our beliefs and the knowledge we have about ourselves (Plotkin, 2008; Wilber, 2007). Within a psychological framework, the Self is the self in higher stages of development (Wilber, 1995) and may appear in dreams, myths, and fairytales (Jung, 1976). In spirit, one is able to experience care and concern for all beings, translating ‘us’ to ‘all of us,’ thus allowing an individual to understand similarities and shared commonalities with humans and other cultures.

The definition of spirituality intentionally includes both self and spirit, since, psychologically speaking, to progress to higher stages of development an individual does not need to eliminate the ego, for then any sense of a functional individual is gone. Instead, when accessing the spirit, the self is preserved, yet at the same time transcended and lessened (Wilber, 1995). The spirit is not a personal possession or an inward endeavour; instead, spirit is universal and collective, and so “to go deeply into spirit is to be lead into universality, away from subjectivity towards the world and the objective life of the spirit” (Tacey, 2004, p. 41). Plotkin (2008) argued that the common understanding of ego as undesirable or detrimental fails to acknowledge the ego as an essential part of being human. A healthy ego has clear and permeable boundaries and is capable of goal
direction, curiosity, and communion with others and nature. As our point of self-awareness, ego gives us the capacity to wonder about the world and our true place within it. Ego growth is necessary for human spiritual development (Miller, J., 2000; Plotkin, 2008; Wilber, 1997), while spirituality [or spirit] opens us to a range of emotions and allows us the experiences of joy, creativity, awe, wonder, and mystery, which are so essential to being human (Hart, 2003; Miller, J. 2007; Kessler, 2000; Noddings, 1984; Plotkin, 2008).

Models of Spirituality and Gender

Based on his research into the spiritual experiences of children, holistic educator and psychologist Tobin Hart (2003) further clarified spirituality by describing it as both a worldview and a process of development. Hart (2003) asserted that as a worldview, spirituality locates an individual in a multidimensional universe in terms of connections, beliefs, and ethics, and leads us to integrate spirit and matter into a greater understanding of reality. Hart (2003) stated that “the basic premise of a spiritual worldview is that all things, including us, are sacred and are infused with or part of spirit” (p. 9). Rather than being housed in logic (which is essentially the thoughts that make up the self), this worldview can be built through direct spiritual experiences based on a multitude of feelings, images, or a sense of belonging. If all things are infused with spirit, as we develop and grow we are better able to recognize this spirit.

Spirituality as a process of development has been a focus of research within developmental psychology, which views spiritual development as:

the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the
sacred. It is the developmental “engine” that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices.

(Benson, Roehlkepartain & Rude, 2003, pp. 205-206)

This is the spirituality that is emphasized by the great spiritual and religious traditions. As a process, Hart (2003) explained that spirituality tops the developmental ladder and leads to liberation, transformation, enlightenment, and self-realization. For Hart (2003), spirituality is essential to focus on growth and identity, to learn more about who we are, rather than reinforcing an “estrangement from self, society, and source” (p. 10) that is evident within the educational system.

Rooted in the psychological perspective of spirituality as a process of development, James Fowler created the Stage Theory of Faith Development to parallel the theories of Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg. In Fowler’s (1995) review of the literature, he explained that the origins of the term ‘faith’ indicate that it is not merely a noun representing a belief or religion, but instead a verb that signifies a relationship to transcendence that is fundamental to human existence. Rather than using the verb ‘to believe,’ classical writings would use faith as a verb to represent “an alignment of the heart …, a commitment of loyalty and trust” (Fowler, 1995, p. 11). Fowler (1995) uses faith in a way similar to our definition of spirituality, indicating that faith is a human way of “finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives” (p. 3). A contemporary of Lawrence Kohlberg, Fowler mirrored Kohlberg’s six stages in the Theory of Moral Development with his own six stages that culminate at the level of Universalizing Faith. A person achieving Stage 6 is an activist
who, through discipline and compassion, makes tangible the ideals of absolute love and justice. The person described here is focusing not on personal transcendence or self-actualization, but on the transformation of present realities to “a transcendent actuality” (as cited in Fowler, 1995, p. 201). Examples of persons achieving Universalizing Faith are Mahatma Ghandi, Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; examples that Fowler admits are rare in society.

Women tend to score lower than men on this hierarchy of faith development (Fowler, 1995), and as a result, many female scholars and feminists have criticized Fowler for not recognizing or valuing the differing tendencies of women. For instance, Slee (2000) has argued that Fowler failed to integrate women’s need for concrete experiences, ones through which she can interact with the people involved, as opposed to abstractions offered in a paper and pencil test. The need for concrete experiences extends to women’s descriptions of themselves in terms of relationships, and their identification of themselves in terms of connection, such as mother, daughter, wife, and child (Gilligan, 1982). In terms of morality, this means that women view moral problems as a construction of care and responsibility due to their network of relationships. Women speak in terms of attachment, and look for a balance of inclusion using an ethic of care and non-violence so that “no one should hurt” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 174). Women also use a logic of relationships that relies on an ethic of responsibility in a concept of equity and a recognition of differences (Gilligan, 1982).

Building on Gilligan’s work and her own research, Slee (2000) developed a new model of spirituality to better reflect a woman’s perspective. Slee (2000) asserted that women’s spirituality is relational in character, rooted in a strong sense of connection to
others and in an ethic of care and responsibility. Based on her interviews with “religiously and educationally developed women” (p. 8), Slee (2000) identified six faithing strategies, or processes of faith used by women to give coherence and meaning to their life experiences. First, conversational faithing is the way women converse to express important meaning, such that each woman’s conversation is unique and reveals her own preferred ways of thinking about her faith. For example, many women reported that speaking with an interested interviewer allowed them to discover truths about their own lives which were revealed to Slee through each woman’s type of speech, narrative, and analysis as well as through individual issues and themes. Second, metaphoric faithing is the way women use metaphor, analogy, and image to give shape to their faith. The most common metaphors used were relational, natural, and geographic images, plus sensual, physical metaphors drawn from the ordinary and the everyday.

Women’s primary mode of shaping experience, narrative faithing, is Slee’s (2000) third pattern. The types and styles of story used by women refer mainly to issues of identity, belonging, and connection to significant others, and often include narratives of inclusion and exclusion. Through narrative faithing, many women describe the struggles and conflicts that were key markers in major life transitions. Fourth, personalized faithing is the way in which faith is communicated in reference and relation to heroes or heroines of faith. In Slee’s (2000) interviews, these were often idealized individuals, be it a parent, partner, spiritual mentor, biblical person, or historical person, who exemplified a woman’s most core and fundamental values. Fifth, conceptual faithing is a woman’s way of using either psychological concepts such as developmental strategies and dynamics of relationships, and theological concepts such as grace, salvation, and forgiveness, to
interpret or analyze experience. Finally, some women used apophatic faithing, which is characterized by describing the negative, what spirituality and faith are not, rather than the affirmative of what spirituality and faith are.

Hart’s (2003) view that there are two perspectives on spirituality may shed light on these differing theories. Fowler’s stage theory of faith development has taken the position that spirituality is a process of development. As such, Fowler has drawn on the great faith traditions to construct the highest level of development, one of absolute love and justice. Theories by female and feminist scholars have more closely followed Hart’s (2003) second mode of spiritual development, in which spirituality is a worldview. This is also where we can place arguments for the web or the quilt as an analogy to women’s spiritual development and other theories such as Slee’s pattern of faith development (the web will be discussed later as a characteristic of spiritual experiences).

*Spiritual Experiences*

A spiritual experience is a broad label that encompasses a wide variety of possible encounters in which an individual in some way has a connection with the self, spirit, others, nature, or the sacred. In understanding spirituality as an essential component of the psyche and the universe, spiritual experiences do not need to be experiences of the supernatural, encounters with God, or angel sightings (James, 1902; Maslow, 1970; Plotkin, 2008; Tacey, 2004; Wilber, 2007). Instead, spiritual experiences are deep and profound understandings about our daily lives (Tacey, 2004), or are a quality of experience that cannot be encountered elsewhere (James, 1902). There is a “sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception [italics removed] … of something there [italics removed]” (James, 1902, p. 58) that is more deep and general than our
senses can perceive. Within the literature, one is likely to find these experiences variously called religious, conversion, mystical, numinous, transcendent, and, of course, spiritual.

Martin Buber’s (1958) concept of I-Thou offers a theological perspective that highlights the quality of a spiritual experience. I-Thou is the relationship of spirit of the subject, which is the I, and object, which is the It that is detached from the I. When the subject and object meet in relation, the object is no longer It but Thou, thus forming the I-Thou relationship. I is bound in relation to Thou, and Thou is bound in relation to I. Typically when we speak of It, the object only has a past; but when we speak of Thou, it is in the present. This relation with Thou is direct and unmediated, and so it is precisely in the I-Thou relationship that spirit exists. Buber (1958) explained that spirit is shared so that, “spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe” (p. 39). If an individual is able to respond to Thou and live in spirit, then that individual enters into a relationship with his/her whole being. It is in fact the actual coming together of objects that allows spirit to be revealed, an occurrence that is a spiritual experience. From this perspective, any encounter between the I-Thou is a spiritual experience. Thou could be any object of connection, be it another person, an animal, a flower, or the divine.

Working primarily within a psychological framework, Maslow (1970) connected his concept of peak experiences to theological understandings of spiritual experiences. Maslow (1970) stated that the origin of every major religion (except perhaps Confucianism) is the revelation, illumination, or ecstasy of a prophet or seer. Rather than being of supernatural origin, however, Maslow (1970) argued that these are not only natural peak experiences (which includes transcendent and mystical experiences), but that
they are all the same in their essence and at their core. The prophets couched their experiences in the cultural, linguistic, and conceptual framework available to them at the time, thus creating the world’s various religions.

Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger and Gorsuch (2003) found it necessary to make distinctions between religious, mystical, and numinous experiences. Religious experiences connect with religious beliefs and are perceived to be religious by the experiencer, but are also widely open to personal interpretation. This category would include visions of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, or another deity. Mystical experiences, on the other hand, are defined in terms of an experience of “unity that transcends individual, discrete objects of perception” (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger & Gorsuch, 2003, p. 292) which can be further divided into extroverted and introverted mysticism. The experience of transcendence, on the other hand, falls into the category of numinous experience, which is “an awareness of a ‘holy other’ beyond nature, with which one is felt to be in communion” (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger & Gorsuch, 2003, p. 292). The Latin root of the term ‘numinous’ implies that there is implicit power in a sacred object, often connecting the experiencer to God, Yahweh, or Allah. Among these distinctions, however, there is a great deal of overlap and unity. Mystical and numinous experiences in particular are an experience with fundamental realities, and for Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger and Gorsuch (2003), they are the best means through which to study those realities.

‘Flow’ is also a term used to describe spiritual experiences. According to psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, flow experiences are those times that are the best in our lives; times when we experience great joy and happiness. In those optimal experiences, we experience a state of flow, in which “people are so involved in an activity that nothing
else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Flow requires deep concentration in the moment, which is usually achieved through sustained attention to the completion of a challenging task. The key to flow is that the person becomes so involved in an activity that it becomes spontaneous and the person is no longer aware of themselves as separate from the actions being performed. Flow is a loss of awareness not of spirit, but in the concept of the self. This “loss of consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being [have] been pushed forward” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 64). Central to flow is the experiencer as an active participant, as opposed to a passive and receptive participant.

In concert with these understandings of spiritual experiences, Wilber (2007) identified four categories of spiritual states or peak experiences. The first category is nature mysticism, which is simply having an experience of being one with nature. Second is deity mysticism, which involves experiences in a dream state where an individual may feel that she/he is becoming one with infinite love. The third is formless mysticism (also called causal mysticism) that can be described as emptiness, formlessness, the Void, or the Abyss. The final category is flow or nondual mysticism, where an individual may feel one with everything.

Spiritual experiences are both common and essential to individual wellbeing (Hart, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hood, 1975; James, 1902; Maslow, 1970; Wilber, 2007). While the structure of the human psyche is composed of both self (ego) and spirit (Self), our normal daily lives are dominated primarily by our experience of the self, and our conscious knowledge of our worlds and ourselves. Through spiritual experiences, “we are released from the burden of ego, and discharged into a larger world that enables
us to focus less on our ego and more on our larger cosmic identity” (Tacey, 2004, p. 66). A healthy, well-balanced individual will find these experiences to be relatively common (Maslow, 1970). The unhealthy, not fully integrated or not fully functioning individual may not have these peak experiences (Hoffman, 1998; Wuthnow, 1978). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), flow assists in the integration of the psyche and when the episode is over, “one feels more ‘together’ than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general” (p. 41). Not only does a person find enjoyment in the completion of a challenging task, but happiness, joy, and meaning are experienced when one is attuned to and aware of their stream of consciousness. As an individual experiences each new episode of flow, she/he becomes more unique and less predictable.

Maslow (1970) maintained that simply being open to the experience is enough to allow it to occur. He described a person who does not report spiritual experiences as a non-peaker, one who is “…not the person who is unable to have peak-experiences, but rather the person who is afraid of them, who suppresses them, who denies them, who turns away from them, or who ‘forgets’ them” (p. 22). According to Maslow (1970), the person who does this is an extremely rational, materialistic, or mechanistic person who could be described as insane. Believing that peak experiences could be used as a determination of one’s state of wellbeing, Maslow (1970) argued that a healthy, well-balanced individual will find these experiences to be relatively common. Subsequent research has supported Maslow’s findings that ‘peakers’ are more likely to be self-actualized (Hoffman, 1998; Wuthnow, 1978).

*Rationale and Significance*
The rationale for this research is embedded in the knowledge that spirituality forms the core of healthy development and growth. Spiritual experiences are an essential component of wellbeing and can occur during any activity in which an individual is connected with spirit. Scholars have called the silencing of adolescent girls and young women a crisis, one which girls and young women need not experience if they owned their spirituality and spiritual experiences (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Pipher, 1994). Our understanding of the spiritual lives of adolescent girls and young women is limited due to the lack of research into their spiritual understandings, spiritual experiences, and their sense of inner knowing (Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998). This research is significant because a deeper understanding of the spirituality and spiritual experiences of young women will allow educators to develop programs and curriculum that can better address the needs of students.

**Summary**

Pipher (1994) argued that girls who are not silenced are ones who own all of their experiences, including spiritual experiences, and know their authentic selves. Pipher’s (1994) claim is supported by psychologists who have argued that spiritual experiences are common and essential to individual wellbeing (Hart, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hood, 1975; James, 1902; Maslow, 1970; Wilber, 2007). Spirituality connects us to self, spirit, others, community, animals, nature, and the sacred, and creates space for relationships that inspire awe, wonder, joy, and allow for transcendence. It can be found both within and outside religion (Tacey, 2004).

Spirituality can be understood as either a worldview, which locates an individual in terms of connections and beliefs, or as a process of development, which leads to
liberation and transformation (Hart, 2003). Women tend to score lower on more traditional measures of spiritual development, such as Fowler’s (1995) theory of faith development. In response, Slee (2000) has proposed her own pattern of faith development, which more closely follows a perspective of spirituality as a worldview. Slee’s (2000) pattern draws on Gilligan’s (1982) theory of moral development, which proposes that women make moral decisions based on an ethic of care and responsibility while looking for a balance of inclusion.

Spiritual experiences can be explored through a variety of perspectives, including an I-Thou relationship, peak experiences, and flow experiences. These experiences need not be traditionally religious, although they certainly can be. Spiritual experiences can be as simple as an experience in which the individual is connected to self, spirit, nature, community, or the divine. A connection to spirit may take place in nature, during a basketball game, or while reflecting-in-action.

Since spiritual experiences are essential to health and wellbeing, and young women who own their spiritual experiences are less likely to be silenced, understanding more about the spiritual experiences of young women, their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about spirit and spirituality and their inner selves, may help educators and researchers create curriculum that allows girls to hear their voices.

Overview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 provides the interdisciplinary theoretical framework for this research, including a review of the literature in three key categories of youth and spirituality; fostering spirituality in adolescent girls and young women, particularly in curriculum; and the characteristics of spiritual experiences, which are separated into the most
common qualities of the experience and the times and settings of its occurrence. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of this research, including recruitment of participants, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis. In keeping with an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, the methodology adheres to the general principles of qualitative inquiry. A descriptive overview of each of the participants, their spiritual experiences, and inner knowings are provided in Chapters 4 through 8. Chapter 9 provides an analysis of the research and discusses the overall findings and themes. The conclusion, Chapter 10, returns to the research questions, addresses the limitations of this study, and proposes future research.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The previous chapter provides the groundwork necessary for studying the spiritual experiences and silencing of young women by contextualizing spirituality, self, spirit, models of spirituality and gender, and spiritual experiences. To further this study, we also need to have an understanding of youth spirituality and spiritual experiences. Youth’s beliefs and experiences with spirituality have features that make them distinct from adult spirituality and are not fully addressed in the theories of Fowler (1995) and Slee (2000). These beliefs and experiences are explored by new and interesting theories that extend our understanding of youth spirituality. Youth spirituality has also been addressed within holistic education, where several educators have discussed the fostering of adolescent spirituality in the curriculum. Spiritual experiences, regardless of the age of the individuals involved, have been studied within psychology for well over a century. Psychologists have examined not only what characterizes a spiritual experience, but have also identified common times and places for spiritual experiences. This information is essential for any study of spiritual experiences. This chapter will discuss the literature on youth and youth spirituality, spirituality in the curriculum, the characteristics of spiritual experiences, the times and places when spiritual experiences may occur, and provide a brief summary of female spirituality.

Youth and Spirituality

As a field of inquiry, the spirituality of children and youth is small, especially from the perspective of sociocultural forces. Hay and Nye (1998) found that they “[ran] into snags, the most important of which is the shortage of competent research” (p. 40) when studying children’s spirituality. Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude’s (2003) search
of the Social Science Abstracts and PsycINFO databases revealed that out of 38,894 articles in the Social Science Abstracts with key words related to adolescents or children, only 143 also had the key word spirituality. That number dropped even more when the reference to religion was removed (0.4%). Similarly, in PsycINFO, only 0.6% of the 139,294 articles with adolescents or children also had the key word spirituality without the reference to religion. My own search of Education@ScholarsPortal, a database combining three search engines in the field of education, revealed that up to and including the year 2007, 111 published works had the descriptors children or adolescents, and religion or spirituality. This number dropped to 34 when religion was removed and zero when children were removed. A search of females and spirituality yielded 29 works, but there was only one match to the descriptors female, curriculum, and spirituality.

The literature that does exist on the spirituality of youth has explored a range of perspectives such as spiritual development (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003), religious development or mentorship (Kujawa-Holbrook, 2001), gender differences (Mercer & Durham, 1999), and spirituality and wellbeing (Davis, Kerr & Kurpius, 2003; Dowling, et al., 2004; Holder et al., 2000). This latter focus on wellbeing bolsters the argument that spirituality is an essential component of a healthy youth lifestyle. This includes the positive relationship between spirituality and thriving (Dowling, et al., 2004), the inverse relationship between spirituality and the likelihood of sexual activity (Holder et al., 2000), and the inverse relationship between the existential wellbeing score (a subset of the spiritual wellbeing scale) and anxiety in at-risk females (Davis, Kerr & Kurpius, 2003). Research has also revealed a positive relationship between spirituality and identity formation in general (King, P., 2003) and a positive relationship between the
dimensions of social recognition, commitment, purposefulness, and meaningfulness in girls (Fisherman, 2004).

Regardless of these positive connections, youth have learned to believe that their inner and outer lives are separate, and that to be successful, spirit must be held at bay (Tacey, 2004). The result is that teens often suffer a sense of meaninglessness, arising from social and religious traditions that do not provide them with meaning, continuity, and connection (Kessler, 2000). Nevertheless, it is precisely a sense of meaning that youth are searching for (Bibby, 2001; Kessler, 2000; Smith, 2005; Tacey, 2004). In his survey of the spiritual lives of Canadian teens, Bibby (2001) found that girls in particular raised questions about meaning, purpose, suffering, and life after death. Teens are open to the idea that existence has meaning, and 80% of females agreed or strongly agreed that “life has meaning beyond what we ourselves give to it” (Bibby, 2001, p. 120). Fifty-five percent of girls said they personally had spiritual needs, and 40% said their friends were interested in spirituality. Bibby (2001) concluded that in general, Canadian teens had an interest in mystery, meaning, and spirit.

Even so, Tacey (2004) argued that modern youth are one of the few generations to have grown up in a secular society, and as a result, their relationship with religion is one of both interest and detachment. A common phrase heard by Tacey (2004) was, “I am not a very religious person, but I am interested in spirituality” (p. 30). He determined that this was youth’s way of expressing their ties to secularism and their rejection of traditional religion. Smith’s (2005) surveys have also revealed that most American teens tend to have an interest in spiritual matters, but they were not necessarily committed to one particular religion or denomination, plus they were very open to religious differences.
Tacey (2004) suggested that one of the reasons for this detachment is that youth are not very patient with the authoritarian structures of most modern religions.

Tacey (2004) began to notice a pattern in the ways youth journeyed away from both their original faith and secularism, one that he argued was “so typical we might almost refer to it as ‘archetypal’, a universally recurring pattern of contemporary experience” (p. 107). This five-fold pattern consists of: 1) natal faith: an infant is born into a religious family and inducted into its faith traditions and institutions; 2) adolescent separation: a teenager begins to ask questions about life but does not receive adequate answers; 3) secular identification: the individual renounces institutional affiliations; 4) secular disillusionment: secular consumer society leaves the individual feeling unsatisfied and not particularly free; and 5) adult secular spirituality: the individual develops his/her own spirituality free from religious influence. Through this pattern, youth attempt to identify separately with both religion and secularism, but in the end they must reject both. The story emerging is one of “losing my religion and discovering my spirituality” (Tacey, 2004, p. 107). Today’s youth desperately search for a connection to spirit, and when religion and secularism are both unable to provide it, youth find their own meaning (Kessler, 2000; Tacey, 2004).

Slee (2000) also observed that her Christian female participants lost their faith, from which she identified three basic and recurring themes. First, paralysis is a crisis of spiritual ownership faced by women within a patriarchal faith culture. Second, awakenings are longer struggles of faith and spirituality, which may or may not lead to a resolution. Finally, relationality is the “underlying sense of connection to God, self and other which endures over time” (Slee, 2000, p. 10). Slee’s (2000) participants reported
that they felt their experience of themselves and their faith to be “fragmented, disconnected, unreal, paralysed, broken, alienated, abused or even dead” (p. 11), which presented a challenge for the women to overcome. Slee (2000) and Tacey’s (2004) participants differed in that Slee’s (2000) participants were all female baby boomers and older, which meant they had a different experience of society, culture, religion and feminism than Tacey’s (2004) mixed gender youth.

According to Tacey (2004), the search for spirit independent of religion and secularism is changing the landscape of contemporary society into one in which the sacred is a prevalent force, and youth are leading the way. Tacey (2004) characterized this new spirituality as a search for guiding visions and values where the holy is an attitude of mind rather than an object of worship. Youth recognize the limitations of the conventional dualities of internal and external, spirit and matter, and are adopting postmodern worldviews. Believing that the conscience is the true moral guide, youth have expanded the definition of the sacred from scriptures and dogma to include ecology, nature, planets, stars, mystical experience, and the search for the true inner spirit (Tacey, 2004). In keeping with this more human and inclusive understanding of spirituality, sexuality becomes an integral piece as opposed to an impediment to experiencing the sacred. Youth spirituality is also deeply concerned with the welfare of the world, social justice, and an end to racism, ecological degradation, and domestic violence (Tacey, 2004).

Elements of this new spirituality have been included in Plotkin’s (2008) holistic developmental theory, to which he added spirit and nature to the traditional contexts of the psychological and social theories of Kohlberg and Erickson. Through his re-
evaluation of the tasks of adolescence and addition of the human relationship to nature in the dynamic of growth and connectedness, Plotkin (2008) enhances our understanding of youth and spirituality. Plotkin (2008) divided adolescence into two stages: the Thespian at the Oasis (early adolescence) and the Wanderer in the Cocoon (late adolescence). In late adolescence, which can range from anywhere in the late teens to the early 20s, the wanderer feels pulled into his/her ultimate place in the universe, and thus has two main tasks: 1) to leave the adolescent home of the first personality and 2) to explore the mysteries of nature and the psyche. The first personality encases an ethnocentrism (which is ultimately tied to the ego) that allowed the early adolescent to feel that she/he is a member of a community or a nation. The wanderer then becomes a postconventional global citizen who values the needs of humanity as a whole and is not confined to the community’s traditions or beliefs.¹

The wanderer is a seeker or pilgrim on a quest to explore the mysteries of the psyche, and ultimately, is in search of her/his own soul. Where Erikson’s adolescent conflict focused mainly on the search for a career and place within society, Plotkin’s (2008) wanderer is on a quest for her/his ultimate place in life. This is not a career, task, talent, or social role, but a place in keeping with his/her vital core. Plotkin (2008) explained that:

her ultimate place is identified not by any social forms or roles, but, rather, by the symbols, stories, and archetypes unearthed from the deep structure of her psyche and by the way the world invites her to belong to it. (p. 252)

¹ Postconventional is the highest level in developmental stage theories. Preconventional is egocentric and focuses on individual needs; conventional is based on societal norms and values, while postconventional is a universal stage that transcends societal constructs and is universal in its application (Gilligan, 1982).
Within this perspective, Plotkin looked beyond a young woman’s attempt to place herself in feminine social roles, such as daughter, future wife, and mother, and saw her attempt to understand her place primarily with her spirit.

Each of the main tasks of the wanderer also has two subtasks. When leaving home, the wanderer is required to hone the skills of self-reliance, which includes making peace with the past and choosing authenticity over social acceptance. Leaving home also requires the wanderer to relinquish attachment to the adolescent identity that ties the wanderer to her immediate community. To encounter the mysteries of nature and the psyche, the wanderer must learn and practice techniques to encounter spirit. In addition, the wanderer must cultivate a spiritual relationship to her own and to all life, which may be done through discovering nature, solitude, mindfulness, and service to others.

Unlike previous developmental psychologists such as Erikson and Kohlberg, both Tacey and Plotkin are holistic and inclusive in their understanding of the spiritual and cultural contexts of discovering spirituality. What Tacey and Plotkin did not do, however, is examine the differences in the way women and men experience their spiritual development. Gilligan (1982) argued that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is the same for both sexes, hence the lack of distinction for Tacey and Plotkin. Tacey’s (2004) five-fold pattern of discovering spirituality and Plotkin’s (2008) reconceptualization of the developmental stages take a universal perspective that does not distinguish between genders. Since Gilligan (1982) has argued that both sexes approach this transition with different moral ideologies – men’s “separation is justified by an ethics of rights” and women’s “attachment is justified by an ethic of care” (p. 164) – we might wonder, for example, how the female wanderer explores the mysteries of nature and the
psyche through the activities of care, or how she leaves home while still maintaining an identity defined through her intimate relationships.

**Spirituality in the Curriculum**

Plotkin (2008) and Tacey (2004) have expressed concern for youth on their developmental paths because educational institutions, both secondary and post-secondary, and society at large offer very little support for the wanderer on her spiritual journey. This support is invaluable for growth and development into adulthood. In fact, it is precisely the development of the spiritual and connection with the authentic self where holistic education has focused its attention.

One of the better-known holistic schools is the Waldorf School (Miller, J., 2007), whose philosophy is based on an understanding of the development of the whole child—physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. Its founder, Rudolf Steiner, wrote and lectured in the early half of the twentieth century in Austria, during which time there was a great amount of concern about the state of youth in Germany. Waldorf Schools integrate the principles of holistic education through their use of the arts, the spiritual, and the physical to teach all subjects in the curriculum. In a collection of lectures on the adolescent given in the early 1920s, Steiner (1996) was very critical of the public education system that relied heavily on intellectual instruction and made no attempt to connect a student’s feelings or inner self with the subject matter. To inform his understanding of learning and the necessity of allowing the child to interact with the material and information, Steiner used his knowledge of biology and science. For example, Steiner (1996) stated that when children sit still to listen to a teacher, even if they are being asked to be active with their minds and use their judgment, the children’s
physiological processes are similar to a waking sleep activity. Steiner (1996) argued that sitting in hard chairs impaired circulation, and any negative state of the body affected the intellectual capacity for learning.

Similar to Plotkin, Steiner (1996) understood adolescence as a time when the ego is fully formed and the individual’s focus changes to the spiritual. He argued that youth must emancipate themselves from their teachers and other authority figures and learn to trust their own judgments, but this is not an easy task. According to Steiner (1996), this stage is characterized by a struggle to relate the inner world, mainly the spiritual and subjective, with the outer world, mainly the physical, objective environment. Based on his observation and research, Steiner determined that adolescent girls have a much stronger connection to the spiritual than boys, who are much less self-assured and more prone to hiding their thoughts and feelings. Thus, adolescent girls require their experience of the spiritual in the classroom to be more aesthetic than boys, but educators must guard against an appreciation of beauty becoming superficial. Steiner asserted that when being taught about morality and ethics, girls learn best through the use of ideals, stories, and the actual lived experiences of heroes and heroines. Of adolescent girls, Steiner (1996) also stated:

> girls get into the habit of making certain judgments about life. They are, especially at this age, sharply critical of life, convinced that they know what is right and wrong, fair and unfair. They make definite judgments and are convinced that life has to offer something that, coming from ideas deep down in human nature, must then be realized in the world. (pp. 120-121)
In Steiner’s view, girls experience the spiritual through beauty and aesthetics, narrative and mythology, are deeply concerned with morality and ethics, and believe that the ideals of human nature are to be made manifest within society.

The development of morality and ethics in females was further pursued by Nel Noddings (1984, 2006), who argued that the primary aim of educational institutions is to maintain and enhance caring. The caring Noddings referred to was not the treatment of students, but the development of the ethic of care within the students themselves. Noddings (1984, 2006) based her perspective of caring in education on Gilligan’s analysis that girls respond to the world through an ethic of care and responsibility. While caring is often associated with subservience and caregiving, Noddings (1984, 2006) instead suggested that the feminine need for relatedness in caring is “to receive and to be received, to care and be cared-for: these are the basic realities of human being and its basic aims” (1984, p. 173). Noddings (1984, 2006) has encouraged educators to teach interdependence, connectedness and caring when exploring topics in the classroom, as caring extends beyond the individual to include community, animals, and nature.

To achieve this end of developing caring as moral education, Noddings (1984, 2006) has maintained that no subject should be excluded from the classroom, especially religion and animal rights. She argued that it is vitally important for students to study the teachings of various religions, to be exposed to religious art and religious music in an effort to experience the beauty, faith, and devotion of others. The exposure to other religions and beliefs allows students to feel what others are feeling, which is an opportunity they may not otherwise have. It is “through such experiences – feeling with the other in spiritual responsiveness – [that] they may be reconnected to each other in
“caring” (Noddings, 1984, p. 191). This perspective echoes Steiner’s view that purely intellectual teaching and learning divides humans and teaches students to view people, religions, animals or nature as the other. Both Steiner and Noddings recommended using art and beauty in teaching students to relate to other beliefs. Noddings (1984, 2006) also encouraged educators to allow students to discuss the topic of ethics and rights not only in regards to humans, but to animals and nature as well.

Connecting students to themselves and their spirit, and to help them make meaning in their lives has been the focus of the work of Rachael Kessler. Kessler’s drive to include an education of spirit in schools grew from two areas: her concern for the teenagers she worked with who were suffering from self-destructive and violent behaviour, and her knowledge of the “exquisite opening to spirit at the heart of the adolescent experience” (2002, p. 28). Kessler (2000) developed a program of seven gateways to the soul that can be used in modern secular schools. These seven gateways are: 1) the yearning for deep connection; 2) the longing for silence and solitude; 3) the search for meaning and purpose; 4) the hunger for joy and delight; 5) the creative drive; 6) the urge for transcendence; and 7) and the need for initiation. Kessler’s program runs over the course of the students’ final year of secondary school and provides the supportive transition that Tacey and Plotkin found missing in traditional education.

Kessler’s (2000) gateways integrate the tasks of the wanderer with a girl’s need for identity in relation to others, particularly the family. The gateway for deep connection, which includes a connection to lineage, resonates with the wanderer’s need to find her/his ultimate place in the universe. Kessler’s (2000) students described a very powerful connection to their family history and lineage, a connection that would be
especially true for girls who identify themselves in terms of relationships (Gilligan, 1982). Mattis’ (2002) observation that women turn primarily to other women in the family for guidance offers support for this connection. Regardless of whether those women were alive or dead, Mattis’ (2002) participants still turned to them for assistance in times of trouble. In this way, as the female wanderer searches for her ultimate place, she may be required to forge new relationships with family members or update existing relationships.

Kessler, Noddings, and Steiner all emphasized the need to have real dialogue in the classroom and to allow students to raise questions without censorship. Steiner, in particular, was very critical of adults and how they related to the disenfranchised young people of Austria in the early 20th Century. Steiner (1996) described groups of youth who left their communities and gathered in the woods where they created their own communities in nature, and sang and talked with other youths. The older generations were not able to answer the great questions that youth asked, and, as such, elders were no longer seen as a source of wisdom. The words that Steiner spoke then do not seem all that out of place with regard to today’s youth: “At the age we are now discussing, the young feel inwardly urged to withdraw from the leadership of the old, to take their guidance into their own hands” (Steiner, 1996, p. 94). Steiner’s reasoning for this is as follows: adolescence is a time for connecting the inner world, the spiritual and soul, to the outer world, the physical and corporeal. But adults ignore this and use only the intellect to educate adolescents and introduce them to the world at large. This negates any authority adults might have, since the young feel they must look elsewhere for knowledge. The role
of the holistic educator, then, is to facilitate the connection between the inner, spiritual world and the outer world.

*Characteristics of Spiritual Experiences*

Maslow (1970) argued that the essence of spiritual experiences are the same at their core, but the interpretations of these experiences differ based on cultural and personal factors. One of the most striking aspects of spiritual experiences is that the essence, as Maslow described it, is not uniform or one-dimensional. Instead, there are wide ranges of characteristics that may or may not be present for any given spiritual experience, and each researcher has a slightly varying list.

For example, James (1902) claimed that all personal religious experiences have their roots in mystical states of consciousness, of which he identified four characteristics. First, these experiences have a sense of ineffability about them. Although they are not purely states of feeling, they have much more to do with feeling than with states of thought or intellect. The experiences themselves defy expression in words, and the quality of the experience cannot be imparted or given to another. Second, these experiences have a noetic quality in that there is also a state of knowing or of knowledge. These experiences carry a sense of authority, illumination, and revelation. Third, mystical experiences are transient and cannot be held for long. Finally, the experiencer is passive, as if she/he is grasped by a superior power.

In contrast, Maslow (1970) was much more broad than James, identifying 25 religious aspects of peak experiences in his research, any of which may or may not be present in a single event. Examples of these aspects are:
• the universe may be perceived as a unified and integrated whole, including oneself
• the person is fully attentive and aware of the experience
• the world is perceived as independent of human wants, desires, and activities
• the experience is seen as self-validating with its own intrinsic value
• there may be a disorientation in regards to time and space
• the world is perceived as only good, worthwhile, and beautiful rather than evil
• reports of awe, wonder, surrender, and humility are common
• persons move from disconnection and opposition to unity and integration
• loss of anxiety and fear
• immediate effects or aftereffects
• movement to a person’s real Self
• greater perception of free will

Rather than discuss all of these characteristics, I will focus on the more common elements of spiritual experiences that overlap with female and/or youth spirituality: noetic experiences, the ineffable, relationality, and joy.

Noetic Experiences

A key characteristic of spiritual experiences is the sense of connection with knowledge, or with the sense of revelation that cannot be explained in logical, rational terms (James, 1902; Maslow, 1970). This sense of deep knowledge or illumination is a characteristic that many feminists and female scholars believe is a strength for women, but at the same time women have been marginalized precisely for this strength (Mattis, 2002; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Mattis (2002) contended that where spirituality is seen as
illogical, irrational, and even pathological, spirituality is also seen as a gendered, female experience. Mattis (2002) found that for the women in her study,

dreams, proverbs, and the like appear to be sites in which knowledge is located, as well as sites for the validation and transmission of knowledge. The notion that knowledge can be produced, validated, and transmitted via these modes defies rational, scientific thinking. (p. 317)

Hart (2003) also affirmed that this intuitive wisdom is strong for children, but like women, they are not taken seriously when they express this knowledge as a means of understanding and interacting with the world. Connecting this with Plotkin’s (2008) developmental theory, it may be understood that revelations are part of the wanderer’s first personality that must be left behind on the path to adulthood, especially in a secular society.

Regardless, these experiences are essential to growth and development. Maslow (1970) argued that subjective knowledge gained during peak experiences is valid and provides a new centering point from which an individual can view the world. Some of this knowledge may not be revolutionary, but may simply reinforce truth as we already know it, such as “virtue is self-rewarding, sunsets are beautiful, money is not everything” (Maslow, 1970, p. 79). The key to recognizing these experiences as such is simply to be open to them. Maslow warned that “familiarization dulls cognition, especially in anxious people, and it is then possible to walk through all sorts of miraculous happenings without experiencing them as such” (1970, p. 78). The inability to recognize a spiritual experience when it occurs, particularly in individuals feeling stress, may lead them to reject the knowledge revealed either to themselves or to others.
Children are very open to this direct knowledge and the wisdom that can be gained through spiritual experiences. Hart (2003) claimed that children possess an innate intuitive capacity and are capable of key insight into the heart of an issue. Children are open to a sense of mystery and wonder, moments that are oddly familiar and absolutely true, and encounters when they can see the sacred. Spiritual experiences are moments of direct knowing, according to Hart, and are not merely passing reveries. They are vital to the way children see and understand the world. Hart (2003) equated accessing other sources of knowledge in children with accessing inner wisdom, which is usually associated with elders.

Research into women’s spirituality has noted this noetic characteristic and discovered that women rely on intuition, dreams, visions, prayers, and somatic experiences as valuable sources of knowledge (Chambers-Gordon, 2001; Foltz, 2000; Kanis, 2002; Mattis, 2002; Mercer & Durham, 1999; Ray & McFadden, 2001; Scott, 2004; Slee, 2000). Tenzin Palmo, the first Western Buddhist nun to study in Tibet, determined that women were highly intuitive and could understand spiritual revelations rather quickly. Part of the reason for this, in Palmo’s opinion, was that women were “not interested in intellectual discussion which they normally find dry and cold with minimum appeal” (MacKenzie, 1998, p. 133). This is very typical of women’s ways of knowing, in that women tend to be cautious of logic and abstract thought, viewing knowledge and truth as personal and private, and subjectively known or intuited (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997).

When logic and rational thought are set aside as the major requirements for interpreting spiritual experiences, the form of the experience, or the form in which the
knowledge is transmitted, is variable. For example, many of Hart’s (2003) participants spoke with angels and used them as sources of guidance and knowledge. Chambers-Gordon (2001) found reports of angels quite common in the religious experiences of women in a Jamaican Pentecostal Church. While Tacey (2004) expressed concern that spiritual experiences be understood as a dawning awareness or an intuition of a deeper mystery rather than supernatural experiences, conversations with God or angel sightings, he also admitted that the spiritual has countless forms of expression. Bibby’s (2001) surveys revealed that teenage girls seek information on all forms of non-traditional religious beliefs, as well as related concepts such as precognition and ESP. With religions not providing the answers they so desperately need, youth often find they must rely on their own intuitions, hunches or “unusual experiences to lead them in the direction of spirit” (Tacey, 2004, p. 52).

Ineffable Experiences

One of the difficulties in researching spiritual experiences is the limit that language places on encounters that are in essence, ineffable. While on one hand Maslow found his undergraduate students describing peak experiences in language similar to that of spiritual teachers (Hoffman, 1998), Maslow (1970) also found himself having to communicate with his participants in less direct language, using figures of speech, metaphors, and poetry. Maslow (1970) was not fazed, however, since this is the language of dreams, reveries, and fantasies. Non-verbal language became essential to his research, and Maslow began noting gestures, tones of voice, and facial expressions. Maslow’s problem was “trying to get the person to focus attention, to notice, to name an experience
inside himself, which only he could feel, an experience, furthermore, which was not happening at the time” (1970, p. 85).

Hart (2003) and Hoffman (1998) originally tried to interview children about their peak experiences but found that the children were unable to describe them. Hart (2003) found that a common dilemma was that children understand spirit at a very deep level, but may not be able to explain their understanding in adult language and logic. Both Hart and Hoffman began to ask older participants to remember a time when they were younger and report on it as adults. The inability to verbalize their spiritual beliefs was the same limitation discovered by Kujawa-Holbrook (2001) and Smith (2005) in their respective research with teens. Davis, Lockwood, and Wright (1991), however, found that regardless of age, all their participants (ages 18-64) struggled with the language of their experiences. Therefore, the challenge of ineffability may not be due solely to the age of those asked, but may perhaps be due to a secular upbringing.

However, even those youth raised within a faith tradition found difficulty in verbalizing their spiritual beliefs and understandings; for example, the girls participating in Kujawa-Holbrook’s (2001) study on religious leadership did not find language adequate to suit their theology. Smith (2005) identified one of his research problems as his assumption that the level of a teen’s knowledge about religion, spirituality, and their own religion was relatively high. The lack of this knowledge, or misunderstanding the difference between religion and spirituality, made Smith’s (2005) work much more difficult. He stated that the majority of teens were “incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives” (Smith, 2005, p. 131). Rather than being a reflection of the teenage capacity to think and speak,
Smith (2005) concluded that teens are not educated to speak about their faith and spirituality. He based this conclusion on evidence that teens were much more capable of speaking about other issues such as drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases, issues about which they were educated.

Kujawa-Holbrook (2001) also found that most of her girls felt uncomfortable articulating their spirituality aloud. This may be, as Smith asserted, because they do not have the vocabulary to discuss issues of spirituality. Then again, Tacey (2004) found a distinct unwillingness amongst his slightly older youth to openly discuss their spirituality. He asserted that youth believe spirit is too important, sensitive, and personal to risk exposing it to ridicule or disrespect and so they guard their spiritual beliefs very closely. It is possible that this is a lesson learned in younger years, when as children they were not able to communicate their spiritual experiences with adults.

Relationality

An experience of the relational, or Buber’s I-Thou relationship, is another characteristic of spiritual experiences. The relational can also be described as Wilber’s (2007) flow or nondual mysticism, where an individual may feel one with everything – a specific example of which may be Maslow’s (1970) movement to a person’s real Self. Hart (2003) concluded that children are exceptionally spiritual and openly experience the relational, and as such they value contemplative knowing and possess an exceptional capacity for wisdom, wonder, and compassion. Since children have not yet developed the boundaries of their sense of self, they are more connected to the deep stream of consciousness where they have access to wisdom, which is a way of knowing that comes through the opening of mind and heart, and is the direct knowledge of an inner voice or
inner sense. Children are open to these experiences of mystery and wonder, moments that are oddly familiar and absolutely true, when the sacred can be seen. Hart (2003) likened children to natural mystics because, like children, sages and mystics “often discover that everyday events – a bird’s song, a cup of tea, a loving hug – become extraordinary when we fall deeply into them and simultaneously into that place from which our life flows” (Hart, 2003, p. 60). Hart (2003) asserted that these experiences move “us from living in front of things to living with them” (p. 60), which is an experience of compassion built upon Buber’s relational understanding of the I-Thou. For Hart, a relational spirituality is about connection, community, and compassion, and as such, a spiritual life is lived at the intersections of our lives – what Buber called ‘the between.’ By living in that intersection, children have the capacity to recognize injustice, hypocrisy, and suffering and are able to emphasize mercy and forgiveness.

Joy

The experience of joy and delight are essential components of spirit and spiritual experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hart, 2003; James, 1902; Maslow, 1970; Plotkin, 2008). In fact, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) discovery of flow or optimal experiences came as a result of his research into happiness. Joy can be experienced in flow because during periods of awareness, the sense of self disappears (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), allowing spirit to emerge. Like spirit, happiness can be encountered spontaneously, but it needs to be cultivated and nurtured to be a regular part of one’s life. Flow and happiness are less likely to occur with the use of electronic devices, such as television, the internet, video games, boating, or driving, which may require material resources but not a high amount of sustained psychic energy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argued
that teenagers have not had flow and happiness modeled through concrete and real life examples, and as a result, they often do not know how to create the experiences for themselves.

Joy and education are not experiences that many would link together; however, both Kessler (2000) and Noddings (1984) have spoken to the richness of joy in the lives of students either through soul or caring (respectively). For Kessler (2000), joy is also an expression of deep soul connection, something which adolescents find very difficult to express. While Csikszentmihalyi determined that youth have difficulty achieving flow, Kessler (2000) observed that youth were often unwilling to discuss their successes or joys, finding it much easier to discuss their failures and troubles. Youth were afraid of evoking jealously in their peers, sometimes knowing the pain felt by others, and so kept these experiences to themselves.

Joy also emerges through the experience of caring as students realize their relatedness to persons, ideas, or other living things. Noddings (1984) suggested that joy is an affect whose occurrence “is a manifestation of receptive consciousness” (p. 147), or in other words, occurs as a result of our reflection on an object of consciousness through caring and an understanding of relatedness. During these moments, there is a sense of connectedness and harmony, which is the sense of being in tune with spirit. Both Kessler and Noddings have argued that the institution of school itself might be an obstacle to joy with its emphasis on competition and individual achievement rather than on caring and connections. Just as Noddings has recommended using beauty, art, and music as a means

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2 Tacey (2004) determined that youth were unwilling to share their experiences with spirit because they felt it too important and personal to risk exposing it to potential ridicule.
of developing caring, Kessler has suggested using beauty, art, and music as a means of encountering joy in the classroom.

*Times and Places When Spiritual Experiences May Occur*

While a spiritual experience may occur during any activity and in any location, many report that these experiences occur in connection with nature, during high psychological investment, in silence and solitude, in community, or through the arts (such as dance or music) (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hoffman, 1998; Hood, 1977b; Maslow, 1970).

*Nature*

A common spark for spiritual experiences is leaving the concrete roads and buildings of our urban settings and connecting with nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hood, 1977b, 1978; James, 1902; Plotkin, 2008). The natural world is such a common place for spirit connections that Wilber (2007) gave it its own category of experience, and Hood (1978) followed young men into their nature retreat to research other variables related to peak experiences, such as anticipated stress. However, education has not recognized our essential connection to nature, but instead has viewed it as a scientific curiosity to be calculated and manipulated (Miller, J., 2007). John Miller (2007) and Noddings (1984, 2006) both argued that connections to nature must be taught in our schools so that students are in balance with animals, birds, and plants. Being in a direct experience with the sun, trees, grass, flowers, and the earth is nourishing to the soul and it allows us to reawaken to the natural processes of life (Miller, J., 2000, 2007). Richard Louv (as cited in Plotkin, 2008) has even coined the phrase ‘nature-deficit disorder’ to
refer to the dulled senses, obesity, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and depression that result from the loss of nature in daily life.

Plotkin (2008) expanded the traditional definition of nature to include not only the fields and the forests, but also our bodies, imaginations, and emotions, so that nature includes “all that exists independently of human obstruction or invention” (p. 129). Separating ourselves from human constructions and surrounding ourselves with trees, creeks, and birds allows us to connect more easily with our spirit. Both Plotkin (2008) and Noddings (1984, 2006) have argued that nature enhances the development of selfhood, empathy, affiliation, morality, and joy. We can easily begin to foster these connections in children because they naturally form deep relationships with animals. Plotkin (2008) did not limit his definition of nature to that which exists on earth, but instead looked skyward to include the cosmos – planets, stars, and galaxies. By looking towards the stars, the wanderer can wonder about the great mysteries of the universe, such as our place within it and deep meaning. It is essential for the wanderer to explore the mysteries of soul and nature through practices and rituals that take place within nature.

**High Psychological Investment**

Using his own Hood Mysticism Scale, Ralph Hood investigated possible triggers for religious experiences from the perspective of the psychology of religion. Hood’s (1977a) findings supported his hypothesis that individuals with a relatively high level of self-actualization are more likely to report mystical experiences. In one intriguing study, Hood (1977b) explored the mystical experiences of male high school seniors as they took part in a nature retreat. Activities during this retreat included canoeing, rock climbing,
swimming, and a solo quest in the woods. Hood (1977b) discovered one trigger for mystical experiences was the difference in anticipated and actual levels of stress for each activity. When the participants’ anticipated and actual levels of stress for an activity matched, whether that be low or high stress, no mystical experience was reported. However, when the participants expected an event to be of low stress and instead the actual stress was high, a mystical experience was more likely to be reported. This finding is similar to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) conclusion that a relatively high investment of psychic energy, which a disparate level of stress would produce, is needed for flow. This may be the reason why Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) participants reported significantly less happiness when the activities they were pursuing required expensive electronics but little psychic engagement, such as power boating, watching television, or driving as compared to less expensive leisure with higher psychic engagement, such as talking with others, knitting, or gardening. The majority of reports of flow experiences indicate that they occur during activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules, such as those required for competitive sports and fitness.

**Silence and Solitude**

Silence and solitude have been identified as key factors in the cultivation of spiritual experiences and relation to spirit (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kessler, 2000; Miller, J., 2000; Plotkin, 2008). Plotkin’s (2008) wanderer needs periods of silence and solitude to enter into communion with herself, and with this ability she can access deep wisdom, inspiration, and belonging and find comfort in times of strife. Maslow (1970) argued that the founding prophets of the world’s religions had their spiritual experiences virtually always while they were alone, which gives rise to the common image of a man sitting
alone on a mountaintop engaged in meditation or prayer. Tenzin Palmo, the Tibetan Buddhist monk who spent twelve years meditating alone in a cave to achieve enlightenment, is a modern example of a woman meditating in solitude (MacKenzie, 1998).

Silence provides the space needed to connect with core mysteries (Kessler, 2000). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explained that silence and solitude are extremely difficult for many people because the natural state of the mind is chaos, and without training, it is unlikely that an individual will be able to focus her/his thoughts for more than a few minutes at a time. For this reason, he argued that teenagers should be given proper mental preparation, otherwise they will usually try to escape any serious mental tasks. Without being taught how to look inwards, and instead looking externally for challenges, happiness, and stimulation, teens will not grow into healthy adults.

To add to the natural difficulty of the mind and its thoughts, Western society contains a myriad of noises and distractions for young people, including television, radio, cell phones, the internet, video games, shopping malls, and cars, that inhibit access to their spirit. Kessler’s (2000) students complained that even their schools were filled with noise, chatter, and yelling, so that they experienced a sensory overload throughout the day. Kessler (2000) argued that when periods of silence are allowed in the classroom, a student is able to rest his/her nervous system, mind, and body. Silence brings calm, serenity, and a detached perspective that allows students to connect to the material that they are learning, and to their emotions and imagination (Kessler, 2000). Unfortunately, many of us have come to fear silence and space (Miller, J., 2000) and we often actively seek noise to avoid listening to ourselves. Kessler (2000) has criticized methods of
discipline that use solitude as a punishment, as in a time out. Children learn to view solitude as a negative rather than a positive force for connection.

In Community

Several female scholars and feminists have argued that women do not seek or have spiritual experiences primarily in solitude (Kings, U., 1993; Ray & McFadden, 2001; Slee, 2000). For example, Hoffman and Muramoto (2007) found that, in order of frequency, Japanese women reported spiritual experiences during times of interpersonal joy (friendship and affection in groups, families, or individuals), in a nature encounter, during aesthetic bliss, and in times of external achievement. However, Hoffman and Muramoto (2007) also reported that while this is characteristic of the culture in Japan, it is not in North America. Rather than being an either/or scenario, it is likely that in addition to encountering the spiritual in solitude, women are also able to encounter the spiritual with others or in community. Mattis (2002) found that the spiritual experiences of African-North American women occur specifically due to intimacy with others and not as a result of disconnection with the world. With this in mind, Bruce and Cockreham (2004) used groups and group activities to nurture the spirituality of adolescent girls, while Kessler (2000) used both groups and solitude.

Developmental theorists such as Kohlberg and Fowler have used Joseph Campbell’s solo quest myth, or the Hero’s Journey, to frame their stages. During the solo quest, the hero is unable to fully develop and grow within the family or community. The hero leaves home not only to find fame and fortune, but his relationship to his spirit, others, and the divine. Having achieved a higher level of self-awareness and awareness of the spiritual, the hero returns to the community to lead or contribute to the betterment of
society. Gilligan (1982) explained that the solo quest could be observed in the Oedipal Complex of Freud, in which boys must detach themselves from their mothers in order to find an appropriate life partner. Since girls do not require this separation from their mothers, their development is better defined by attachment and the ability to care (Gilligan, 1982). It is uncharacteristic for women to separate and individuate before re-integrating into the community, and they instead define themselves in terms of communities and relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Ray and McFadden (2001) purported that it is precisely within communities and relationships that women find power, in part because women’s experiences are much more concrete and centered on everyday experiences. Slee (2000) and Ray and McFadden (2001) were all informed by theorists who argued that women’s development is not linear, as are stage theories based on the solo quest, but improvisational.

The web has been proposed as a more appropriate and improvisational metaphor for women (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Ray & McFadden, 2001). A web receives its strength from many interconnecting strings not only from the inside out, but also across those strings. The more strings, the stronger the web. If part of the web is broken, the integrity of the web remains intact until that part can be repaired or the ends fused. Ray and McFadden (2001) have suggested that women’s personal myths are best described as webs, or also quilts, to emphasize the connectedness that women feel for their personal experiences and community.

Rather than using the web and its interconnectedness as a replacement for solitude in nurturing spirituality, it is possible that both are common triggers for women’s spiritual experiences. It is precisely because women are more likely to be in connection with
others in terms of Gilligan’s (1982) theory of care and responsibility that they also have more opportunity to experience Buber’s I-Thou in relation to individuals and groups. Tacey’s (2004) argument is that the more in tune we are with spirit, regardless of gender, the more likely we are to reach out to the world since spirit itself is universal.

The Arts

The arts have been used in various forms to connect with spirit, but unfortunately funding for the arts, be they visual, music, or dance, is often the first part of the classroom curriculum that is cut (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Cultures around the world have recognized music as a powerful agent for affecting mood and have created music specifically for weddings, funerals, or religious ceremonies. Music is especially important for teenagers who are rarely without their iPods or MP3 players. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explained that, “teenagers, who swing from one threat to their fragile evolving personhood to another in quick succession throughout the day, especially depend on the soothing patterns of sound to restore order in their consciousness” (p. 109). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), music can do this because in essence, music is organized auditory information that can organize the mind that is attending to it. In addition to warding off boredom and anxiety, when seriously listened to and attended to (rather than just being heard), music can produce flow experiences. Flow can occur when listening to music in solitude, but as importantly, the ritual elements and the large number of people witnessing the same event can make concerts a powerful catalyst for flow.

Flow can also be achieved through a broad range of rhythmic movements, such as dance and yoga. Dance can be extremely complex and has universal appeal, part of which is that one does not need to be a professional to enjoy the experience of controlling the
body and moving harmoniously. Teenagers find dancing at clubs an important source of enjoyment which may also contain some of the group aspects experienced at a concert. According to Isadora Duncan, an influential figure in movement education, dance is not the expression of personal feelings, but instead is the expression of universal feeling that requires the dancer to forget self-awareness (as cited in Miller, J., 2007). Letting go of the ego and self provides space for the dancer and the audience (if there is one) to connect with spirit. Yoga is so similar to flow that it is possible to think of yoga as a planned flow activity since “both try to achieve a joyous, self-forgetful involvement through concentration, which in turn is made possible by a discipline of the body” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 105). While yoga is a method to unite the individual with the sacred, it does so by increasing the individual’s skill in controlling their consciousness.

Female Spirituality

The literature that focuses distinctly on female youth spirituality or female youth spiritual experiences is limited, and what exists is somewhat disconnected. Many of the issues about female spirituality that are relevant to this research were explored in the sections on youth spirituality, curriculum, and spiritual experiences. However, to help the reader connect the various issues that relate specifically to female spirituality (regardless of age), a short summary of its major characteristics will be provided here.

First, one of the main characteristics of female spirituality is that it is relational in nature (Noddings, 1984, 2006; Slee, 2000). Women experience their spirit through their relation with their selves, others, community, the sacred, and nature, such that “to receive and to be received, to care and be cared-for” (Noddings, 1984, p. 173) is an essential component. Second, a web better reflects this relational characteristic of female
spirituality, as well as the improvisational nature of women’s relationships and spirituality (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Third, dreams, intuitions, and other non-traditional sources of knowledge are a common element in how women experience and understand their spirituality (Mattis, 2002; Ray & McFadden, 2001). The final characteristic is the way women use heroes, heroines, and mythology to understand spirituality (Slee, 2000; Steiner, 1996). To this end, both Steiner (1996) and Noddings (1984, 2006) have stated that bringing mythology, art, and aesthetics to the classroom is essential to nurture the spirituality of young women.

Summary

Tacey (2004) and Plotkin (2008) have argued that youth’s search for spiritual knowledge and for spiritual ways of understanding themselves, a search that takes youth both deeper within themselves and outside of societal perspectives (e.g. cultural, religious, or secular).

Spiritual experiences have variously been called religious, mystical, or transcendent, or even peak and flow experiences. Regardless of the name, psychologists have identified many features that characterize spiritual experiences which can be narrowed down to the noetic, the ineffable, the relational, and joy. While spiritual experiences can occur at any time or place, they are more likely to occur within nature, in situations of high psychic investment, within silence and solitude, in community, and within the arts.
Chapter 3 - Methodology

In placing the student at the forefront of education, J. Miller (2007), R. Miller (1993), Kessler (2000), and Steiner (1996) have recognized the importance of nurturing the spiritual while teaching to the growth and development of the whole student. Nevertheless, critics such as Gilligan (1982) and Pipher (1994) have argued that girls are traditionally silenced by school and society, and often feel a disconnect with their inner spiritual selves. This inquiry is an exploration into the spiritual experiences and inner lives of young women, including their understandings, interpretations, quality of experiences, and personal reflections. The question to be addressed is: What is the nature of the spiritual experiences and spiritual understandings of young women? Sub-questions include: 1) What types of spiritual experiences do young women have? 2) In what ways do these spiritual experiences affect the way in which young women interpret or interact with the world? and 3) What are the characteristics or patterns of the spiritual understandings of young women?

Van Manen (1994, 1997), a well-known phenomenologist and qualitative researcher, argued that qualitative inquiry acknowledges and values the subjectivity of the researcher, so the researcher must present his/her own personal experience as a place from which to view context, positioning, biases, and prejudices. As such, this chapter will begin by a positioning of myself as a researcher within the subject of spirituality and spiritual experiences. Following this, the section on methodology and data collection will review the participants and methods of recruitment, discuss the methods of data collection and their rationale, and explain the coding and analysis of the data. Finally, the ethical considerations of the study will be reviewed.
Myself as the researcher

When I began my doctoral studies, I was determined to research an aspect of spirituality in education. Spirituality has been a life-long interest for me, and I may not have chosen to pursue doctoral studies at this point in my life if I had not had the freedom to explore this subject in education. I began the process of planning my dissertation by compiling a long list of topics that I might like to explore, which my advisor helped me narrow down to an exploration of the spiritual experiences of young women. My master’s thesis, Holistic Education and the Teachings of Jesus, focused on an educator’s experience and after several years of working with university students with learning disabilities, I wanted to focus on the student experience. I was also enrolled in a course in curriculum for girls and young women at the time, which sparked my interest in the educational experiences of adolescent girls and the challenges that girls face. I have always been fascinated by spiritual experiences and what they reveal about us as individuals and as humans.

My interests have roots in both my family and personal history. After emigrating from Hungary to Canada after World War II, my parents met, married, and settled in the suburbs of a Southern Ontario city. Both of my parents were devout Roman Catholics; in fact, my mother wanted to become a nun before she met my father. I attended Catholic schools throughout elementary and secondary school and was spiritually active both in secondary school, by participating in groups and retreats, and in university, as a member of the Catholic Student Association. I desired to become a priest, but my sex was a barrier to pursuing that goal. Becoming a nun did not have the same allure, especially since I would not be able to perform the rituals of the mass.
I have always wondered about the big questions: What is the nature of life? Why do we exist? Why are humans self-reflective and other beings not? What is the nature of the universe? I was not just asking these questions out of general interest; instead, I was desperate for answers. But I often felt alone in these questions and in my yearning to see beyond what I was taught. I have always felt in conflict with society’s focus on consumerism and competition, and I wondered why people spent so little time discussing issues that I considered to be of real value and importance, such as spirit, nature, inequality, and poverty. As I studied psychology, I became particularly interested in studies of consciousness (altered states, dream states), transpersonal and humanistic psychology, and Eastern and Western psychology. By studying these areas, I came to a better understanding of human nature and by extension, the possibilities of the universe. Eventually I discovered education and teaching, and my life took a new path, but I have always felt grounded in the knowledge I gained during my studies.

I longed for an experience that would help me perceive greater possibilities and learn more about the nature of spirit. At the age of 20, I was asked to be a Eucharistic Minister at one of the masses for the Catholic Student Association. It was during the performance of my duties that I experienced a spiritual insight, a religious awakening, or a revelation in which I had a glimpse of the universe and the possible realities of nature. I did not see the world visually, but experienced it with my heart. I knew the universe intimately and felt myself to be interconnected with everything and everyone around me. It was a moment of awe and wonder – a moment when I took joy in the mystery of the universe. I experienced a unity between the physical and spiritual, and I understood its perceived duality to be a human creation.
Unfortunately, all that I learned during this experience was not compatible with the doctrine of the Catholic Church and I have since separated myself from organized religion. Unlike Tacey’s (2004) path from religion to secularism to spirituality, I journeyed straight from religion to spirituality, and I have strived to learn more about various experiences of spirituality and world religions. In particular, I have strived to read and learn more about Indigenous Spirituality (particularly North American), Buddhism, Paganism, Gnosticism, and early Christianity. I have also found spirituality in the theories of quantum physics, which has allowed me to merge my understanding of religion and spirituality with my western scientific education. I have jokingly referred to myself as a Quantum Gnostic Buddhist, which reflects the knowledge of spirituality and spiritual practice that I have gained from various traditions, while not being a strict adherent of any. I must admit that I have so far failed in all my attempts to begin a regular meditative practice, but I do remind myself to be present in the moment. It is from this position as a spiritual, but not religious, person that I have approached this study.

Methodology and Data Collection

In order to create the Hood Mysticism Scale, a test of mystical experiences, Hood (1975, 1977a, 1977b, 1978) used quantitative research methods that allowed for standardized testing and standardized measures. While this is one method of approaching the subject of spiritual experiences, it is not the best approach for the current study. The research question, “What is the nature of the spiritual experiences and spiritual understandings of young women?” focuses on the quality of young women’s spiritual experiences; therefore a qualitative approach is the best method of inquiry. As Eisner (1998) bluntly stated, “…qualitative experience depends on qualitative forms of inquiry”
The principles of qualitative inquiry are naturalistic and inductive in their search for patterns and complexity (Glesne, 1999); this is essential for drawing out rich descriptions for a deeper understanding of the spiritual experiences of young women.

Erickson (1986) and Wolcott (1994) suggest that there are several questions qualitative inquiry can address, including “What is happening here?” and “What do these happenings mean to the people engaged in them?” These two questions can easily be integrated into this research. *What is happening here:* What are the spiritual stories of young women? What are the patterns or characteristics of young women’s spirituality? *What do these happenings mean to the people engaged in them:* What does this understanding and experience of spirituality mean in the lives of young women? How does this affect how they know and relate to the world?

Both Erickson (1986) and Wolcott (1994) have advised that qualitative inquiry can address questions of experience and its meaning to those engaged in them, in this case, spiritual experiences. Ideally, this research will allow the voices of the young women to be prominent since voice is central to qualitative research (Eisner, 1998; Gilligan, 1982; Madriz, 2000).

*Participants*

A total of five young women between the ages of 18 and 25 participated in this study. A recruitment flyer was prepared and distributed (Appendix A), but all of the participants became aware of this research through word of mouth. Before consenting, they were provided with a copy of the flyer and a Letter of Introduction (Appendix B). Since girls under the age of eighteen were invited to participate as well, the Consent

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A sixth participant originally agreed to participate but withdrew for personal reasons.
Form (Appendix C) allowed for the signature of a guardian or parent. In the end, all the participants were over the age of 18 and did not require parental consent. Two of the participants were previously known to me through my role as an educator, but none were in a classroom where I would be evaluating them.

Each of the five participants was enrolled in an academic institution at the time of the research: four were in university programs (two undergraduate, one a second undergraduate degree and one graduate) and the youngest was in her final year of secondary school. This participant was in the process of applying to universities and colleges, but was not yet sure where she would be studying. Four of the participants were living at home with both of their parents, while the fifth was living in a university residence. Three of the participants knew each other, as two were sisters and one was their brother’s fiancé. The religious breakdown of the participants’ families were two Roman Catholic (the sisters), one United Church, one Unitarian, and one with no family religious background.

Methods

Data collection consisted of two interviews, an artefact presentation during the second interview, and a final interview with each participant. The first interview focused on gathering background information and a description of spiritual experiences (Appendix D), while the second interview began with the artefact presentation (Appendix E), followed by additional questions (Appendix F). Interviews are an appropriate method of data collection because they provide the opportunity to explore participants’ activities, feelings, lives, and any alternative explanations of their experiences (Creswell, 1998; Eisner, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Seidman, 1998; van Manen, 1994, 1997). Interviews allow
the participants to reconstruct their own experiences, and the researcher to understand “the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). In addition, interviews allow for the telling of a story while acknowledging the value and worth of that story (Seidman, 1998). Eisner (1998) has maintained that participants are willing to reveal much to the researcher if they believe this person is willing to listen; for example, the girls Brown and Gilligan (1992) interviewed became more engaged with the researchers when they were asked to tell stories about their lives.

Interviews tend to be the primary form of data collection in research on spiritual experiences (for example, Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003; Maslow, 1970), although as previously stated, there are other possible measures. Hood (1975) based The Hood Mysticism Scale on James’ qualities of religious experiences (such as ineffability, noetic qualities, ego, and spatial qualities); however, a scale does not allow for the rich, extensive description needed to address my research questions. Ferrer (2002) stated that “the validity of spiritual knowledge does not rest in its accurate matching with any pregiven content, but in the quality of selfless awareness disclosed and expressed in perception, thinking, feeling, and action” (p. 168, original in italics). In addition, Brown and Gilligan (1992) noted that when using traditional research methods (such as paper and pencil tests), the girls in their study felt judged and were guarded in their interactions. Focus groups would also not be an appropriate measure to use when discussing spirituality, as both Tacey (2004) and Hay and Nye (1998) have observed that young people are very shy about their spirituality and are concerned about exposing themselves to possible ridicule.
While qualitative researchers enter into a study without specific categories for analysis, they will have identified conceptual issues of research interest before conducting the study (Erickson, 1986). I developed my interview questions by first producing a list of topics that I wanted my participants to discuss. The biographical information that I thought might be relevant to the analysis was the participants’ religious or spiritual background, their current religious or spiritual beliefs, educational history, family information (who lives at home, number of siblings), and general interests.

Topics of conceptual interest included participant descriptions of their spiritual experiences, reflections and thoughts about their experiences, people with whom they shared their spiritual beliefs and experiences, reflections on their inner lives, reflections on female spirituality, and connections to intuition or creativity (as specific reflections on inner life). Descriptions of and reflections upon their spiritual experiences were at the core of this study. I chose to ask with whom the participants shared their experiences or with whom they discussed their spiritual beliefs in order to probe for feelings of community or isolation. I wondered if the participants might have a close friend or a religious community with whom or which they would discuss their spirituality. I did not want to ask about spirituality or spiritual beliefs directly because that might elicit answers about God, the afterlife, and ethical beliefs, which were not central to the research problem. Instead, I chose the topic of inner life in an attempt to learn more about the girls’ relationships with themselves. I also chose to ask about the participants’ perspectives on female spirituality to draw out any observations about gender or gender differences in spirituality. Finally, the topic of intuition and creativity is another means of
inquiring about inner life, as it is emphasized in holistic education as a means of connecting with spirit (Kessler, 2000; Miller, 2007; Steiner, 1996).

I separated these topics of conceptual interest into two groups (first and second interviews) to loosely follow Seidman’s (1998) order of questioning in phenomenological research. I condensed two of Seidman’s (1998) sections, focused life history and details of the experience, into my first interview. Since I did not require a richly detailed life history or an extended discussion of the details of the experience, one interview was sufficient for the data collection. My final topics merged together to touch on Seidman’s (1998) final interview, reflection on the meaning of the experience.

I then constructed questions based on the topics of conceptual interest. Van Manen (1994, 1997) and Seidman (1998) recommend that interview questions should encourage the participant to use descriptive language and partake in storytelling rather than asking ‘why’ questions. de Marrais (2004) and Glesne (1999) warn that ‘why’ questions force the participant from description to abstraction, which requires analysis or rationalization about the experience. This hinders the rich detail that storytelling can produce. Questions should be short and direct, require the participant to recall events, and be general and open-ended (de Marrais, 2004). Appendix D lists the questions in the first interview, which were framed in terms of storytelling (can you tell me about an experience…) and reconstructing events (how do you describe the experience) (Seidman, 1998). The remaining questions were framed as probing questions to elicit more detail about the experience. The second interview questions (Appendix F) were designed to allow the participants to reflect on the meaning of the experience (Seidman, 1998; van
Manen, 1994, 1997). The excerpt in Appendix G is an example of the first interview with Theresa and is intended to highlight my style of questioning.

Considering the age of my participants and the busyness of their lives, I attempted to complete each interview within a 45 to 75 minute time frame and allowed for two primary interviews. This provided enough time to ask approximately five open-ended questions⁴ (Creswell, 1998), and allowed for self-reflection as the participants were then given time to choose the artefact they wished to bring to the second interview. The time between the interviews allowed the participants to become more comfortable with me as a researcher and with the questions I was asking. Girls may also be reserved and uncomfortable when they do not have some facet of control (Brown & Gilligan, 1994; Gilligan, 1982); by having multiple interviews the participants had more control over their continued participation in the study (one chose not to continue) and for their artefact presentation. Time also allowed for the development of trust between the participants and myself, which is essential to qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Eisner, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Hay & Nye, 1998; Seidman, 1998).

Interview questions should be updated and altered during the course of a study to reflect the nature of the answers provided by some or all of the participants, according to Glesne (1999). The difficulty with this, however, is that it may require returning to previously interviewed participants to ask them follow-up questions (Glesne, 1999). Adding a third and final interview in the construction of the methodology allowed for this opportunity, and any new questions that arose from the interviews could be asked in this

⁴ The interview question sheets in Appendix D and F lists more than 5 questions per interview. I expanded subquestions into separate numbered questions for greater ease of reading during interviews.
final meeting. Following the second interview and artefact presentation, all data was transcribed and given an initial analysis (described in the coding and analysis section). I grouped basic themes and common features into a mind map, also called a web design. Mind maps are visual representations of information where material flows from the centre outward in bubbles (think also of the shape of a spider web), so that major ideas or categories are at the center and details stretch out near the ends. A mind map is not hierarchal or linear, and thus allows information to be subdivided into neutral and equal parts. The mind maps were presented to the participants at the beginning of the third interview so they could see my initial findings and have some preparation for my follow-up questions. Member checks such as these are a form of data verification, which is essential to qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Wolcott, 1994).

To provide an additional form of data, which is necessary for triangulation and credible interpretation (Eisner, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Wolcott, 1994), participants were asked to bring an artefact or item of spiritual significance for presentation and discussion to the second interview (Protocol in Appendix E). The item could be an object, artwork, poetry, or something nonverbal such as music or dance. It could have been something they created themselves, something they were given, or something they found or bought. According to Eisner (1998), artefacts allow the researcher to use unobtrusive measures to reveal what individuals will not or cannot say, which is especially relevant to a subject that by its very nature is difficult to verbalize. Eisner claimed that artefacts are “indirect surrogates for values, expectations, and behaviors that might otherwise be difficult to see and assess” (Eisner, 1998, p. 185) that can be analyzed by the researcher. Objects and
artefacts are often mute; however, through their importance and emphasis, they reveal much about an individual (Eisner, 1998).

At the beginning of the second interview, I allowed the participants to ask any questions or make any comments that may have risen since the last time we met. I then asked the participants to present their artefacts, which allowed the participants to begin the second interview by discussing their spirituality in a way that was meaningful to them. I asked them whether or not they had any difficulty in choosing an artefact, then I allowed them to describe the item and explain its spiritual significance. Appendix H offers an excerpt from the beginning of my second interview with Kim. I did not have pre-written questions about the artefact, but rather my questions flowed from the description and story of the participants. Appendix I offers an example of my second interview with Maria. In addition, they allowed the participants another opportunity to explore and discuss their inner lives and provide rich data for this research, both prior to and during the interview. Other researchers of spiritual experiences have also used some other measure of data collection besides interviews; for example, Hay and Nye (1998) used photographs to generate reflective conversation and Coles’ (1990) children drew pictures. While Maslow (1970) did conduct interviews, he also observed non-verbal communication and analyzed this information in addition to the verbal material.

Coding and Analysis

The method of data analysis with which I identified was Wolcott’s (1994) trio of data analysis methods: description, analysis, and interpretation. According to Wolcott (1994), these methods are not mutually exclusive, and I found that this trio offered a theoretical and applied approach to qualitative data analysis that worked well in my
transformation of the data into context and themes. In description, Wolcott (1994) emphasized that data should speak for itself; this is accomplished by allowing the participants to tell their own stories. Thus, each participant’s spiritual experience and artefact presentation are described in the upcoming chapters. I attempted to present the stories as the participants described them, while at the same time paying attention to the flow and order of the stories for readability.

The process of analysis takes place during and after the coding of the data and identifies the key factors, relationships, and patterns among the stories told. To avoid confusion with the overall process of data analysis, Wolcott (1994) narrowed the definition of analysis at this stage to refer “specifically and narrowly to systematic procedures followed in order to identify essential features and relationships consonant with the descriptors” (p. 24). I approached coding as a multi-step process. First, I needed to code and conduct an initial analysis of interviews one and two to prepare for the third interview. As I read the transcripts of the first two interviews, I made notes in the left hand margin of my first codes of the data. This included words used by the participants, such as “awe,” “passion,” “peace,” and “joy.” I also coded the data according to the topics identified by the participants, such as “connection to people,” “choosing, not conforming,” “negative reactions of others,” and “thinking and spirituality intermingle.” I attempted to keep the codes as simple as possible and to create codes using the words of the participants as much as possible.

I then transferred these codes to a blank sheet of paper and randomly dispersed them across the page. As I searched for commonalities within the data, I began forming groups and categories by circling codes and drawing lines to connect them to other codes.
I then summarized these groups and categories into mind maps. I initially did this twice for each participant, which allowed me to find different categories the second time. These categories became the basis of the mind map I prepared for the third interview with the participants. For example, four major themes I initially identified in Kelly’s first two interviews were “female,” “power,” “ebb and flow,” and “holds the map.” During this coding step, I was still interested in looking for concepts within each participant’s data rather than across the participants.

The third interviews were then transcribed and coded according to the same process described above. I continued to follow the same process by placing all the codes randomly on a blank page and connecting similar codes, this time including data from the final interview. Again, I summarized the groupings into mind maps. Once I had identified initial categories, themes, and concepts, I colour coded each. I then returned to my coded data and, using the right hand margin, I coded using these new categories. Some of these themes and categories were “inner life,” “mentor,” “challenges,” and “community.” Here I was able to determine whether the themes and categories were prevalent, whether the data supported the themes, or if there was another theme or category that I had not noticed. I continued the pattern of creating and recreating mind maps in my search for the final themes revealed by the data. Once again, these themes and categories were within each participant’s data rather than across all the participants. The final themes for each participant are discussed in Chapters 4 – 8.

In order to look for themes across the participants, I used the various mind maps created throughout the process to identify overall categories and themes. In some cases, I returned to the raw data to find descriptors that reappeared across participants, even if
they had not appeared to a great extent within the participant data. The final themes are discussed in Chapter 9.

Finally, the goal of qualitative research is interpretation that looks “for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis” (Wolcott, 1994, pp. 10-11). Thus, analysis is identifying the patterns and interpretation is the understanding of those patterns. Using the most recent and best mind maps, I began my interpretation of the data by returning to the literature. Wolcott (1994) highlighted understanding in qualitative inquiry, which comes in part from the knowledge found in the literature and also from my own sense of the participants, the data, the literature, and myself. In the interpretation phase, qualitative inquiry is a subjective process of research. While I made every attempt to allow the voices of the participants to be visible in this research, my interpretation of the data is intimately related to the literature I have chosen to review, and my own spiritual beliefs and understandings.

Ethical Considerations

This research was submitted for scrutiny to the Ethics Review Unit of the University of Toronto. Here the method of recruitment, choice of participants, method of data collection, and method of data analysis were approved. It was determined that due to the nature and design of the study, this research posed no significant risk to participants. Given the conversational nature of the interview questions and the right of participants to refuse to answer questions, the risk of emotional distress was considered to be small. Possible benefits for the participants included the opportunity to reflect on their spirituality and its influence in their lives with an interested researcher. The interviews
may allow the participants to further identify knowledge, strengths, and opportunities for personal development.

Participants were asked to sign a letter of Informed Consent, which outlined the procedure of the study (including the number of interviews and artefact presentation), the method of recording the data (audiotape), the proposed use of data (for academic purposes), and the confidentiality of the participants’ information (the use of pseudonyms; access to raw data restricted to myself and my thesis advisor). The Informed Consent letter also notified the participants of their right to not answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time without the risk of penalty.

This study is limited by the design of small-scale qualitative inquiry. With only five participants, there can be little to no diversity in terms of spiritual background, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and education. As such, the findings of this study cannot be generalizeable to the population, and are limited to the spiritual experiences and understandings of a small group of young women in Southern Ontario.

While I had known two of the participants prior to this study in a teaching context, I was not a course instructor, meaning that I would not be in a position to affect their grades. However, at the time of the interviews, I was still in a position to provide study strategy assistance to these two participants, Amelia and Kelly.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, all the names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms, including the names of the participants, persons mentioned by the participants, and organizations. Only the names of cities and countries of origin are unaltered.

Summary
This chapter reviewed the methodology used in this study, beginning with a positioning of myself as a researcher within the subject of spirituality and spiritual experiences. The methodology and data collection section reviewed the participants and methods of recruitment. In addition, an in-depth discussion of the methods of data collection, and coding and analysis of the data allowed for a greater understanding of not only the methods of research, but of me as the researcher. Finally, the ethical considerations of the study were reviewed.
Chapter 4 – Kelly: “I Went for a Walk”

Kelly is a striking young woman with long auburn hair and dark brown eyes, who surprised me by bringing me coffee at our first meeting. Her manner of dress did not give away the fact that she is a highly artistic person, but instead allowed her to blend in rather than stand out in a crowd. A 19-year-old first year university student, Kelly is studying visual arts and education in the hopes of becoming an elementary teacher. Kelly is the only participant whose parents are divorced (they divorced when she was 11 years old) and the only one not living at home (she lives in residence). The younger of two girls, her older sister graduated from university the same year Kelly graduated from secondary school. Kelly was raised in an upper middle class family that leans much more towards science than religion. Kelly considers herself to be the black sheep of the family. It struck me when we first met that she was verbally holding back, waiting for me to set the tone for our conversation. She presented as a thoughtful and observant person, and I discerned that Kelly was trying to make both herself and me at ease by giving me her full attention. Kelly was very careful about asking me to restate questions that she did not fully understand, but when she did answer, she appeared comfortable with giving me free and open responses.

Although Kelly is focusing primarily on painting and sculpture at university, she has a number of other artistic hobbies and activities that interest her. At four years old, she took up pottery, at eleven, she took up stained glass, and recently, she tried her hand at cake decorating. Kelly loves to try new, creative art forms and crafts that are “fun” and let her work with her hands. She also has 30 pen pals that she continues to stay in contact with the old-fashioned way – with hand-written letters sent through the post office. She
says this does not take too much of her time, however, since she can go a year without writing to someone. In all, Kelly considers herself to be a typical university student who enjoys activities like snowboarding and being with her friends.

With the exception of her grandmother who has lived with Kelly throughout her life, Kelly and her family are not religious. Both Kelly and her mother are strong believers in evolution, her mother being particularly sceptical about the spiritual since it cannot be proven to exist. According to Kelly, her mother is “just taking from the knowledge she sees present.” While spirituality could exist, her mother only believes in what she can see. Kelly explained that her father is very much the same, and is not very spiritual. As many typical North American families do, however, Kelly’s family celebrates Christmas and Easter. Kelly is not without exposure to religion, as she has attended an Anglican Church with her grandmother. This did not last, as Kelly does not believe in God and stopped attending church when she reached puberty. Kelly instead said that she went to church because she “believed in [her] grandma” and attending church made her grandmother proud. Kelly also values the connection she had with her grandmother, which was reinforced during their time together in church.

Kelly struggled early as a student and was diagnosed with a learning disability in Grade 3 at a public school. Her parents then sent her to a private school that specialized in teaching students with special education needs, a school she continued to attend until she graduated in Grade 8. At this time, Kelly’s parents allowed her to make her own decision about the school she would attend for her secondary education. After researching the secondary schools in the area, Kelly found a local Waldorf School that she believed matched her philosophy of education and had an emphasis on the arts.
Through her struggles with education and her success at the Waldorf School, Kelly decided that she wanted to become a Waldorf teacher. Like other students with learning disabilities, Kelly felt that many of her teachers could not connect with her learning disability and this left her feeling isolated and frustrated. She found it very difficult “to have teachers try to teach me how to overcome the disability without them having any idea where I was coming from.” While she was in secondary school, Kelly found that she was able to use her strengths to enjoy learning and to achieve high enough grades to be accepted into a concurrent education program. Kelly’s major is fine arts, with a minor in history, and she would like eventually to become a specialist in special education. Kelly wants to become a teacher so that her students can have someone who understands their difficulties and make learning “as easy for them as possible.”

A Sunny Afternoon

I worked with Kelly in my capacity as a teacher prior to beginning this study. As we talked about her experience at the Waldorf School and my research, Kelly asked if she could participate. She wanted to share a powerful spiritual experience with me that had a great impact on her life. During the summer of her 16th year, Kelly “went for a walk.” She began her story:

I went for a walk. A four-hour walk with my now ex-boyfriend and we - It was in the summertime. And we just going for a walk and we were just bouncing ideas off of each other. It was just totally a summer afternoon. It was beautiful. I then made the connection with myself that day that I really - everything kind of clicked. So I really started to think about the society we lived in. And we kind of together - we have very similar mentalities so we kind of picked it apart.
During this experience, Kelly made a “connection with [her]self” that she believes informed her beliefs about society, her worldview, and the way she wanted to live her life. For example, it was during this walk that she decided to become a vegetarian:

We were talking about the meat industry, for example. And then, that was the day I stopped shaving my legs. That was the day I realized that we live in this capitalist society and really we should be nomadic and we should live - we should give back the land to ourselves and stop using these roads and start being more efficient and start being smart.

Kelly asserted that she changed her life, both in terms of what she believed but also in terms of how she would live her life, due to this walk.

On the surface, this experience could appear to be a moment of youthful rebellion when Kelly was excited by new ideas rather than by something spiritual. However, Kelly believes that her spirituality “happened” on that day and has flowed from that point on. Her description revealed that much more than rebellion was happening at the time. Kelly said she was experiencing a state of awe, so that:

It felt like I had butterflies in my stomach. Right before Christmas kind of feeling, when you’re a child. And it was just - I guess it something (unintelligible) indescribable - I felt really, really at peace with myself. I didn’t feel burdened by all these thoughts. I didn’t feel heavy. I felt light.

The words that Kelly used to describe her experience are “butterflies,” “indescribable,” “at peace with myself,” and “I felt light.” Kelly felt connected by this experience, in particular, connected to her thoughts. She described what may be called an ‘aha’ experience, where she had a unique moment of clarity and understanding. Kelly said, “I
went from absorbing, absorbing into - that was my first clicking moment. Where I put
everything out on the line and I figured out what I wanted from it.” She also described it
as an opening up, where she “was opening the doors, putting everything on the table.”
Other phrases Kelly used were that the experience “shook her world,” was
“overwhelming,” and it “transformed her lifestyle.”

Kelly’s experience held two facets. The first was the elation and joy just
described, and the second was the examination of her beliefs about the world, society,
and her position on issues. To describe her decision-making process, Kelly explained
how she posed questions to herself:

O.K., Kelly. How do you feel that there are Hummers driving around you right
now? How do you feel that women in North America are dying from anorexia?
How do you feel that North America’s dying from obesity? Like, I put it all out
there. And so I looked at each one individually and decided whether or not it was
beautiful or whether or not it was disgusting. So it was that process and there was
no really grey area for me. It was like - I think shaving your legs is stupid because
there’s no point to it. But it’s so important to society that you do it and you
conform to being this woman. So I put that out there.

Kelly needed to come to terms with what her beliefs were, what she stood for and how
she was going to act as a young adult in the modern world. Kelly credits this single
experience for changing her life and how she interacts with herself and the world around
her. She explained:

Well, it totally - at the time changed my view in life. I started to work harder in
school. I started to eat healthier. I started vegetarian lifestyle which I’ve
continued. I grew out my leg hair (laughs). I didn’t wear make-up anymore; I wouldn’t go shopping in malls anymore. I really applied myself to these ideals I kind of picked through, all these things that society’s telling us - I chose the ones I liked and I discarded the ones I didn’t.

However, it would not be correct to describe Kelly’s walk as an exercise in logic since she asserted that more than her intellect was involved.

The thoughts and decision-making aspects of Kelly’s experience melded with the ineffable. She described the experience like a wave, “like a moment that just kind of flew over me,” a moment in which she was an active participant. She described it further:

It just came over me and I really feel like it came within me versus something else. Like it was all inside of me and it just needed to come out and it did. And I can’t explain why it came out. It was just like bottled, bottled up and it all just came out. ’Cause one idea just rolls off the next and then it’s this flow.

According to Kelly, the source of this experience was partly the “power of [her] company,” that being her boyfriend, as well as “the power of where I was in my life and it was just making those connections.”

Kelly believes that while she was undergoing this profound event in her life, her boyfriend was an active reflector, providing feedback while she came to her own decisions. For example:

We were bouncing ideas off of each other. And I go, “what do you think about shaving your legs? Like it’s kind of stupid if you think about it, right?” and he’s like, “Oh, yeah. I totally agree.” And we’d be like, “Why do you people do it?”
And we totally went into it. So I think it wouldn’t have happened the way it happened without him.

Kelly also credits him with helping her commit to these decisions that she made and incorporate her beliefs into her everyday life:

He influenced me a lot. He was very supportive in making sure I stuck with those decisions and formulated them. For example, he was a vegetarian pretty much his entire life. So I’d go, “Oh, the meat industry. I’m having a really big problem with this.” He was very supportive in helping me make those connections and helping me have those questions answered. So he was a huge part of that experience.

Ultimately, however, this was Kelly’s spiritual experience and her boyfriend was a facilitator. Kelly does not believe his experience that day was the same:

I don’t think he was - I think he was agreeing, but I don’t think he had the same life-altering experience that I did. I think he was agreeing and he was following along. He was a part of it, but I don’t think he had the same - I don’t think he walked away from that with the same kind of presence within himself that I did.

And it is precisely that ‘presence’ within herself that made this experience unique.

Kelly also had a second spiritual experience that was quite different in description and impact from the first. This experience was more recent, occurring just a month before we met for the interviews. Kelly was asked to complete her first art assignment of her university career, in a visual culture class. Kelly was not nervous about the assignment, but she did want to do well and receive a good mark. Her class was asked to create a free-range art piece, one that would reflect the material in the textbook. Kelly described what she created:
So I decided to do this collaborative piece, kind of, this idea of reflection. And so I did this mirror - children’s flip books with the fuzzy spot, for example. Every time you turn the page the fuzzy spot is on the dog on some part. Do you know what I’m talking about? So I decided to do a piece like that with this idea of reflection.

Even though this assignment was not due for several weeks, Kelly worked with the piece for 10 hours until it was complete. She felt so swept up in the ideas she had, that she did not notice the time pass, not even when it was 4 am:

The more the wheels started spinning the more I became overwhelmed with it. And it was such a big part of me; it was such a big part my university experience to just get this one piece done. Nothing in the world mattered like, I didn’t have anything pressing and usually when you have something pressing you stay up late to work. It was such a great importance to me; the ideas were just flowing out of me. The world kind of stopped when I was doing it. And I’m a girl who needs my sleep. So it was a big deal.

Kelly described the walk as awe-inspiring and an opportunity to connect with her thoughts, but creating her art piece was exhilarating in a much different sense:

I felt really empowered by it. It was like coming off of a roller coaster. I had adrenalin from it. And when I went to bed, I only went to bed because it was time to go to bed. It wasn’t like - I could have done it all night.

As Kelly spoke about this assignment, she used the word ‘passion.’ This is a word she also used to describe her love of art and creating art pieces. Still speaking of her visual culture assignment she stated:
Yeah, but it felt really good because I was really passionate about it. And to be really passionate about a homework assignment, I think is really important because usually I’m not very passionate about the assignments given. Like I give them my all and I put in what I can and I always try to give 100%. But this was different. It came out of me, like originally it was just an idea and I was like O.K., I’ll do it. But then, it just totally overwhelmed me and that was the first homework assignment I’ve had at [university name] that was like that.

The creativity that is part of art projects and presentations is part of what has inspired Kelly to pursue a career in teaching. She stated that “one of the reasons why I wanted to be a teacher was when I’m working on something I’m really passionate about the whole world closes down. And I can just focus in on it.”

Although she described this as an experience in which she felt completely enveloped, it was still distinct from the walk. The art piece was an absorption in the moment, while the walk was a life-changing experience. Kelly said that the art piece “was significant in my life but that next morning I wasn’t a different person from it, I don’t think.”

_A Torn Photograph_

Kelly chose to bring an item that she encountered while on her walk. Together, she and her boyfriend found a discarded photograph of a man’s forehead just lying on the ground. It was an ordinary photograph that perhaps had not turned out as intended. It appeared that someone had taken a picture of himself but did not center his face and instead only caught his balding forehead. A bright blue sky can be seen in the background. Kelly and her boyfriend ripped the photograph in two and each took one
half. Kelly believes that the picture’s owner must have tossed it out, thinking he did not need it anymore. Kelly said:

He took a photo of his face, and then the sky’s in the background and I’m sure he’s walking along and he just like, “I don’t need this photo” and created litter, I’m assuming. It’s kind of a fun mystery to figure out where it came from.

Kelly keeps this picture glued in a scrapbook diary. Over the years, the glue began to dry, so the picture had already come loose from the rest of the scrapbook. Kelly planned to glue it back in once we were through with the interviews.

Choosing this object to discuss as an item of spiritual significance was an easy decision for Kelly, since it was a direct link to her spiritual experience. She explained that:

The more I started to think about it, the more I realized it would be a good example because I really believe spirituality is about life’s fleeting moments every day. Little moments make up generally, I don’t know. The walk was a moment. And so I feel that being here on earth is more my spirituality. So it represents just one of those moments.

Kelly views this picture not as an individual’s private property, but as part of a community of objects that surround us every day. She stated that “you find the picture, why not rip it in half and share it? Why not pick it up and look at and observe it? It’s an object that someone else’s trash becomes another person’s treasure.”

Since Kelly is such a creative person, she did consider bringing one of her own creations of art. Kelly did not feel that these would be the best representations, however, because nothing she has created truly reflects her experience or her spirituality. Looking
at this torn half of a picture “refreshes the thoughts that were happening in [her] head during that walk,” while her artwork is often created for other reasons, such as a present for a friend or just to have fun. Kelly is careful to point out that the picture is not a “lucky charm” that she looks at before an exam, nor does she even think about it all that often, but it is a reminder of her experience and her convictions. The picture has also become a “prized possession” for her; at the same time, she realizes it is just a “piece of rubbish.” Kelly would not want to lose this picture, but she hopes that if she did ever lose it, someone else would find it and also have an experience with it.

*Power of Knowing Who You Are*

The subheading for this section was provided by Kelly herself. Her spiritual walk led Kelly to take a stand against the mainstream on several issues, and as such, she has had to endure many challenges from friends, family, and acquaintances. While Kelly’s vegetarianism has only presented minor challenges, she often has to explain why she does not shave her legs like other young women. Of this, Kelly makes a comparison between herself and a male friend who is gay. He is comfortable speaking about his homosexuality and Kelly is comfortable with him as well because “homosexuality’s not a big deal for me ’cause it’s - you can’t help it. It’s who you are and it doesn’t matter. At the end of the day it doesn’t matter.” Kelly explained that people are still scared of him, that they don’t understand him or his sexuality, and ultimately, “they’re intimidated by his power of knowing who he is.” Kelly believes that others are also intimidated by her own power of knowing herself, especially in her refusal to shave her legs. She reflected that “it’s intimidating for people to think that there’s mentality out there. That there’s
someone different, I think. Someone not afraid to take a stand or they just don’t understand it or they don’t want to deal with it.”

Some have appreciated the stand that Kelly has taken, especially on the issue of shaving her legs. This has come mostly from the girls and women at her secondary school, as well as from girls Kelly has met during her first year at university. Kelly said:

Some people have a lot of respect for it and they appreciate it. I have, for example, some girls on my floor go, “Kelly, I shave my legs, I’ll never stop shaving my legs but I think it’s amazing that you don’t. And it is a billboard to everyone out there saying, “I don’t care and I don’t have to.” And people really appreciate that.

Although at times Kelly spoke in terms of protest against society and perceived notions of beauty, she mostly spoke of personal power of knowing herself in her lack of need or desire to conform to society’s norms.

This power that Kelly possesses is the power of her knowledge of self, which Kelly attributes to the spiritual experience of her walk. This was the time when Kelly established her beliefs and values about several issues and determined various ways of living and maintaining these beliefs. Kelly has had positive feedback from others who support her beliefs and her reasons for coming to this position. Her secondary school is one of the places where Kelly has felt supported in embracing the nature of her experience and the positions that she has taken. Kelly went for her walk while she was attending the Waldorf School, a place which she also credits for opening her up to the possibility of that experience. Kelly said that “my high school kind of fostered that mentality and then I kind of took it home for myself.” Not only did the Waldorf School
foster her spiritual experience, but they also accepted her positions on capitalism, vegetarianism, and norms of beauty. Kelly said:

And because of my high school, it was a really welcoming environment for that. Because Waldorf - it’s - sorry to use a cliché word, but it’s a very, like, hippie kind of culture. So you know, it was very accepting of the fact that I didn’t shave my legs, for example. I was the prom queen and I had the prom queen dress on with hairy legs. Like, you wouldn’t get that anywhere else in the world but at that school! So, that was really welcoming environment for that and I give it a lot of credit for me being able to sustain this in my worldview.

On the other hand, however, Kelly has experienced a fair amount of negative reaction from others due to her lifestyle choices and at times, the spiritual experience that led her to them. Kelly stated that these negative reactions exclude her vegetarianism since this is more socially acceptable and that even without a spiritual experience as a catalyst, many others have taken the same stance against the eating of meat. But when it comes to shaving her legs or her rejection of consumerism, she asserted that this is not the norm. For instance, Kelly’s parents have had difficulty accepting her beliefs and have not been supportive. Kelly said, “my father hates the fact that I don’t shave my legs. My mother hates the fact, like, I am the black sheep of the family by far.” Kelly suggested that some people have difficulty with what her position reflects about their own lives, and as well, that she came to these positions during a spiritual experience. Kelly observed that:

It freaks people out a bit because they feel - well, I eat meat and I haven’t had this experience and you’re saying to me that you put my whole life out on the line and
you’ve said it sucks and now you’re living differently. And a lot of people get offended by that.

Kelly has noticed that on the whole, students at her university are not as open minded as those she encountered in secondary school. One girl on her floor thought of her as a “weirdo” for not shaving her legs, and another boy always teased her in the cafeteria about her vegetarianism (teasing that was not welcomed by Kelly). Kelly suggested that since the students at her university are from small towns, they have not been introduced to the “hippie culture” and “organic living” that characterized her secondary school. In that setting, Kelly received positive responses from her peers, such as “You don’t shave your legs? Neither does my mom!” At university, Kelly feels that when she puts herself out there for others to see, she’s leading by example and this makes her schoolmates uncomfortable. Kelly made a joke about not having converted anyone yet, but at the same time she acknowledged that this was not her role and it would not be healthy for others to adopt her lifestyle outright. Kelly said that “if they don’t have that experience then it’s not - it’s not going to make sense to them. They’re just going to be doing it because they think it’s right, but for me I know it’s right.” Once again, this is not solely a political position for Kelly, but a personal one because it was tied to her spiritual experience.

Kelly reported that she does make an effort to explain her position and empowerment to others, not for her own wellbeing, but often for theirs. Kelly enjoyed talking about her experiences and her beliefs in our sessions because “you’re wanting to learn from it and you’re wanting to take something from it.” But with others she must discuss it for their sake, which is not so enjoyable. Kelly lamented:
I have other people where I feel like I’m explaining why I do these things. For their peace of mind. Like, can you just tell me because I don’t get it and I’m like kind of feeding them the information so they can be O.K. with the fact that I don’t eat meat or they can be O.K. with the fact that I don’t shave my legs or whatever life choices I’ve made.

Once again, Kelly believes that others are intimidated by her power of knowing who she is.

**Ebb and Flow**

Kelly is very concerned that her experience does not hold the same power over her life that it once did. This is an issue of great importance to Kelly because she believes it is a struggle over her consciousness or self-awareness. Several times Kelly referred to the experience as “fading” or she was “losing touch with all those thoughts.” During our initial meeting, Kelly indicated that she needed another experience because she was beginning to lose her desire to practice her beliefs. Although her vegetarianism is not so much at risk, her other practices are. For example, she stated, “I’m totally cool with the fact that I don’t shave my legs, I think it’s awesome. And then other days I’m like, I’m really sick of this, maybe I’ll shave them.” In addition, she stated that:

[I] thought a lot about the environment that day. And I didn’t want to get a driver’s license and I wanted to take the bus, not even, I wanted to take the subway. I wanted to be very environmental. And so just looking at that one example, like, I drive a Jeep now. But some days I want to sell my Jeep and other days I don’t care about the environment.
This ebb and flow in the power of her beliefs over her behaviour is of particular concern to Kelly. Her interpretation is that “society’s kind of grinding back into me.” After all, it is difficult being the rebel or outsider. Kelly attributed part of this struggle to the change in her environment, being in a new school and feeling the pressure to conform. Kelly reflected that:

Here it’s hard. I find it’s hard. Because a lot of kids are very mainstream culture. They follow the views of society. They like look at you funny because you don’t shave your legs. Or the fact that you have artwork all over the place because it’s so important to you. Like a lot of people find that hard here. I’m tired of having to explain myself all the time.

The culture of Kelly’s university is somewhat conservative, and students there may not be as receptive not only to Kelly’s experiences, but also to her anti-corporate views.

When Kelly thought about renewing or “refreshing” herself and her beliefs, she felt that another spiritual experience was needed and that it would be a gift. This initial experience gave her the forum to determine her values, personal and spiritual, which have brought her to this point in her life. But now that she is in a time of transition, from secondary school to university, she said, “I don’t know where I am all over again.” When Kelly sees her torn picture fragment, she feels that her beliefs, feelings, and experiences are renewed. However, she understands that because the time has passed, she is older and a different person, and that “it will never be the same.”

Kelly reflected that this instability that she feels is not just about the fading power of the walk, but of the feeling that she is losing herself. This is reflective of the difficulty she is having in maintaining her inner self in a different community. Our conversations
reach further into her school year, and by the end of the interviews, Kelly did not feel these same pressures anymore, that is, the sense of pressure to conform and the pressure to have a similar spiritual experience in order to establish her values. It was a friend who helped to put her year of transition into perspective:

She’d said, well Kelly, I don’t - you know, you’re not the same person you were in Grade 1 and you’re not the same person you were in Grade 5 and you’re not the same person you were in Grade 9 and you’re not the same person you were the first day you came to school. So you’re never going to be the same person, so - I started to think about it and I go - she’s right. Why am I holding on so tightly to someone I was when your environment and who you’re around and what you’re exposed to shapes who you are today?

Kelly no longer feels that she must have another spiritual experience to move forward in her life. She would like to have other types of experiences that allow her to continue to enrich her inner life, rather than cling to the past.

*Her Inner Life Holds the Map*

Kelly has given a great deal of thought to her inner self, her external world, and how the two relate. She has come to the conclusion that her inner life “holds the map” for her life, her behaviours, and her interactions with herself and the world. She stated that this was not a moral map, but rather was a map of the characteristics she identified as being a part of her; for example, creativity, loyalty, motivation, emotions, secrets, her history, and her learning disability. According to Kelly, her inner life is also her humanity.
Creativity is one characteristic of her inner life that Kelly is very comfortable speaking about. Kelly said of creativity: “when I come up with a thought for a piece, that is my inner life.” Her inner life “holds the map” and “creates the thoughts” behind the particular piece she is working on. In this sense, Kelly believes that not shaving her legs is creative because “it’s taking a thought and it’s changing it into your own and there’s a meaning behind it.” In creating art, her inner life tells her how she wants to go about doing the piece and how it should look, but this is the end of her inner life’s role in the creative process. The physical and manual creation of a piece is not a part of her inner life, but is rather the completion of the project. For example:

When I’m sitting down with my smock on and I’m going for it, the whole world kind of shuts down and I’m just focusing on it. Like, I’m just here to get the job done. So the thoughts already been done, the creativity already been established, it’s just making it happen now. So creativity yes, for creating, no.

Kelly views her inner life and spirituality as a part of her that puts things into perspective. Realizing that she cannot expose her inner self all the time, Kelly explained that it balances and filters the external world and how she wants to be perceived in that world, so that her inner life fuses the internal and external together. This became very difficult for Kelly to explain, but she did feel that it was necessary to try. Kelly gave this example:

I can be very shy inside and I come off totally outgoing in a situation. But when mixing them together, that’s when I can cope in the real world. Because if I’m, like, so, I don’t want to be withdrawn, but sometimes I enter a room and I feel withdrawn. So I come off, I go, “O.K. Kelly. Big personality. No one’s gonna
know.” And in the process of doing that I mix the two and I come off confident, but not exciting. I can – very timid and I’m making big jokes and having big laughs and it’s not genuine sometimes.

While Kelly was willing to admit that her outer self is not her true person, she clarified that her inner self is not her true self either. Kelly views the combination of two, the place where they intersect, to be her authentic self. Kelly said:

I think I’m living in this constant balancing of my two worlds. And as a result, I get who I am. And I think that’s authentic. ’Cause in my mind I’m playing with two ideas, and I want to be both. And so I create this - I don’t create it, it happens to be me in the process.

According to Kelly, this balance explains why her spiritual experience was so laden with thoughts and decisions, because Kelly comes to her authentic self through an integrative process of connecting her inner and outer worlds. On her walk that day, Kelly experienced her authentic self as she integrated her external and internal worlds. She tried to connect with her spirituality by “constantly trying to keep myself aware.” Kelly observes that spirituality is found in fleeting moments and in “not becoming numb to mundane moments.”

_Becoming a Woman_

Kelly connects her authentic self and her awareness of her spirituality to her understanding of herself as a woman. It was obvious to me from the very first time we met that Kelly is a very strong, independent, and feminine young woman. Her gender infused our conversations from the very beginning when Kelly declared that she decided
to stop shaving her legs as a result of her spiritual experience. Explaining the relationship between her spirituality and her womanhood, Kelly said:

I feel as if - so my spirituality is my thoughts. It’s making the connections in the world I want to live in and creating that world. Being a female, being an independent female, I like to radiate those thoughts and individualism.

What Kelly radiates by her act of empowerment by not shaving her legs is her redefinition of the concepts of female and femininity. Kelly feels firmly planted in the realm of womanhood, but she is not necessarily society’s woman, and this is something that she struggles with:

I don’t think I struggled to become a woman because, what is the definition? What is sexuality? What is gender? Do I struggle to become the ideal woman? Yes! What society projects onto females? Yes! I struggle to do that. I don’t buy into it.

At the same time, she realized that the struggle would be much easier if she did buy into it, especially by shaving her legs. In fact, Kelly switched society’s paradigm by asking, “And the leg shaving thing is a billboard into the world saying, why do you shave your legs? Not why don’t I?” In this way, not shaving her legs is Kelly’s billboard announcing her authentic self as well as her beliefs about gender stereotypes.

Kelly had been thinking about the role of gender in self-identity and within society due to a paper she had been writing on gender and education. This gave her more insight into this topic and allowed her to speak in more detail. Kelly believes that she is lucky to know her gender and feel secure that, regardless of her unshaven legs, others can recognize and accept her gender when she walks in a room. Kelly specifically spoke of
transgendered individuals who do not necessarily have the freedom to choose their sexuality and gender, and who are often unaccepted in mainstream society. Kelly understands that she has the option and can make the conscious decision to reject social norms of femininity and not shave her legs. Again, this is a power that Kelly knew she possessed over herself and over her interactions with others. After the initial reactions of new acquaintances, Kelly finds that people become more accepting of her choices, as in this example of one girl who had considered Kelly a ‘weirdo’:

The more I talked to her and the more like, you know, I’m slowly incorporating her into it, she’s becoming O.K. with it. Which is so funny because it’s such a simple thing. Men don’t have to do it! Anyways (laughs). I could go on a rant for days on it.

The power of Kelly’s message to control her legs is related to Kelly’s belief that women are very connected to their bodies. Much of Kelly’s dialogue, not only about her decisions after her spiritual experience but also her reflections on her femaleness, was infused with talk about women’s bodies. At various points, Kelly spoke of body image, anorexia, and abortion, and her own stance on controlling her self-image. She also spoke of the connection women have with each other when it comes to their bodies:

But women are so, first thing, like, girls, like I could go up to any girl in the world and go, “Oh, my cramps are killing me.” And they totally, they’re like, “Oh, I’ve totally been there.” And it’s a body function, like women don’t usually talk about their body functions. But like, women are so aware of their bodies and it’s wrong to say wavelength, but – if you talk to anyone in any language about giving birth.
Similar experience and women are so connected to their bodies they like to share that with each other. They connect with that.

While Kelly is able to empower herself in this way, she is certainly not immune to the pressures young women face in society. Although Kelly is comfortable with herself, she reported that she is not comfortable with her body, especially having struggled with her weight when she was younger. A thinner Kelly asked, “But could I stand naked in a room full of models? No way, Jose! Right! I’m not that comfortable. I wouldn’t blame myself for that. Well, I would indirectly, but I blame society for that one.” Kelly places much more value on her inner life and the inner lives of others than on outward appearances.

One part of womanhood that Kelly feels is definitely evident when reflecting on her own self as a female is the instinct of mothering and nurturing. When Kelly attended mass as a child, she was not interested in religion, but instead she used this opportunity to connect with and be with her grandmother. With regards to her mother, initially Kelly only spoke of her a few times, as in giving her mother credit for encouraging Kelly to reflect on the roles of women in society. Kelly called her mother an “equalist” and said she “gets the juices flowing in my head.” At the same time, however, her mother did not like the fact that she is the black sheep in the family. Kelly did not feel that she would speak to her mother about spirituality and her inner life because unlike the time when girls are children and they want to be near their mothers and spend time with them, young women of her age of “are separating themselves from their mother.” Kelly did not feel that mothers are part of young women discovering themselves. But after much of the self-discovery has taken place, she felt that then mother and daughter can come together in a new relationship. Kelly said “My mother and I are – we have a great relationship now!”
But I’m almost 20, right. And I’ve got my life under control. And she has her life under control. So now we can meet.”

*Summary*

Kelly’s inner life is rich in experience, creativity, and intuition, and Kelly struggles to maintain her authentic self amid doubt and new challenges. She situates her spirituality in her beliefs, where animals are not raised as food, women are celebrated as naturally beautiful, and the status quo is questioned and challenged. Kelly understood her world in terms of the concepts of self and spirit, with her authentic self as the outcome.

Kelly has been questioning the cultural norms of western capitalist society, and she questions it with regards to connections to the earth, animals, nature, and to women. Kelly has experienced disconnect and fragmentation in society, which she has chosen to rebel against in favour of positive relationships with the environment and animals, and in solidarity with women against rigid expectations of beauty. Kelly has chosen interdependence rather than independence, and balance rather than imbalance.

Kelly’s experience and descriptions of her inner life connect significantly with the literature on women’s spirituality. Not only did she reveal her interconnectedness in her rejection of traditional hierarchies, but she also interpreted her walk as a spiritual experience rather than a logical exercise of morality. Kelly implicitly trusts what was revealed to her during that walk, even though she could use logical explanations for her beliefs and moral stance. She experiences her physical body spiritually, and this has a profound meaning for her as a woman.

Kelly had her spiritual experience while doing something quite ordinary: that is, going for a walk. During that walk, Kelly felt her spiritual life begin, as she was able to
know herself in relation to the world around her. Although Kelly ultimately rejected a number of key societal norms, she viewed this as strengthening her connections to society and other women. Kelly’s spiritual experience became the source of her personal power, which she understood in terms of being female. When others ask Kelly why she does not shave her legs, she generally gives them a simple answer describing her moral beliefs. However, to those who she believes are willing to listen, Kelly will share her story – the day she went for a walk.
Chapter 5 – Maria: Breaking Out of Shyness

One of the siblings in this study, Maria is big sister to Theresa and the younger sister to two older brothers. At 21, Maria is a very attractive young woman with long dark hair, brown eyes, and a round face. Although Maria is rather reserved, she spoke easily and comfortably during our interviews. Maria had several questions for me before we began our first interview, perhaps informed by her studies at university. In the third year of her program, Maria is pursing a double major of sociology and Spanish with the goal of becoming a Spanish teacher at the secondary level. Maria emigrated from El Salvador with her family when she was four years old and her first language is Spanish. Maria’s interests and hobbies are very typical for a young person. She likes to dance, watch movies, listen to music, hang out with friends, and shop. Maria enjoys sports and even swam competitively in secondary school. Maria completed all the levels of swimming and completed part of the bronze cross; however, she now prefers recreational swimming as she is not that interested in competitions. Lately, she has been working out, but otherwise she spends much of her time with her studies.

Maria was raised Roman Catholic and attended schools within the Catholic school board her entire life. Maria’s maternal grandmother is very devout and prays the rosary every day, but the rest of the family is not as religious. Maria herself does not practice her religion and she is questioning the policies of the church, especially its position on social norms and moral and ethical issues. Maria explained that:

Certain aspects of it, I’m like, they don’t go away from the traditional, I guess you can say. They stick to what they know and then they don’t want to move on. Like, certainly the whole priests not being able to get married and just like, there’s
different little things that I kind of debate over sometimes. But, I do believe in God, and I do believe in like, a lot of the other beliefs.

Maria has no plans to search for a different denomination.

Even though she attends a university that requires seminars and debates in its programs, Maria has a great deal of difficulty expressing herself verbally. She explained to me that she often has nothing to say, but in our conversations she was very engaged and has obviously spent some time reflecting on her spiritual and religious life. Even so, some of my questions were new to her and she was unsure of an answer, and at other times, Maria struggled with the appropriate vocabulary. Maria’s language was very much that of a young person and was infused with common youthful interjections such as ‘like.’

*Experiencing the Spiritual in Swimming and at a Club*

Maria was not fully prepared to discuss a spiritual experience with me at our first interview; this was apparent from some of her questions prior to our discussion. We spent some time talking about the study, which gave Maria a few minutes to reflect on her past experiences. Maria then attempted to describe two different spiritual experiences, one while she was swimming and the other while she was dancing at a club. A swimmer since the age of eight, Maria stopped swimming competitively at 16. Maria stated that there was no reason in particular why she gave up swimming, but that she just stopped: “I just think I stopped just for stopping. I don’t really, there wasn’t any reason for why - I just stopped swimming.” The experience Maria wanted to share did not occur during her competitive meets; instead, it happened while she was lane swimming at the local YMCA. Maria’s coach had taught her a breathing technique that synchronized her
breathing and her strokes – the exact details of which she has forgotten. It soon became clear that she was not able to elaborate very much on the swimming experience, providing only this description:

I’m thinking about the breathing process. Like, I remember one of my swim coaches always telling me – you have to swim, was it – one breath. I can’t remember what it was. But every time I’d think about it, every time I would swim I always have that in the back of my head. It was just, focusing on like how, how, the style you’re swimming in. I guess you’d call that, so.

Maria chose to share this experience because she identified it as a time when she was caught up in a moment, and felt in tune with the act of swimming; however, she was not able to expand and reflect on the moment.

Without hesitation, however, Maria began to discuss a second experience for which she was able to provide much more description. One of her favourite activities is spending the night dancing with her friends. They have only been able to go to a particular club for two years since it is a licensed venue, so this experience is relatively new for Maria. In this venue, the music is very loud and it can be hard to see because of the low lighting and the strobe lights. While dancing at this club, Maria had an experience of transcending the mundane and being in tune with the music and movement of dancing. In Maria’s words:

You’re just into that point where all you think about at that moment is the music and just like hanging out and you’re just like just singing along and like jumping and dancing and whatever. And then, I think that, ’cause all your worries are gone for some reason, like, all your stresses at that moment are like, have disappeared
for that like 2 minutes of a song just because that song is the greatest thing in the
world.

Her description focused mainly on the intensity of the experience, and Maria struggled at
first to move past this and provide more depth. When she did, she stated that:

It’s just like the point of like, you’re just dancing along to this song, and you just,
you just, you just want to dance and all you want to - and all you care about right
now is dancing, like, singing, and you’re just - I don’t know how to explain it.

(laughs). It’s good. It makes it fun.

Maria was obviously reflecting warmly on the memories as she told her story. As she sat
across the table, Maria smiled, laughed, and moved in her chair like she wanted to stand
up and demonstrate for me. During her experience on the dance floor, Maria was
euphoric:

You’re pretty much – my face – I couldn’t stop smiling the whole time I’m
dancing. Like I always have this constant smile, like, just like laughing and little
things happen, and like, little things happen that you just burst out into laughs.

This experience was one of joy and elation for Maria, in which she was swept up in the
music and her company of friends.

In the experience of swimming that Maria struggled to discuss, she did say that
her experience of being caught up in the moment was facilitated by her focus on her
breathing, her strokes, and achieving the proper swimming style. In contrast, when Maria
was dancing, she relinquished control of herself and the moment, allowing herself to be
enveloped by the situation. Maria was careful to explain that alcohol or other drugs did
not induce the experience, although she said it did feel similar to drinking except that
when drinking, she would have no memory of it. Maria explained, “It is because you find like, I guess you could say when you’re intoxicated you have that sense but you don’t remember anything. Well, in this situation you have that hyperness and that outgoingness but you remember everything.” Maria will sometimes have a few drinks, but this is not typical. Although she said the nature of the experience is not greatly altered when she does drink, she believes that alcohol does, in fact, have the potential to negatively affect the experience:

It doesn’t change the experience, it’s just more like, I just don’t remember it, most of it. ’Cause you know when you’re - drinks a little bit, there’s little moments where it clouds. I find it’s better when - that experience is better when you’re not. Just ’cause you’re - like you get into it a lot more than if you were.

So even though Maria feels that she relinquished control of herself during her dancing experience, the reduction of control through the altered state of intoxication ‘clouds’ and impedes the experience.

Unlike drugs or alcohol, Maria asserted that the type of music played at the club is essential to the experience. Maria explained that: “It is kind of an experience without drugs. It’s just that upbeat music.” The type of music played at this club is New Rock, which is music that evolved from punk and New Wave in the late 1970s, to grunge from the 1990s, and includes what is now called alternative and indie music. Maria believes that the type of music is important for her experience, as she explained that “they play like rock music, which is odd for a club, but that’s why I think you get into the zone because you’re moshing, I guess you can put it.” Maria identified moshing (wild and free form) as different from dancing (planned and deliberate) and according to Maria, dancing
does not really take place with New Rock. Even though the environment may facilitate
the experience through the sensory assault on her hearing, vision, and physiology, Maria
instead credits the emotional effects of the music and the lyrics for her experience. Maria
reflected that: “It has to be that atmosphere – ’cause the music’s different. There’s not
very many - I think it’s more the music though than the actual place that you get into that
state of mind.” Maria emphasized the music perhaps because she has had similar
experiences at concerts, where concerts have:

That same ability where you’re just so focused on the band and like what they’re
doing, but you’re also focused on being, like, being, I don’t know, like sweated on
and grossly feeling but you want to be close so you put yourself through this
torture in order to be close, but in a club like going to this club, you don’t have to
go through that torture in order to feel what the musicians are trying to express.

Although Maria enjoys concerts, a club is a much cleaner and safer venue for Maria’s
spiritual experience.

Maria originally felt that her experience was “more of a group thing” and that she
needed to be with her friends to have the experience. Upon reflection, however, Maria
reconsidered not only the group aspect, but the appropriateness of the location as well.
Maria explained:

Some songs do, sometimes some songs make you want to, like, sometimes I just
wanna, I put on my headphones on and then I’m like - I wish I could just burst out
dancing in the middle of the square here and you’re just like - you have that
intensity but you don’t, you know you shouldn’t because everyone’s going to look
at you and going to be like, you’re crazy – what are you doing?
From Maria’s description, the music is clearly the force behind her experiences.
Nevertheless, the location is important because dancing at a club is socially sanctioned while dancing in the “middle of the square” is not. Maria has obviously thought about this before our discussion as she related a story:

I was telling my sister that actually the other day. Of how, I wish I could just put on my headphones and there’s a certain song I like and just put on my headphones and just wanna burst out and like, dance and then people are just going to look at you like you’re nuts (laughs).

Again it should be emphasized that Maria is reserved and very aware of social norms, and she has very little interest in standing out in a crowd.

While Maria enjoyed the memory of the experience, she admitted that describing it was very difficult. She reflected:

It’s that kind of experience I guess because it is like something you experience that you have to be there in order, you know what I mean? Like, I tried to describe it as best as I can right now but, I’m trying like, I feel like I need to draw a picture to explain it just because I don’t know how to elaborate on it.

I jokingly offered to let Maria draw a picture, which she declined since she does not consider herself artistic enough to do so: “I’m not a very good artist (laughs).” Instead she continued to say, “maybe it’s just an experience that I experience. But, like a personal experience. Not everyone in that situation might feel that same way, but for me that’s the way I feel.” Maria actually did offer a great deal of description of the experience, but she still struggled to fully express the experience verbally and felt that her description did not do it justice.
Maria struggled to decide on an item of spiritual significance to bring for the item presentation. At first she thought that creating a picture or drawing might be a way to present something of spiritual significance. However, just as she had struggled with expressing her spiritual experience, Maria also felt that she would struggle in creating a piece of artwork. Maria mused that she “lack[s] in like, artistic ability sometimes.” Rather than bring something from the club or a song, or something else related to the music, Maria decided that, “a picture would be good. ’Cause like, I think it’s – I like pictures ’cause they capture moments and they’re like, that’s why I think they represent a certain time period in life and stuff like that.” Eventually Maria chose to bring pictures of her friends taken the last time they went to the club. She brought in two pictures – one where Maria and her three friends posed and smiled for the camera, and another where they made funny faces. Maria described these pictures as “just us acting pretty much silly.”

Not only do the pictures represent Maria’s experiences, but they also signify the last night the four friends were together at this club. Maria told the story of this night:

I brought these pictures because they’re a moment, um, because it was the last time I went to – ’Cause remember how I told you like, my inner, the way I felt was, that club I went to – what was the last time I went to it and it was when my friend Lisa over here [points to the picture]. She moved to B.C. and I haven’t seen her since. So I was like, it was kind of like. So these pictures kind of like are a reminder. This is us getting ready right before going out and stuff like that. So it’s always like, that build up to going there and like dressing up and you’re like, wear your make-up, depending and stuff like that, so.
Maria said that the pictures are a “reminder” of her friends, their evening together, and the experience. They wanted to take pictures of the entire evening, but as Maria explained, they only usually get pictures before they go out:

We always try to take pictures but we always just take pictures just before we go out because it was my friend’s mom who took the pictures. She’s always like, “Mom! Take the pictures! Take the pictures!” So then she takes all of our pictures before we leave (laughs).

The importance that Maria places on her ability to reminisce about her life, her friends and moments in time was evident. These pictures are a reminder as well of the joy and excitement of the event, and this was something the girls wanted to capture.

Photographs and images are a source of enjoyment and of meaning for Maria. She explained that, “when you were a baby and you see these pictures and you’re like, you put them chronologically you can see how much you’ve grown up. I like to capture moments.” In addition to the pleasure gained from the pictures, Maria seemed to need these images of the past to place herself in the present. In a way, Maria used the photographs to reflect upon benchmarks that chronicle her life up to this point, to provide continuity and meaning to her life. Whereas Maria struggled to expand on the spiritual experience, or even the picture itself, she easily elaborated on the benchmarks that pictures and images record for her. In this lengthier exchange she said:

Just like we see each other grow up, so you’re kind of like, our facial expressions and stuff like that. We change, even like, our wardrobe or what we wear and stuff like that, have changed. There are times we graduated high school and we look back now and we’re like, wow, we look so young! And then, like, now, we’re
like, we look a lot older. It’s kind of shocking ’cause it was only like 4 years ago or a few years ago since I graduated high school, but for some reason we’ve developed so much. And we’re growing up so fast. Like, I was talking to a friend of mine, like, we were talking and we were just having like a conversation and stuff, and we were just reminiscing about - remember when we were 19 and we used to go out so much! And like blah, blah, blah. Now we’re getting old and then. I was talking to my sister, my sister turns 19 in April and she’s like – I want to go out with you guys. But now we’re getting to a point where we don’t want to go as much as she would want to go out. Like, it’s just that growing up process and you just don’t realize ‘til someone else tells you and stuff.

Even though Maria is only 21 and has lived a relatively short life, she was very reflective about her past. Maria utilized this insight to place herself within moments in time, whether they are past, present, or future.

*Breaking Out of Shyness*

Maria explained that she is very shy and is uncomfortable speaking during some social situations. While her shyness was not evident to me during our interviews, her reserve was apparent. However, Maria seemed comfortable enough that if she did not explain it to me, I would not have realized the extent of the issue. During her secondary school years, Maria was very quiet and spoke very little in class. This quietness may have been extreme because Maria told me that people would ask her why she did not talk. Maria’s response to this was “I have nothing to say. What do you want me to say?” From her description, her reserve in social situations was a result not of being afraid to speak or be noticed, but of not necessarily having something to communicate at that time. Maria is
also wary of the judgement of others, and she believes that others unfairly judge her due to her shyness: “Just because everyone would, like, judge me just because I was shy. Like I wouldn’t speak in class, so they’d be like, oh, why don’t you talk? Well, because I have nothing to say.” The university program Maria is enrolled in relies on seminars for a substantial portion of her grades, so speaking in front of others continues to be an issue for her. She explained that “like even now, in university, where seminars are involved, they’re like, well, you should talk more.” Even with the emphasis on discussions for her grades, Maria did not indicate that she was prepared to make large changes to her personality and attempt to talk more.

Just as Maria was more easily able to elaborate on the importance of her pictures, she was also able to elaborate on her thoughts and feelings about her shyness and introversion. Maria did not view her introversion as negative in itself, or as a personal trait that she needed to change. She was very secure in this aspect of herself and made no apology for it. She did, however, feel that others have a great deal of difficulty in accepting her introversion:

I’m like, sorry, I’m not that kind of person who just blurts out things. I think it’s really hard for other people to understand that. That being shy means that you can’t express yourself in certain ways like other people who can. This might also connect with Maria’s wish to describe her spiritual experience in a picture, because she has so much difficulty finding the words to relate it. At this time, she has not found another modality or form of personal expression.

Maria’s reluctance to say what she is thinking is not simply a reflection of difficulty with expression, but according to her, it is also a reflection of her thoughts.
Maria explained that she is very deliberate with her words and must think before she speaks, which she considers part of her shyness. There are two sides to her thoughts before she speaks, one being her concern for the feelings of others. Maria does not want to say anything that might hurt another person’s feelings, or in any way appear inconsiderate. The other side is Maria’s concern about the opinion others have of her, or the “judgment that others have of you.” When I asked Maria to elaborate, she focused on her experiences as an immigrant, especially coming from a third world country. Maria has experienced prejudice from others who have made assumptions about her native country, her family, and her life without truly knowing the real story of their experiences.

Consequently, Maria is careful when speaking and tries not to reveal too much. Maria explained:

So I think that kind of judgment of others is, has always been there. In the back of their head, in the back of your head. I know this is Canada but like, immigrant, like immigration, like, in society and stuff, but there’s always going to be someone who thinks they’re superior just because they’ve been here longer or because they’re important or something like that.

Maria came to Canada with her family when she was four years old and as an adult, she has no trace of an accent and she dresses and acts like a typical Canadian young adult. However, a piece of Maria still feels like an outsider and she links this with her shyness and difficulty speaking with others.

While she does not view her shyness as a negative, Maria enjoys breaking free from it on the dance floor. Maria identified three ways in which her spiritual experience allowed her to break away from herself and the everyday: stress reduction, self-
expression, and transcendence of herself. The club that Maria and her friends frequent only plays New Rock on Friday nights, so it is always a weekend when they go out. Just being with her friends on the weekend is a way for Maria to relax and unwind from the regular week. Maria reflected that:

I guess it’s just a way to break away from the stress and like. Just a time when you can be crazy and they don’t care what you do and it’s just one of those moments where you can act all crazy and hyper, outgoing without having to care about - Oh, I have homework due in like two weeks or I have to go to work and I need money and just those little small little things that you think about everyday. It just goes away for a little bit, right.

Perhaps removing herself from the stresses of everyday life allows Maria the opportunity to open herself up for the experience. It is unclear whether the reduction in stress facilitates the experience, or the experience facilitates stress reduction. Likely they are interconnected and are equally relevant.

Due to her shyness and lack of artistic ability, Maria may need another form of self-expression. Dancing may become that outlet because this is a time when Maria can feel free to express herself. Maria said “usually I’m a very shy person so when I dance it’s more like I get out of my shell.” She further explained:

It’s more of a personal thing where it’s conservative, like. I feel that it, like for me, it’s a break in the way from who I am, I guess. It’s harder for me to explain things and with the music and with the atmosphere, it’s easier for me just to express myself this way. Just having fun, and the whole friends and singing along.
Moshing is a free flow form of dancing, so Maria does not have to worry about choreographed steps or keeping in time with the music. In addition, Maria said that she connects with the lyrics, so this way she can identify songs that are meaningful to her, but she does not have to write the songs themselves.

Maria linked her dancing experience to more than just self-expression, as she believes that during the experience she transcends herself or her personality. She has difficulty expressing this during the interviews; for example she stated:

The person that like, it’s my personality, but it’s just what - not what I want to be but what I - a person beyond what / who I am. Does that make sense? (pauses) It’s like - How do I say this? (struggles with different starts) It’s my personality but it’s exaggeration of my personality. Do you know what I mean? Like, ’cause I am a conservative person, this experience makes me - It is me, but I don’t know how to like, elaborate on it, I guess.

It is important to note that Maria clearly believes that during this experience, she does not become an idealized version of herself, but that she becomes both an exaggeration of herself and something beyond herself. Also, she does not believe that her ‘true self” is trying to break out. It is possible that Maria is experiencing a previously unknown part of herself that connects with the music.

Maria made the connection between going beyond her everyday self to her process of maturation. She meant this in the sense of not accepting things at face value and questioning her experiences, beliefs, and values. She said:

Part of my, as my maturity level goes up. It may not, it sounds kind of ironic, just because it’s dancing and like being in the zone and all with your friends. But for
me, as my personality’s growing, I find that I’m extending away from what others think in that moment, to I don’t care what others think. I’m going to do my thing. I’m going run my life the way I want to run my life. And I think that kind of goes with - you asked me before how to link - that linkage between my beliefs and this experience. I think it goes kind of hand in hand because now I’m questioning - how I question my beliefs is how I’m kind of growing up in that same sense. I just don’t take things for what they are.

Perhaps the experience has also given Maria some of the self-confidence to say that her views and beliefs have merit, and they might be different from accepted norms. It does seem to go hand in hand with Maria’s confidence in questioning, exploring, and expressing more avenues of herself.

*Other Ways of Knowing*

It was revealed in our discussions that Maria felt herself split between the logical, rational world of modern society’s science-based paradigm and the spiritual world of her inner self and her religion. Although Maria is not a practicing Catholic and she is having difficulty with the doctrines of the church, her beliefs about spirituality were very much informed by her Catholic upbringing. On the other hand, Maria has also learned how to think logically through her schooling. Maria and I were discussing her inner life when she said:

I think it could be - it’s spiritual. But I think it’s rational, too, just because after going through, like, school, and stuff like that, you kind of start taking, you’re rationalizing everything. But I also believe in like, in faith and like, God and some
beliefs of the church. (unintelligible) The church and stuff. So I think it's a combination of everything.

Maria recognized the rational and spiritual paradigms as having value in her life; however, she struggled somewhat with the difference between them, perhaps because once again, the spiritual is so difficult for her to discuss. While she reflected that school teaches her to think beyond the spiritual and prepare her for the world at large, the spiritual offers a measure of guidance. Maria stated:

[…] when I think of school, I think of like, O.K. This is what I need to, like prosper in the material world. While spiritual is more like, guidance beyond the material world. But I still think that spirit - like, my spirit, like my inner life is interconnected with both worlds.

Maria experiences herself as connected with both the spiritual and the “material” world, where the spiritual gives her guidance to act in the material world.

Maria attempted to separate and delineate the rational and the spiritual in our interviews, but she had a great deal of difficulty. She began to touch on connections between the two, and she seemed to have some instinct that they may be interrelated, as in her statement above. Nevertheless, Maria had not fully thought through this possibility and she continued to struggle with her belief that the outer world of school and society is rational, while the inner world of the personal is spiritual. She revealed that she did not feel that the worlds were balanced in her own life. Maria explained:

I think sometimes I lean more towards, like, the rationalization of everything than to like, the spiritual. ’Cause, like, I don’t take into account the spiritual factors
very much. Unless it comes with like, for some reason more with like, loved ones and stuff like that.

Maria experienced herself as fragmented between the rational and the spiritual, and she did not currently see how the two could be integrated, especially since her education has not seemed to provide a means of doing so.

As Maria discussed the role education has played in her understanding of the split between the rational and the spiritual, she tended to focus more on her university education than her elementary and secondary experiences in a Catholic school. In her Catholic education, she felt that her spirituality was nurtured and developed:

I think that faith and believing in myself, and knowing that I can do things, that kind of helped. Where I don’t have to - feel pressured for any reasons, ‘cause I have other - I have a base and other things to decide.

Maria believes that her Catholic education gave her the foundation and independence to become an adult and to feel secure with her spiritual and moral decisions.

Saints

One area in which Maria does take spiritual factors into account is in her beliefs in the saints and angels. This stems from her upbringing in Catholicism, where saints play a very active role in the lives of the faithful as role models, guides, and guardians to which one can pray and ask for support. Maria shares the church’s belief that saints and angels exist, and that their purpose is to support her and her family members, even though what she has learned outside of Catholicism has taught her not to believe. When she was a child, Maria learned to pray to saints and angels, usually asking for help in times of trouble and uncertainty. Again, Maria struggled with the words:
It sounds weird, though. Like I still do. Like, I like the idea that there’s angels out there and like, guardian angels, stuff like that. Kind of helps to guide - like it does, it helps like, when you’re like, you’re, as you were talking about, like, meaning in your life or whatever, it’s like it helps you guide yourself to O.K., and now I shouldn’t be doing this. At the time, you don’t think about it but you know that there is - you want to believe that there is an angel saying whispering in your ear, like – “You shouldn’t be doing this, you shouldn’t be doing this.”

Even today as a young adult, Maria turns to the saints for protection, support, and guidance. Maria believes that saints and angels are able to connect and interact with her and the outer world. She explained, “Like, I have a rosary in my car just because everyone has a rosary in their car. Like, I don’t know. It makes you feel safer like there’s something there to protect you, right?” At the same time, however, Maria reflected that she shouldn’t believe in these otherworldly beings because it is not rational.

Most importantly, Maria wants to believe: “I like to believe in saints and I like to believe in like, the idea of spirits in the world.” Maria has tried to resolve this dilemma of the rational versus the spiritual by investigating “other forms of belief,” for example listening to the messages of popular media figures. Maria particularly mentioned Sylvia Browne, who as a medium speaks with angels and deceased relatives, and passes their messages on to loved ones. Most likely this has given Maria the validation for her beliefs that she is not getting from school and is no longer getting from a church. Her own struggle with her beliefs is mirrored in the differences of opinion between her parents:

There’s always like, what to believe – and I think influence from my dad, too. My mom’s very, she believes in all the angels and saints and stuff … or ghosts. That
type of spirits. While my dad’s like, no, they’re not real. Like, I get both sides of things ’cause she so believes in it. My dad doesn’t believe in it at all. He’s more rational than that.

Maria vacillates between her father’s rational view of the world and her mother’s spiritual view. Finally, however, Maria stated, “I do believe. Like, sometimes there’s, you just get these gut feelings - where there are spirits or angels.” Maria considered these gut feelings, or intuitive feelings, to be a part of her - not in the same sense of feeling as an emotion, but as a “way of knowing.” This way of knowing may be Maria’s own experience that the spiritual and the rational are interconnected.

Dreams

Saints and angels are not the only ways of knowing that Maria revealed in our conversations. Maria also described the role of dreams and their intersection with the events in her life, in particular the death of loved ones. Maria’s grandmother died a few months before our first meeting, and because her grandmother was in El Salvador, Maria was not able to attend the funeral. This was difficult for Maria because she was not able to mourn with her family or to say goodbye the way she would have liked to. After her grandmother’s death, Maria frequently had very vivid dreams about her grandmother. These dreams reminded Maria that she did not have any closure, but it also reassured her to see her grandmother, if only in her dreams. Maria said that through her dreams, she was slowly able to realize that her grandmother was no longer there and that she had, indeed, died.

Maria does not limit the role of dreams to coping with daily events or difficult times in her life, however. She also connected dreams directly with the everyday world
and she believes that it is possible to connect to events through our dreams. For example, Maria told the story of a dream her mother had:

And then my mom, once her cousin passed away and - what was it? Her cousin passed away and like, she didn’t know she had passed away. But in her dream that night, she dreamt about her of like, of seeing her and stuff like that. And like the next day we heard, we had a call saying she had died and stuff like that. So I kind of, that makes sense and like how our intuitions, I guess you can say, always combine with like, our faith, spiritually. It’s all interconnected.

Maria did not indicate to me that she believed her mother had a premonition that her cousin died. Instead, Maria was exploring how our inner lives, spirituality, intuition, and the outer mundane world are interconnected and interrelated. While Maria has been struggling with the separation of the two worlds (a split she mainly attributes to school), through her experiences and the experiences of her family she also senses that the two worlds are not so separate after all. Of such dreams, Maria said:

[it] kind of makes me believe that there is another world. Like, there’s something beyond earth and like, there’s something beyond death. But you just don’t know what it is and you’ll never know because (unintelligible). And I still want to believe in like, the heaven, the hell, and like, the whole like, the good and the bad kind of ideology.

Here Maria revealed that the rational explanation of the material world is not satisfactory to her, and that she needs to know that there is a spiritual realm. She is as of yet unsure what the interconnection is, however.
Our discussion about dreams rose from a question I asked about her experiences in the church and how that has affected her spirituality. Maria credited the importance of dreams to her Catholic upbringing; however, while Catholicism encourages praying to saints, it does not necessarily promote or sanction dreams as a link between spirituality and the mundane world. At the same time, my experience with Catholicism is that it does not discourage it either.

_Girlie-Girls and a Double Standard_

Being the oldest girl but having two older brothers meant that Maria spent her early childhood in the company of the boys. Although she had typical girls’ toys such as dolls, she did not play with them very much and instead played with her brothers’ toys. In fact, Maria disclosed that she is afraid of dolls and was forced to play with them because of her younger sister. Maria declared that she was a tomboy as a child, and as such, she does not connect with the stereotypes of being a girl.

At the same time as being a tomboy, however, Maria believes that a part of her is a “girlie-girl.” When I asked Maria to define a girlie-girl, she replied, “I think of Clueless. Have you ever seen the movie Clueless?” In addition to being “ditzy” and “flamboyant,” Maria stated that a girlie-girl is “all about the fashion and all those shoes and stuff like that.” Maria claimed that while she does not buy fashion magazines, she does like fashion, girlie-girl movies, and girlie-girl music. This is an aspect of herself that she has tried to hide because she did not feel it was socially acceptable to be a girlie-girl. Maria was again worried about the judgments of others. Maria explained:

When I was younger I used to like a lot of boy bands and Backstreet Boys and stuff like that. But other, like, when people are like – “You like boy bands!” And
stuff like that. You would pretend that you didn’t like them, but secretly in my room, I’d be listening to Backstreet Boys. I still do, like, I’d be in my room listening to the Backstreet Boys.

As she gets older, Maria is more confident and is willing to announce to others that she is a typical girl. Maria stated:

Now it comes to the point where I don’t care what they think. I listen to the Backstreet Boys. I went to their concert and whatever, right. So, I think when I was younger it was a lot clearer, that like musical choices and stuff. And movies, even. I like those girlie-girlie movies. And now I can admit it, I don’t care. I like those girlie-girlie movies. And back then you’re like, “oh, you’re such a girl.” Or blah, blah, blah. Or Harry Potter. I love Harry Potter. (laughs)

Where Maria once felt apologetic about liking things that are considered too feminine, she is now more confident.

In terms of her spiritual experiences, Maria perceives a connection between being female and her experience at the club. The main issue for this association, according to Maria, is that it is normal for a group of girlfriends to go to a club and dance. Girls do not need another reason to go, such as to drink or to pick someone up. On the other hand, Maria believes that boys do not have the same opportunity for this experience. While boys do go to the club and dance, they have different reasons for being there, and that does not include bonding. Maria stated:

Males don’t go out to a club just to dance, they go out for other reasons. And you just don’t, you don’t really see a group of guys dancing very often. It’s more like, it’s girls everywhere, right? So, you have that leniency that you can go out and
have fun. But same with guys, I’m not saying they can’t, but they’re intentions are different, I guess. (laughs)

Maria declared that this is a double standard where girls are permitted more freedom, and boys face social restrictions on their behaviour. At this club, Maria felt that she was able to be a girlie-girl without sanction.

This reversed double standard, however, is limited to only a few places such as the club. Otherwise, Maria does not believe that being a girl is an advantage. This is especially true in school, where Maria feels that her femininity, or being a girl, is not acceptable. She reflected:

Like when I’m in school. (laughs) I don’t think there’s … ’cause, ’cause … I don’t know. I think the setting of school, you don’t want to be – oh, I have a pretty pen. Like. (laughs) Which I do say sometimes, but. I don’t know. There’s, ’cause there’s always those standards, right, when you’re in an educational setting. And they have certain expectations as a girl. And not as much as a guy, I guess. So you try, I don’t know. It kind of goes with the double standard stuff.

Maria stated that there are standards in an educational setting, but she believes that these standards are different for each sex. Maria expanded on these expectations:

As a girl, you’re expected to, not to like, you try harder, I guess. Because guys in society are seen as more intelligent or not every society, but in some societies.

And I just find that if you act like, not act like a guy, but not behave not so much as a girlie-girl, then you’ll be more respected in that setting. Like, accepted.

The characteristics that Maria associates with being a girl are not characteristics that are respected in a school setting. According to Maria, in order for girls to be perceived as
intelligent, they have to become other than what they are: they have to become boys.

Thus, Maria believes that an educational setting is masculine and rational, where the feminine and spiritual are not valued or are of little use.

Summary

Maria is still attempting to understand her spirituality and beliefs about the spirit. She no longer finds a home in the doctrine of the Catholic Church, although she has not rejected it entirely. Maria’s spiritual experiences release her from everyday experiences; her spirituality is a place where the rational and the spiritual inhabit two separate spheres, angels exist, continuity with the past is maintained, and she can be a girlie-girl. Maria’s spiritual experiences take her outside of her normal world and allow her to capture a view of herself that is full of joy. Maria is shy, reserved, and very concerned about the judgements of others. However, with her dancing experiences at the club, Maria is able to break free of social norms and constraints, her worries and concerns, and just be enveloped by the music and the company of her friends. Her experience is euphoric, and filled with laughter and joy. This experience is facilitated by the high intensity of the music, but the style of the music must be of a particular kind. Maria connects with the language of the music while the lyrics speak to her own life.

Maria’s understanding of herself is shaped by benchmarks that provide a sense of continuity and linkages to the past. Maria enjoyed looking at pictures and photos of her family and friends and these become reminders not only of the event itself, but the person she was at that time. Pictures of secondary school remind Maria of a girl who was shy, reserved, and deeply concerned about the judgements of others. But looking at the pictures of her friends before a night out at the club reminds Maria of an older girl who is
still shy and reserved, but is now more confident in herself. While still concerned about
the feelings of others, she is less concerned about their judgements.

Ultimately, Maria feels a disconnect between the logic and rationality that she
learned in school and the spiritual side of herself. While there is an interconnection,
Maria struggles to see this in any practical way that she can utilize. The rational inhabits
the public realm of education and school, where she is not free to be herself, but feels she
must act like a man. While rationally she cannot believe in the existence of angels and
saints, spiritually, she wants to believe they exist. Saints and angels are not simply
passive mentors or role models; but they actively offer their protection to Maria. Dreams
are also an essential piece of her spiritual life, as they help her to weave together all that
she has experienced and felt.
Chapter 6 – Theresa: Living in the Moment

At 18 years old, Theresa is the youngest of the participants. With her long, dark curly hair and round face, there is no doubt that she is Maria’s younger sister. Theresa lives at home with her older siblings (Maria and two older brothers), her parents, and a “really big” black Labrador Retriever. She has a bubbly personality and smiles and laughs easily, even in the unfamiliar place where she has come to meet me. In many ways, she is the typical teenager - attending secondary school, working a part-time job, a Rose Queen contestant, is interested in music, fond of sports and lying on the beach. Theresa noticed the basket of stress balls on my desk and wanted to play with them. As she reached for one during our first interview, she looked to me for permission. As I nodded, Theresa replied, “Oh, sweet. I saw them when I first walked in and I’m like, nooo, I can’t play with those!”

Theresa is finishing her final year of secondary school, and like many students in Ontario, she is staying for five years even though the province has eliminated the fifth OAC year. Theresa used to be involved in sports, but now would much rather watch than play. Despite her average height, her main sport was basketball. She also played baseball has tried roller blading, or really anything that was “fun.” To help her on her path to becoming a nurse and to earn the community service hours required for secondary school graduation, Theresa volunteered at the local hospital. Theresa does not consider herself to be very artistic, but as we talk about her hobbies and interests Theresa revealed that she enjoys a variety of creative activities:

I change my mind very often. I’ll start knitting and then I kind of give up on that.

I’ll start a whole bunch of pract…., like little hobbies, I guess you’d call them.
Like I used to make hemp necklaces - I got really obsessed with that then I changed, then I want to start knitting.

Unlike Maria who was born in El Salvador, Theresa was born in Canada. They both attended the same schools in the Catholic system. Like Maria, Theresa does not consider herself religious and feels “up in the air with [her] religion.” Theresa said her family are non-practicing Catholics, but of her two parents, her mother is the most religious. According to Theresa, they are a busy family and do not have time to go to church. Theresa does, however, consider herself to be a spiritual person. Theresa has tried a few spiritual practices, although she is not currently committed to or practicing any of them. Theresa enjoyed the yoga she learned as part of her physical education classes which allowed her to clear her mind through movement and breathing. Theresa also learned meditation with the yoga, and now wishes she could meditate on a regular basis. Being an energetic person, Theresa appreciates the effect of meditation:

[it] clear[s] your mind of other things. Just having a mind free of like, thought, I guess, right … just not having to worry about anything not having to think about anything. Just being like, calm and like almost sedated but like, naturally. Theresa’s encounter with meditation taught her to feel “so awake after” and “so much, like, uplifted.”

Theresa’s manner of speech is typical of many teenagers and is infused with the word ‘like’ and interjections such as ‘so.’ In many places I have chosen to keep these words and interjections intact to maintain her voice and because these interjections are at times essential to witnessing the struggle Theresa has in talking about her inner self and her experiences.
Encountering the Spiritual in Basketball and on the Beach

Theresa described two very different types of spiritual experiences. The first took place during basketball games, a sport she stopped playing several years ago. Theresa had learned about Csikszentmihalyi’s flow experience in school and felt that her experiences were good examples of flow. Theresa felt that she was very ‘in the moment’ and that she experienced a flow sensation when playing important games that sparked a change in attitude and an “adrenalin rush.” Theresa explained:

Well, yeah, ‘cause you always want to win, right. So it’s just in your nature to win. So you just kind of you push yourself and you like try to do your best and you then you push your friends to like to play just the same. You know what I mean? Like you can’t, you don’t want to be trying all the time, like trying so hard with all your effort and stuff and they don’t care. So you kind of just want to get everybody going so you try to like pump everybody up and jump around and stuff.

Practices did not produce the same effects because “there’s no effort in it, you’re just playing around.” A game requires much more focus and attention on her part. Theresa found herself fully focused in the moment of the game, only attending to the court and the players on her team. Theresa stated:

It’s kind of almost like you guys are all like, you don’t notice if people are there … like off the court, you know. I remember when my parents used to come to the games, but half the time I wouldn’t notice they were there ’cause you’re so into it, you know. Like you know your teammates are there ’cause if not you’d be
playing a one-man game, right? … Like once I got off the court then I’d be like, oh! Look - my mom’s there!

This is the experience that Theresa wished to share with me, most likely due to her knowledge of flow. However, it soon became evident that even with Theresa’s energy and willingness to talk, she did not have the words to describe this experience in more detail, nor was the experience enough to keep her playing competitive sports.

A second experience that Theresa shared with me did, in fact, have more detail and Theresa also revealed more insight into the experience. While the basketball game was a high energy or adrenalin-based experience, this other one was a subdued experience that took place on the beach. Theresa told the story:

I like the beach. I just love being at the beach. And like, there was this one time in the summer we just, we were there and it was almost like overcast but it wasn’t … there was some sun … and we were just hanging out at the beach … just me and my friends. There was like hardly anyone there ’cause it wasn’t that nice of a day. But it turned, it was foggy almost, so it looked like there was nothing in front of us. So there was no water in front of us, it was just like huge overcast, almost. Like, there’s like fog … so you didn’t know where the water started or where it ended. Like you couldn’t see the difference between the sky and the water. It was just all one thing.

When Theresa noticed that the sky and the water blended into one with the fog, she felt herself to be in the moment. Theresa continued:
So you were just like – Oh. Like it’s not something you see every day, so it was … wow, it was cool. And you’re just there, you know, like tanning. You’ve got like the heat on you so you just mellowed you out … and stuff. It was good.

Theresa’s moment in nature had a physical effect on her. Normally a high-energy person, Theresa felt herself calmed and “mellowed” by the fog, an experience that has stayed with her.

This experience revealed more about Theresa and her inner self than she initially seemed to recognize. The fog also prompted Theresa to think about nature, the environment and the nature of existence. She explained:

You don’t see that, right? So you’re just, think about, like in general, and in like things you haven’t seen before. Like you see pictures, but what if we didn’t have pictures, are you going to be able to see things? Right? Well, if you think about animals going extinct, like, apparently seafood might be going extinct, ’cause people … it’s such a high demand or something. So what if my kids, like, they’ll never try it. Shrimp. It’s kind of like, I don’t know. They’ll know what a shrimp is ’cause they’ll have pictures, but what if they didn’t have pictures? There’s like so many animals that could have lived once that we never saw.

During this experience, Theresa became more aware of the effect humans have on the environment, and ultimately, the interconnectedness of nature. She elaborated, “it shows you how funny life is, like how, like it’s a small world. Like it really is, like little things like that, you don’t realize how everything can interlink and how everything relates to each other.” This moment was an opportunity of great insight for Theresa, and while she
struggled with the language, she was able to articulate some of her understanding of the
interrelatedness of nature and something of the sense of mystery in the fog.

*Jewellery and MP3 Players*

Theresa could not decide on one item of spiritual significance, so she brought
two. The first was a necklace that spoke to her connection to her family. Originally her
grandmother’s, the necklace was passed to her mother and more recently passed to her.
The necklace was “a gold chain. I don’t know. It used to be my grandma’s – well, it is my
grandma’s. But she gave it to me.” The chain has a little clover charm attached, and her
grandmother told her that “it’ll bring me good stuff.” There is also a frog charm on the
necklace that “used to be my mom’s when she was my age. So she gave it to me. So it’s
kind of cool to have stuff like that. I can pass it down eventually. So I just think it’s really
cute.” Even so, this necklace is not one that Theresa wears very much. Possessing the
necklace with its multiple meanings was more significant to Theresa than actually
wearing it.

The necklace had two roles for Theresa: that of a connection to women in the
family and a good luck charm. She described the day she received the necklace:

It’s something that means some- … like, a lot to me … like, it made my day. I
was really happy when my grandma gave it to me. It was like my graduation, 13th
birthday, kind of thing. I was really happy. And it wasn’t like anything that she
had to buy. It was just something, it was just passed down to me. And being like
the younger child, you kind of get, like nothing gets passed down to the youngest,
so. It was really cool that I got it. And you know, the idea of it being my mom’s
and her wearing it when she was my age was, like that was really neat, I thought.

And so. Hopefully it brings me luck.

Theresa spoke several times about the women in her family, as she feels a very strong connection with them. After listening to her speak during our meetings, I was surprised to learn that her grandmothers did not live in Canada, but still lived in El Salvador. Theresa spoke of them in such a way that I assumed that they must live nearby and that she visited them on a regular basis.

The second item of spiritual significance was Theresa’s MP3 player. She laughed a little as she showed me the player and presented it to me, as if she were somewhat embarrassed about considering this item to be of spiritual importance. Theresa explained the player to me:

And then I brought in my MP3 player just ’cause the whole music thing. Just like kind of shows, like, my style and what I like to do and stuff. For each song, it has like, I’ll show you (demonstrates the player). For each song, it kind of has like a little picture. Of like me and my friends and stuff. I’ll see if I can find one. But, like, I don’t know. It just really, it kind like, each picture kind of relates to the song, I guess. I have one with me and my dad. It’s really cool. It’s like crazy and stuff.

Theresa is a music fan, listening to music not only throughout the day but also at night just before she goes to bed. As our conversations progressed, it became evident that music was a source of meaning and was of great importance to Theresa. She explained:

I like music. It calms me … it brings down my mood, I guess. So then, I just thought it would be a good example of who I am, kind of. And the pictures just
kind of matching it, ’cause, just shows … an example, I guess, right. And yeah … not much to say … a little electronic device. Oh, it has my name on it! So that’s pretty cool. (laughs)

Theresa uses the picture option on the player to make meaning of the people and events in her life by matching photos to songs. The photos she showed and described to me were of her family, in particular her father and one of her grandmothers, although she told me she has many with her friends.

Theresa obviously enjoys listening to music, but beyond the enjoyment, she uses music to experience emotions and regulate her moods. The lyrics are of particular importance, as Theresa said, “I’ll be listening to them and yeah, I’ll really believe in them and what they’re saying. Or that’s a really good statement, or something.” She elaborated further:

You can relate to it. If you’re just down or if you’re happy with something you just, you can relate to what they’re saying. And just be like, yeah, okay. Not that it’s a general thing, it’s just like, it’s kind of like, this makes sense in my life here, and like, this is just like our relationship with like, my friends or like, with someone, you know.

Theresa is not a musical person in the sense that she does not sing or play an instrument, but it is apparent that she does appreciate the art of songwriters and musicians. Through their music and lyrics, Theresa is able to reflect on her own life and experiences, and sometimes come to new meanings of events.

Theresa also chooses music to match her mood in the moment. Music helped Theresa prepare for her basketball games, especially “old school rap” and techno. Before
the games, she would visit her friends and “we’d like open my car doors and like crank all this techno stuff up and we’re like … Black-eyed Peas. Just to get them going (laughs).” When she is hyper, she will play her “jump around the house music,” but when she is upset or sad, she will play “low key music.” When her grandmother died just a few months prior, Theresa used music to help her mourn. Theresa was not able to attend the funeral (it was in El Salvador), so dealing with this death was difficult for her.

With the help of her sister, Theresa discovered how music and dance can change her mood for the better. She related this story:

Yesterday, me and my sister we like … I wasn’t in a good mood. Just I was stressed out with school and everything and then all of a sudden my sister comes up and she starts dancing like an idiot. Just like closing her eyes and just going nuts and like. I was like looking at her like, what are you doing? I started doing it making fun of her but it cheered me up. Which is weird. And then I just started doing it and then my mood just totally changed. Like I just went from being like mad at everybody to like getting totally hyper and like running around the house. Theresa surprised herself by being able to change her mood from anger and frustration to excitement and joy. She considered it a venting experience that relieved her stress, even though she was initially only trying to make fun of her sister. Theresa told me that this experience taught her a new way to cope with stress.

*Searching for Meaning and Purpose*

Theresa is at a time in her life where she struggles to understand the world around her and she is searching for meaning. Her encounters with the spiritual and with flow are learning experiences that have assisted Theresa in this search for meaning. For example,
through her experience with the fog on the beach, Theresa learned that “everything can interlink” and “everything relates to each other.” She then took this knowledge and related it to other areas, such as ecology and nature. Essentially, Theresa believes that these experiences “try to explain who I am, right. ’Cause I have no idea who I am, so. Still trying to find my purpose, I guess. … Like everything I thought of doesn’t make sense anymore.”

Theresa found that many of the experiences she discussed with me represent parts of herself or her life:

They all mean something to me. They all - They all kind of like, they’re all ways like I have to kind of believe myself and like the craziness. Like going to the beach is just how we hang out and then dancing is how you get like, every stress out. Playing basketball is like my fun activity, right.

Just as music and songs represent various parts of her self, Theresa’s spiritual experiences coincide with activities that represent various parts of her self. With each event, she is able to learn something different.

School is also a place where Theresa has been able to explore various levels of meaning. During our conversations, Theresa began to refer to the theme of her English class, which was man’s search for meaning, which has prompted her to question her beliefs and values. Talking with her sister has also caused her to reflect; she explained:

Like why is this like this, or why did we do this, or what if the world was this different, or. I’m thinking like, God, lately. My sister took like a humanities, like human - uh, animal rights’ class. So that got me thinking like, well, what - why do we eat meat? Like, and why. I stopped using all products that are animal tested
just ’cause you think about it, you don’t see it, so you don’t think it, right? So I stopped using that and then. I don’t know. My views like, it’s like my eyes open to different things, like you never thought before.

Theresa could also be questioning her relationship to animals because one of her brothers is a vegetarian. While Theresa has decided not to use cosmetics that have been tested on animals, she is still eating meat.

In addition to meaning, Theresa is also searching for her purpose in life, especially in terms of a career at the time of our interviews. Theresa’s struggle between becoming a teacher or a nurse is evident:

O.K. My profession. Right now, like I’ve had like, doubts, like. It’s either nursing or teaching. And I’ve always liked all I’ve ever really known. But then I’ve been set on nursing and haven’t my (unintelligible) and that’s what I’ve been applying to school for and then, the other day, like, something happened and I was really, like, I saw myself more like, long run, I could see myself more as a teacher than a nurse. … I’m just up in the air. It’s like a big difference between the two. It’s supposed to be for the rest of your life, right? So.

Theresa is afraid of making the wrong decision because she views it as lasting “the rest of her life.” At this moment in time, Theresa believes she must get this decision right or she will not be happy, nor will she have the opportunity to change her profession. Theresa believes that her career path is not only one that she must have an interest in and a talent for, but one that will be personally satisfying and meaningful.

*Living in the Moment*
Theresa’s spiritual experiences have helped her gain insight into the nature of even her most mundane experiences and she expressed the idea that it was very important for her to be living in the moment and to be aware of the everyday. In particular, her experience with the fog on the beach nurtured this realization. Theresa realized that she could spend a great deal of time thinking about people and events that have nothing to do with where she is or the people she is with. In referring to her basketball games and the fog on the beach, Theresa reflected:

Yeah. You kind of realize, like oh, this is so cool. Like you kind of … it’s almost like an out-of-body experience like you see yourself, or like, you see yourself there and you’re there with things around you. And like people who are with you instead of people who aren’t with you. You know.

Although Theresa used the term, her descriptions do not match an out-of-body experience. In fact, it is more likely that Theresa is having an in-body experience and a rare experience for her of being present in the moment.

Theresa’s experiences of being in the moment are facilitated not only by her two spiritual experiences, but also by music, which she identified as having spiritual significance. Theresa stated:

[…] music just makes me think. I don’t know. It connects everything, right, like. It’s kind of like, things that are going on in my life happen to other people. It’s not like, I don’t know … I kind of have to think, like, I’m not being selfish. Other things happen to other people and worse things can happen to other people. So, that kind of just, puts my feet on the ground and gets me out of like, (pauses)
over-rationalizing and just, you know, living in the moment … connections. Well, yeah. I try to connect everything together. Like, try to make sense of it. 

The music and lyrics allow Theresa to connect with the lives of others, and in doing so she becomes less self-absorbed. Through the realization that she is not the only person suffering or feeling similar emotions, Theresa is able to free herself (even if partially) of those emotions and live in the moment. It also allows her to stop over-rationalizing and experience the connections between herself and others.

To this end, Theresa has made attempts to become fully aware in the moment; most notable was her decision to make a New Year’s resolution to become fully present and aware. Theresa believes that she spends much of her time trying to plan ahead and thinking of things that she should do. But then she asked herself, “why do I do that?” So, Theresa made the resolution “to stop and just kind of take everything in and then kind of live in the moment, not so much in what’s going to happen.” This resolution occurred to her while she was on vacation in British Columbia. Theresa explained:

I was like, O.K., New Year’s resolution. So kind of like, we were in the museum and just be like, O.K. … this is cool. You know, like … nothing, like … well … where are we going to go to eat? Or like, what are we going to do next? Like, just kind of like … be there and that’s it. Not really think of what else. And yeah, I guess, I’m just trying to do that. Like, not really, not thinking so much, anyways.

Unfortunately, this has been a difficult resolution for Theresa to keep over the course of the year. She felt that it was the right resolution and an important goal in her life; however, she has not found a way to make this a reality.
Theresa stated several times that she would like to stop thinking so much. When I asked why, Theresa replied that she spends “too much time thinking and not really living.” Theresa felt that she spent far too much time planning, thinking of other things that could be happening or what she may be missing instead of enjoying the moment. Not surprisingly, Theresa referred to herself as a thinker. She claimed to be continually reviewing ideas in her head and asking “what ifs.” Theresa suggested that she may have these thoughts and questions because of her age, but for whatever reason, she is compelled to ask the “what ifs.” Theresa told this story of her dog as an example of what she thinks about:

But like, when he comes in from outside from like going to the washroom or whatever. He has to clean his paws so he doesn’t get mud all over the carpet. So now he’s doing this really weird thing where every time someone comes in, he brings them the towel. So they can clean their feet. Which is like, you forget to think how smart he is. Like, why, he put that together in his head, you know. So it’s like … really you wouldn’t think, like … well, he’s an animal.

Theresa was a little embarrassed to tell me this story and implied that it was a silly example, but it illustrates Theresa’s thoughts and her attempts to make sense of her world. Here, she wondered how her dog is able to connect the idea of cleaning his own paws when he comes in the house to humans having to do the same.

Theresa is very concerned that as a thinker, she “overthink[s] things sometimes … yeah … but then I try to think up a theory, or if it’s like a bigger picture or something.” In fact, she sees herself and her thoughts as different from others and she knows that she has difficulty communicating her thoughts. She disclosed:
Like, I’ve come to like the realization, like … I see things different than anyone else will see things. Right, and like you kind of forget to think about that, like, people don’t always view the things the same way you do. To help her communicate, Theresa would like the support of someone else who may be better able to understand and communicate her ideas. Theresa mused:

I wish someone was in my head sometimes so that they could like understand what I’m trying, like, what I see, or like, how I see things … kind of, like … but that’s about it. Like, just how I view things so they understand, you know … like I have like, weird thoughts … not weird thoughts, just … Like if I see something like, complex, like … in like … I get really into it, I guess.

It became apparent that while Theresa was very capable of insight into her inner life and her spirituality, she did not feel that she had the language to explain it to herself or to others. But she was able to provide a small analogy to explain her wish to be understood:

You know those movies where it’s like, walk in someone else’s shoes and like, they see your life and like, kind of like that. But then, you can kind of think the way I think, so then. Or I’d like to see how other people think and see how different it is … so … just like, experience (unintelligible). It’d be really cool.

Because she has difficulty explaining her thoughts and feelings, Theresa would like to have someone else step into her head and experience what she experiences, or conversely she could step into her/his head to have their experiences. In this manner, others could better understand her perspective and she would better understand theirs.

Much of her focus on thinking translates into worrying, especially about school and her career. Theresa was questioning and reflecting on her choice of career and how it
would influence her life. Right now, Theresa “kind of want[s] to see the future and be like, O.K., this is where I am and this is who I will become. So then I don’t really have to worry, right?” Since she cannot see the future, she worries that she will make the wrong decision. Theresa is also at a time of transition in her life, as this is her last year of secondary school and she is getting ready to attend post-secondary the following year.

Theresa would like some assurance; she stated:

Or if I’m meant to do things or, if there’s such a thing as fate that what I’m doing is actually what I should be doing in life, right. ’Cause you only do things once. So to tell me it’s a bad idea, right. You are only 18 once in your life, so.

Theresa felt the stress of choosing her career, doing well at school, and the financial obstacles in pursuing that career. While she does not “spaz out and stuff,” her stress was very real. To reduce the stress, Theresa preferred to plan and organize. Theresa explained that when she is able to write things down, she can then consider her options and make the right decision.

Theresa explained that she perceived her thoughts to be her inner life, but felt her spiritual life is something else entirely. According to Theresa, her inner life consisted of her thoughts, but that her spirituality was more about her feelings, and that to be connected to her spirituality was also to be connected to her emotions. Theresa clarified that “’cause sometimes, like, you can see something and you’re just like, O.K. You’re not really fazed about it. And sometimes you’re really in touch, and you’re like, wow! Like, you just kind of realize, like, what’s going on.”

Theresa described spirituality as being “really in touch” and “wow.” For her, this is different from religion, which she describes as “believing in like, certain beliefs.” To
her, spirituality is “something inside of you that you believe in and, like, how you intake things around you. It’s more personal than a religion, it’s [trails off]”. Theresa saw the spiritual more in nature, for example, than in being with other people, even though much of her own experiences and conversation are about being with others. She explained:

Like I could … it seems more like, nature. Like when I think spiritual. More like being … like captured by something … or being, reflecting on something. Instead of, like … more … not …so, like … not so personal. More like, with other people or other objects around you like nature and stuff. Well, well, more with nature not with others.

This description was very difficult for Theresa, as she was not entirely sure about her spirituality, or even her own definition of spirituality.

*Connections with Women*

While Theresa is questioning and asking her “what ifs” about many issues she is experiencing in life, gender is not an issue that she mentions during our conversations. Theresa’s questions have focused on moral issues, such as animal rights and sex before marriage, but she has not felt the need to question her femininity or gender roles. Theresa obviously has a very strong connection to her grandmothers and to her mother. Theresa’s grandmothers are role models of strong, independent women who were able to raise families in a country afflicted by war. Both of these women were single mothers, one of them raising seven children on her own. Theresa hoped to follow their lead and become just as independent. This connection is also evident in Theresa’s choice to present the necklace that has been passed down through the women in her family, and reflect on the good luck that it brings her. But Theresa also felt the distance between herself and her
Theresa’s family is a five-hour flight away. She believed that she has missed many opportunities and experiences by not being closer to her grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Theresa hopes that when she has children, their cousins will be no more than a town away.

While Theresa often mentioned her grandmothers in our conversations, she spoke less and was much more analytical about her relationship to her mother. Theresa did not believe that she resembles her mother, nor does she believe that they have similar personalities, but she believed that they do share similar views of the world. In particular, they are both prone to worrying. Theresa said her mother “like, she thinks and she worries like crazy. Luckily, I got that, too (laughs). I guess it’s a family trait or something. I don’t know.” Theresa provided this example of her worrying:

Like if my friends go out, like … whatever, like … and it’s not nice weather, it’s like … O.K., call me. Like if they’re driving by themselves. Call me on my cell phone when you get home, O.K. Just make sure you’re O.K., you know. Like, it’s kind of like that weird little thing.

This also relates to Theresa’s concern that she spends too much of her time thinking rather than experiencing the moment, as her worrying could be a roadblock to experiencing and appreciating life.

At the time of our first interview, Theresa had not decided whether she was going to attend college or university, since she could follow both routes to her chosen profession of nursing. She was also considering teaching, but by the end of our interviews she had finally decided on nursing. Theresa explained her reasons for choosing this profession:
Well, I started volunteering a lot more at the hospital. So then, I really like it … and I went to go visit the school. And I … I don’t know. I just loved it … so … I like the idea of it. I like the kind of job, like I get bored easily. Like, I can’t just be sitting in an office and stuff like that. […] So I kind of like, just like, like helping people. You get to meet new people. It’s not really the same kind of job and stuff, right. And like, the whole like thing of like, making a difference … like small things matter, kind of … I like that … like, that kind of thought … I guess.

In our interviews, I asked Theresa about her choice of traditionally female occupations, nursing and teaching. While she understood this question, Theresa disagreed with my assessment that they are gender biased occupations. Theresa stated:

I just kind of thought of, like I like helping people and I like the medicine field. Like, I don’t like (unintelligible) I don’t like that kind of thing. I’ve always had an interest in like medical fields. And then nursing I like ’cause I love helping people … like I like old, like I love babies, so … I like, want to be a pediatric nurse and I love kids and stuff. So, I just … I don’t know. I just thought … I never thought it was a woman’s, like, job … I don’t know … I just thought it was an occupation, I guess.

Theresa’s perspective may have been affected by her older brother’s desire to become a nurse. Theresa said that he dropped out of the program, but seeing him as a “guy nurse” was not unusual. Theresa added:

Like, I know there’s a lot of guys in nursing. It’s just not as common as women ’cause there’s so many more, but. It’s not weird to me. So, it was just a regular
job. Like me being a teacher. It’s just the same as … teachers … like girl teachers and guy teachers, right.

In her experience, both teaching and nursing are non-gendered professions and she chose them due to her interests and personality.

On the other hand, Theresa did indicate that there existed gender differences between boys and girls, and that she would have different experiences than boys. In particular, her reactions to events will differ in essentials. Theresa gave this example:

So like, I guess being a girl … like, I can look at a puppy and be like that’s adorable, where a guy can look at a puppy and be like, it’s a dog. There’s not much to it or something. Or something spiritual, like something happening to someone or something happen … like, you become, like you impact it differently than some other people. So, I guess I’m almost more sensitive, like, in the long run … what could happen. I guess ’cause I am a girl, like … I think a lot. I don’t know if it’s a girl thing, but (laughs), to think a lot, so … I worry a lot, so.

While Theresa did not see nursing and teaching as female professions, she did suggest that women are capable of much more emotion than men. Theresa appeared to indicate that she has not been exposed to many differences between males and females in their gender roles or their perspectives or outlook. Instead, she appeared to have experienced similarities between the genders, perhaps as a result of the strong female role models in her family.

The Catholic Church, Service to Others, and Her Profession

Like her siblings, Theresa attended publicly funded Catholic schools throughout her education. A pivotal spiritual event at the secondary school she attended at the time of
our interviews is the annual pilgrimage, which Theresa talked about as one of her volunteer experiences. She described the pilgrimage:

Like a … it’s almost like … you raise money for like, third world countries. And then, like all this money goes and they build like a school and it just goes through (unintelligible). It’s like a small society in like a third world country that needs the money and stuff. And then we walk, like … the whole school walks like 25 km or something crazy like that (laughs).

Having walked the same pilgrimage myself as a secondary school student, I can expand on the information provided by Theresa. Equally a fundraiser and a spiritual journey, the pilgrimage is a focal point of the school year. Typically held in the fall, the money is raised for Third World countries where it may be used to build a school or wells, depending on the needs of the community. A new wooden cross is created for each year that the pilgrimage is walked, and it is carried by students for the entire route. The pilgrims return to the school gym tired, and in my experience wet, since it often rained. The day ends in a candlelight mass, which is typically much more emotional and spiritual than a regular Sunday mass. However, for many of the students, and possibly for Theresa, this experience is primarily a social event.

Theresa credited her Catholic education for her awareness about the plight of others both locally and around the world. In addition to the pilgrimage, her school often raised money for other charities, ran food drives, and helped people within the community:

Even in like grade school we always had like Christmas funds and stuff like that, right. You give to some little kids and stuff like that. They make you feel good by
helping other kids and to not think of only yourself. Which is good. ’Cause it’s just … it benefits other people besides yourself.

Theresa reported that she learned to not “think selfishly” and to be of service to others. The Catholic schools also nurtured Theresa’s knowledge of herself and her spirituality: “Well, they teach you like the religion but not so much. Like it’s more, it’s more of a spiritual thing. Like finding yourself and who you are and like your beliefs and that.” Her school “just helped me become who I am right now. How my views are.” The transition to secondary school only served to increase her knowledge of world events; as Theresa stated, “And in high school it just continued on and then it got along to more realistic, like poverty and it just opened your eyes to like the world.”

Theresa’s Catholic education included instruction on figures within Church history, including biblical persons, angels, and saints. The saints have particularly become part of Theresa’s worldview in that they model how she should live her life. Theresa explained:

Well, they kind of have like, they were just regular people. And then they lived their lives, like, exceptionally. Like they were just very, like … they … I don’t know. They changed people’s lives, I guess you’d say. They were just remembered for what they did, kind of. And that’s like … that’s kind of like my whole, like, motto in life, I guess you’d want to call it … like, every small thing counts.

Theresa came to realize that her actions, especially in her interactions with others, have an effect, and that she could control whether this was a positive or a negative effect. The saints began as regular people, just like herself, and were able to make an extraordinary
difference in people’s lives. Saints were Theresa’s role models, just like her
grandmothers.

Her school’s lessons on service to others and the examples of the lives of the
saints inspired Theresa’s choice of nursing as her profession. Nursing combined
Theresa’s interest in medicine with her desire to have a life of service to others. She
elaborated:

Like, one … like that’s what I kind of want to be. I want to be a nurse, I want a
small part … but my whole thing is like, … once, like … how a person acts
towards you can make a huge difference. Even though you don’t notice it, to a
person can be more, like, you know. I kind of like that idea. And that’s kind of

Nursing is a fulfilling career that Theresa believes can bring “meaning to your life.” She
reported that she needs to feel that she is helping people every day and having a positive
impact on people’s lives.

Theresa’s desire to make a difference extends beyond her profession into her
everyday interactions with others. Theresa has made a conscious effort to be aware of the
feelings of others and she enjoys making a difference. For example, Theresa said:

Even if I’m walking in the halls and someone looks kind of sad I kind of just try
to smile and so try to cheer them up. I really think like small things like that make
a difference in people’s lives.

Even though Theresa believed her Catholic upbringing was a very positive
experience, she was still not sure of her beliefs in the Church’s doctrine at the present
time. Her doubts began when she made the transition to secondary school, and she “just
started like thinking more of religion.” While Theresa believed in much of the Church’s teachings, she was not as comfortable with the dogma and social perspectives. Theresa explained:

My friend actually, John was telling me how he went to church the other day and they were preaching about how Catholic society shouldn’t be, like supporting gay marriages and gay coupling. Where I’m very for it. I have a few gay friends and I’m all for gay marriages and like. That’s something and like, abortion and like. I’m more pro-choice than pro-life. Which is kind of bad, but. You know what I mean? I don’t know … um … sex before marriage … that’s just … I don’t know.

Theresa struggled to reconcile the Catholic Church’s conservative stance and Canada’s liberal perspectives on social issues. Theresa described her view of the Church:

Very old school. I don’t know … um, yeah … Just very old school … like, it’s just … They don’t see to update it with times. It’s just very traditional ways.

Which is good. Tradition’s good, I’m not saying that, but it should be kind of change along with people’s changing. ’Cause like everyone changes, right?

Theresa decided to pick and chose what she believed in and what she does not.

Ultimately, Theresa summarized:

I grew up like Catholic and stuff so a lot of my beliefs and stuff are kind of based on that. But now that I’m grown up like I’m seeing things a bit differently, right. So now I agree with the church, like I understand like the bible and stuff and I like the spirits, like the saints and that stuff. I just don’t like how the Catholic Church portrays themselves and how close-minded kind of they are and stuff like that.
Like, that I don’t believe is right and stuff, so … and like, I don’t know … to me
like … like … right now … Catholic … the church isn’t a big part of me, like. It’s not something I like practice, right.

Summary

Theresa’s experience of her inner life is characterized by living in the moment, the interrelatedness of people and nature, and service to others. Although she attended Catholic schools, Theresa is not very religious and she is not in agreement with the Church’s position on many social issues. Theresa does not believe that it is necessary for her to be against gay marriage, for example, because the Church instructed her so. Theresa expressed a belief, however, that the Catholic schools nurtured her spirituality. Not only did Theresa learn to view the saints as role models for their public works, but the schools encouraged her to become more aware and involved in charitable acts. Based on the influence of her role models (the saints and her grandmothers), Theresa has chosen a care-giving profession. In nursing, Theresa expects to be intellectually stimulated and challenged, but she also expects to experience the rewards of serving others.

Although Theresa may struggle with verbalizing her inner life experiences, she has discovered ways to affect her inner life for the better. She has learned that music helps to regulate her moods and relieve her stress, while the lyrics give her insight into her own life and the lives of others. In addition, Theresa has identified her thoughts and worries as an impediment to experiencing life in the moment. To that end, she made awareness of the moment her New Year’s resolution. She also understands that meditation is a means of achieving control over her inner life, thoughts, and worries, even though she did not make the connection to include meditation in her New Year’s resolution.
Theresa is a typical teenager with the typical language and cadence one would expect; for example, she used the words ‘like’ and ‘so’ throughout her speech, plus she exhibited many false starts. The subject of our discussion, spiritual experiences and her inner life, compounded the difficulty Theresa had in expressing her ideas. Theresa’s knowledge was gained mainly through felt experience and direct insight in the moment. Asking Theresa to elaborate more on the experience did not produce much more dialogue besides her description: “They kind of tear me up kind of. They’re all things that like, make me happy.” These are essentially nonverbal experiences, thus difficult to express, although Theresa was able to express her experience of the interconnection and “interlink” of nature and humans.
Chapter 7 – Amelia: “How Do You Capture An Everydayness?”

The oldest of the participants, 25-year-old Amelia is a friendly, chatty, vivacious young woman who always seems to have a smile on her face. She is a firecracker in a petite body, and her excited outbursts of “Oh My God!” startled me more than once. At the time of our meetings, Amelia lived at home with her parents and younger sister, while a younger brother was away at university. In the future, she plans to marry her boyfriend, Manuel (who is the older brother of both Maria and Theresa), but currently, the couple are both in school. Amelia needed extra years to complete her undergraduate degree in communications due to her learning disability and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At the time of our interviews, Amelia was pursuing a second undergraduate degree in adult education, and was working as a teaching assistant and as a first-year transitions coordinator in her university’s office for students with disabilities.

As for her career plans, Amelia had not yet decided. In character with her diagnosis of ADHD, she was considering a range of careers, such as teaching, law school, an MBA, or working in the film industry. If she could, she would gladly pursue all these paths.

Amelia’s ADHD made her a very intriguing participant due to her excitement and difficulty with attention and focusing, which was apparent in our conversations. While our discussions did not last any longer than the ones I had with the other participants, there is much more material because she spoke so quickly. Amelia’s conversational style was also interesting because she would often diverge from the topic or she would include interjections and false starts in her speech; this is apparent in the passages to come. In addition, Amelia used a great deal of storytelling to explain her thoughts and expand
upon initial comments. I was just as likely to hear a description of other people’s experiences, as I was to hear about Amelia’s.

Amelia keeps herself very busy with work, school, and family, so when I ask her about hobbies or interests, she had difficulty thinking of anything. Her first response was reading fitness magazines because she did that for fun. Amelia thought going to the gym might be a hobby, but decided that it was a pastime instead. After our first meeting, Amelia added another hobby - dancing classes with Manuel. Otherwise, she thinks of herself as rather boring. She did, however, like to organize and considered this a hobby: “I, unfortunately, spend way too much time organizing stuff.” Amelia explained that she enjoys organizing even if nothing is never quite accomplished. For example:

It’s a lot of fun for me to organize. Like I organize … like, if I was really into my pictures I would actually put them in albums, but all I do is like … like … I organize them all the time. I don’t actually ever get them into albums. ’Cause I’m constantly sorting through and figuring out where they’re all gonna go, and they’re like … They never get into the albums, so.

This organizational piece is crucial for Amelia. Due to the nature of her learning disability and her ADHD, she would be lost without organization and time management. Amelia has learned many techniques to compensate for her difficulties, some of which she learned from me through my role as an educator to students with learning disabilities at her university. For example, Amelia has learned that when she is engaged in an important conversation, she must stop and take time to understand the question before responding, something she did many times during our conversations.
Even though her family is not French, Amelia attended a French speaking school throughout her entire public education. Amelia and her siblings were raised in the United Church, although this was not her parents’ original religious background. While her mother grew up in the Presbyterian Church, Amelia’s father was raised in the Mormon faith. He eventually left this church because he disagreed with their beliefs about marriage and sexuality. Overall, Amelia’s father did not find the Mormon faith progressive enough. Her parents are active in the church community, but Amelia has not been as involved since she started attending university. Amelia has had some exposure to the Catholic Church as well, since Manuel is Catholic.

_Dancing on Stage, Being in Nature, and Meditating in the Tanning Bed_

Amelia was able to recall several types of spiritual experiences, but she was excited to discuss one in particular. Amelia loves to dance; she began taking studying at the age of four and finally stopping when she was 17. While many other schools were competitive, Amelia’s focused mainly on learning and enjoying dance. Amelia was fond of this focus and took great pleasure in the classes, especially ballet; unfortunately, being in a non-competitive school meant that she and the other girls did not have as many opportunities to perform on stage. During her teen years, the girls began to search for competitions just so they had opportunities to be in front of an audience. Amelia loves to be in front of people, whether dancing or giving a presentation, and this is where her spiritual experiences occurred - while she was on stage in front of an audience. She recalled, “it’s the dance. It’s the dance stuff that made me feel that sense of – you feel in the zone. You don’t see anybody, you know there’s like a hundred people out there
watching you but you don’t really care.” While Amelia was performing, she felt completely absorbed in the activity, in the music, and in the art form.

Having difficulty finding the language to describe the experience, Amelia suggested that she felt that she was able to transcend the everyday: “It’s not out-of-body, but it’s that whole, when I was dancing you get … you don’t see anything. Like it doesn’t matter.” While she was aware that she was in front of an audience, Amelia was not mindful of their presence. She was aware only of herself, her experience, and the flow of the dance. Nor was she focused on the technicalities of the dance. Amelia said that “…no matter how many times you practice the dance or whatever. Like you just sort of don’t even know that you’re doing it … you just sort of do it. You just do the steps.” This was entirely different from a practice where the technical aspects were the focus: “so when you’re practicing you’re very cognizant of all the other people around you or what’s going on or the lighting, or you know, the music and everything like that.” This changed when she was on stage, where the people, the lighting, and the music all “blend together and there is no … O.K. This is where I’m pointing my toes. […] It totally takes the technical and makes it seamless.”

Amelia was also enveloped by the experience because her daily worries and anxieties melted away. Performing in front of an audience may be stressful to others, but Amelia was peaceful and happy. Amelia described the experience:

[it’s] like warm and cuddly and you just feel like you’re - you feel like you’re the star of the show. It doesn’t matter what anybody else tells you at that point. Like, whether they agree with you or don’t agree with you … it doesn’t matter because the feeling is just right.
Amelia felt her anxieties, surroundings, and the technical pieces of the dance slip away in her awareness, but she was still very much aware of herself. She felt like she was the “star of the show,” so there did seem to be some awareness of self. Amelia experienced a lack of awareness of others, be it the audience, her parents, or her teacher, and instead experienced a deep connection to the music and the dance.

Dancing as a spiritual experience only occurred during the competitions and performances as practices were very structured. Amelia believes that the difference in a competition was adrenalin, and this was what triggered the experience. For example, she described a high level of excitement backstage before the performance. Amelia lost track of the focus of our discussions while describing the antics that took place backstage. For example, she focused on the costume changes:

When you’re changing costumes. Oh! … when you got, when you get clever and you’re like, O.K. … well put these tights underneath these tights and now all you got to do is this and then this and you’re done and you’re changed. And you got someone doing the hair and someone doing the shoes and all.

As Amelia became older and had more numbers to perform, she was able to change closer to the stage. This carried a particular status that fuelled her levels of excitement for the event.

Amelia’s experiences were both full of adrenalin and “warm and cuddly” at the same time, and she described them as both passionate and spiritual. She explained:

I think it has to do with like … yeah, like I mean … a sense of what you’re passionate about. And I think that’s what spirituality is. There’s a connection with
passion, right. That other-worldly feeling that you get when you’re doing something that you have to do …

This may provide a clue as to the reason why Amelia has yet to decide on a career. She received so much joy from experiences such as these and she felt that her life’s work should be just as passionate, spiritual, and exciting.

On the other end of the spectrum, Amelia also believes she had spiritual experiences that were much more subdued than dancing. Amelia enjoys spending time alone with Manuel and she believes that just being with him calms her down and opens her up for experiences. Their activities could be as simple as going for a walk, but simply having the time to spend alone with him was rare since they both live at home. She stated:

I think that like, Manuel and I talk a lot. There’s just … that lends to … I don’t know if you want to call that spirituality or like the relationship building or there’s just … we say a lot of things to each other that you can only do after you’ve had a very long conversation. Like you just, connected to each other.

Amelia described several activities that she shared with Manuel that are mostly in the outdoors and with nature:

We’re happy in like looking at a tree or … I get excited about pink trees right now! So it’s really cool! Just things like that, like just being happy and excited for things that are naturally occurring in your world.

Amelia described other times when they were in nature, either camping, at the beach, or skiing. These experiences differ in that instead of tuning out her surroundings, Amelia focused on the beauty of the landscape, including the stars in the sky or the water
on the beach. These experiences were peaceful, quiet and sometimes awe inspiring.

Amelia described an experience in Banff:

You’re literally on the top of the world because you’re on the highest mountains.

And you can just ski for an hour and that’s unheard of around here. Here, it’s like you go up, it takes you four or five minutes, you come down. … It’s like 10 minutes – you’re done. Like, here … you go up 45 minutes, but it takes you 2 hours to come down and there’s nobody else around. There’s something about being just by myself or being just with Manuel that you … that’s when I get those feelings.

Amelia believes it is the feeling of awe created by the vastness of the space in the Rockies that creates this spiritual connection. Amelia reflected that she does not frequently spend time with nature so that the rareness of exposure may add to the experience. Due to her life as a student and working part-time jobs, she explained that does not have the finances to travel very often. Moreover, due to the busy schedules of Manuel and Amelia, they do not often get the opportunity to do the activities they enjoy that connect them with nature.

Spiritual experiences in nature occur without any effort on Amelia’s part. On the other hand, Amelia explained that when she was dancing, she could induce a spiritual experience. Since she no longer has the opportunity to participate in a dance performance, she has tried to create a moment while engaging in spiritual practices, in particular, meditation. Amelia does this while at the tanning bed:

[I was] just trying to be connected and trying to like ease your thoughts and to just sort of be in tune with (pauses) other. Like not, you just get your day thoughts out
and you just sort of like be open to whatever it is that comes. And … I don’t
know. I don’t know how to explain it.

Amelia thinks of the tanning bed like a “fake beach,” and although she is aware of the
health risks involved, she justified it with two reasons: she feels she looks better with a
tan, and it is difficult for her to meditate elsewhere. As a person with ADHD, Amelia
finds relaxation or meditation challenging. She explained:

Because I’ve always had very hyperactive, not only in body but in mind. And it’s
hard to quiet my thoughts a lot of times […] So then, when you go … when I go
to the tanning bed I listen to the meditation – the counting, the breathing. Or learn
how to … I do the walking where you relax your feet, then you, you relax your
calves, then you relax your knees, then you relax your muscles. And then you just
do one by one. What I can’t … I’ve tried many times to do it on my own and I
can’t do it on my own. So I need that peaceful music, that sound, I need that …
telling me what to do with the directions. Of how to get there … And then trying
not to let the day’s thoughts kind of get in the way … I love the tanning bed!

Amelia found meditation beneficial, but she is unable to do it outside of the tanning bed
where she is forced to lie still. Given this, it is not surprising that the first spiritual
experience Amelia discussed, the one that she feels has had the greatest impact on her
sense of the spiritual, was one that was energized and highly active.

*My First Bible*

Amelia had no difficulty choosing an item of spiritual significance. When she was
younger, instead of participating in regular masses, children attended Sunday school to
learn about the United Church in a child friendly environment. Amelia began attending
Sunday school when she was four, and it was customary to hold a small graduation ceremony at the end of the child’s first year. At this ceremony, Amelia received her first bible. Since then, Amelia has received many bibles, but none have the same significance to her as this first one. The bible is now old and worn, and there are a number of bookmarks spilling out in various places. They were given bookmarks “because I guess when you asked to read like passages and stuff you had to make sure you had them marked.” Amelia said, “[I don’t] know why I love it. I just do.”

Amelia did not always love this bible; there was a time when she “used to hate this book.” In addition to ADHD, Amelia struggles with a learning disability that affects her ability to read. At university, she uses assistive software that reads documents aloud, but as a child, this disability was not yet diagnosed. Since Sunday school was educational, the children were asked to read aloud and this created a great deal of stress for Amelia. Amelia explained:

Because they used to make us read, right? And I couldn’t read. And especially because I went to the French school I couldn’t read in … I couldn’t read in English. And so they would make us read. And I used to have such anxiety about going to Sunday school. And I don’t know. I’m sure my mom at one point or something like … I remember going home and crying because they made me read in class. And I was so embarrassed and all this kind of stuff, but. I mean my mom told my teachers, my Sunday school teachers not to, not to make me read in class. But I remember being so embarrassed.

Amelia found it odd that she used to hate this bible, but now she feels an affinity and a deep connection that manifests in three distinct ways: spiritually, intellectually, and as a
source of security. The bible became a tangible and personal connection between Amelia and the church, keeping her spiritually grounded to her faith. Amelia explained:

It’s what you brought with you and brought home with you every week. And that kind of thing. So I think it just represents … like, the idea of staying connected to … probably when I was younger, church. But now I’d say connected to spirituality just that it’s there.

While her connection to the church has faltered, Amelia still experiences this bible’s connection to her spirituality. Just by looking at it, Amelia feels a sense of inner grounding and stability, especially when life becomes stressful.

Amelia expressed a belief that education in its various forms is essential to living a good life and this bible represents that connection to her intellect. Through her participation in Sunday school and the gift of this bible, Amelia feels that she has been “informed” about God, church and spirituality, and now she is able to make decisions about her own beliefs and understandings. Amelia gave this example of a boy in secondary school to explain her meaning:

… [he] claimed he was an atheist. And I always resented that term because I said you don’t know what you don’t believe in. So how can you say you don’t believe in anything? And he never heard any of the stories ’cause his family wasn’t religious, or not even a little bit. And I would bring him to Easter service and he had no idea what’s going on! And I just that … totally, to me … like then that means that his opinion of being against everything I said is totally not valid because you have no idea what you’re anti. So it doesn’t make sense to me.
Amelia asserted that her religious upbringing has given her the “privilege” to have an informed opinion about religion. She also defended The Bible by saying that

It gives you structure. And it gives you … it teaches you … regardless if you … regardless if you believe in church and organized religion, The Bible has good life lessons, you know. Do unto others as they do unto you. And I think that they’re life lessons that people should be taught.

For this reason, Amelia has decided that her children will attend church. She is not concerned whether they are United or Catholic, and in fact, she believes that her children should choose to attend whichever church they wish; it is just essential that they attend and learn so they can make their own decisions in the future.

Her bible currently sits idle on a shelf in Amelia’s bedroom where it is rarely touched. While she no longer feels as strong a connection between herself, this bible and the church, the bible has taken on a new role of protector. Amelia explained:

And it’s sort of that constant reminder. If I look at or if I don’t look at it, it’s just … it’s there. There’s almost like a sense of like, I’m protected ’cause I have it there. Nothing evil’s going to happen in my bedroom …

Amelia compared the protection of this bible to the protection of the many crucifixes in Manuel’s home, including the ones in his bedroom. Amelia explained that “… it’s just that comforting notion that there’s something there, sort of, power. I don’t know.” She continued:

So, like, for me it has that symbolism of being … like, it is possessed some spiritualness to it. So then it … sort of that, I don’t know … it’s like the … creates
that protective bubble around your room because it has been given to you by the
church or it’s deemed appropriate by the church or something like that.

Of the many bibles Amelia owns, this is the only one that she believes is infused with
these protective elements. In the end she added, “it’s really silly when I think about it,
actually … (laughs).”

Struggle Integrating the Spiritual into Daily Life

Amelia identified one of her struggles as the regular engagement in practices that
balance her spirituality with her everyday life. Our conversations about dance as a
spiritual experience prompted Amelia to begin dancing again. When we originally spoke,
she was far removed from this spiritual experience, but as we explored the meaning of
dance to her inner self, she realized how important it was to her. Therefore, Amelia began
to actively seek out dance with Manuel as something they can enjoy together, as well as
provide her with a place for her spiritual experiences. She described this change:

[I’m] better at taking moments right now and sort of centering myself and like
focusing myself and trying to make that priority. And I think that ever since we
had our first conversation, I’ve really been trying to be cognizant of it.

Amelia was easily entangled in the worries, concerns and stresses of an average day and
was now attempting to focus in the moment.

Pursuing centering experiences is a challenge, however. While Amelia was aware
of the spiritual nature of her experiences on the beach and skiing, these activities were not
part of her everyday life. Amelia reflected, “but how do you capture an everydayness?
You know what I mean? ’Cause even skiing, you can only do it several times a year.
There’s only so many … I’ve only been to Banff once.” Amelia seemed to be connecting
these experiences in her life to larger events, ones that can only occur in certain places and at certain times, such as dancing on stage and being in nature. As a result, Amelia was having difficulty embedding some practices in her everyday life:

You don’t go to church everyday or I don’t pray or I’m not … that kind of everyday where there’s a structured part of everyday that is in like a spiritual practice I have to do. However, when you’re in touch with yourself and you’re actively seeking out, and that actually cancels out, you are having spiritual experiences and you’re creating them for yourself versus it being a structured part of your life. That’s I think how more I feel. Right, ’cause if I’m actively seeking out, then it is part of your everyday life, it’s just not an everyday structured part of your life.

For Amelia, then, it was not essential to have structured spiritual practices, but she thought spirituality could be part of the everyday if she were to seek it out.

The nearest Amelia could come to incorporating the search for awareness into her normal routine was by going to the tanning bed and capturing moments while meditating:

I mean I actively seek out that, that to go to the tanning bed, and to go and get centered and to focus and to maintain that sort of sense of being in touch with me and understanding myself and …. And … and … knowing my thoughts and what are important to me and what are my beliefs.

Amelia saw connections between meditation and knowing herself and being grounded in her daily life. Amelia said that her centering “carries over in any kind of decisions that you make every day, whether they be ethical decisions or, you know, if I feel bad about something, or if I’m happy about something.”
Amelia’s spiritual practices have helped her to understand herself, as well as helping her with perspective and grounding when she must make decisions. However, Amelia felt very confused about the external world, and centering herself has not always been possible. She determined that her spiritual practices had a purpose:

[To] understand myself, yes. Because it gives me insight as to why I think the ways that I do. Understand the world around me, no. It’s how I try and make sense of the world around me. ’Cause I, I just don’t feel like I understand a lot of things lately.

Amelia still struggled with her confidence, especially in the workplace. She was very much caught up in social dynamics, not in the sense of gossip, but in the sense of understanding another’s perspective on policies and procedures. Amelia has struggled to understand the reasons behind these different perspectives, which has sometimes been frustrating, and she has not been able to carry over her centering experiences or spiritual practices to the workplace in any meaningful or useful way. Currently, she views the spiritual and the workplace as two separate realms.

This sense of separation is again an example of Amelia’s challenge to incorporate the spiritual into daily life as she finds spirituality, including meditation, outside of her daily experiences. As we discussed her meditation, I asked Amelia about Eastern meditative practices and the view of everyday mindfulness nurtured by meditation. While Amelia liked this idea, she did not think that western society makes the pursuit of spirituality in the everyday realistic, especially in the workplace. Again, she feels that a particular structure is required for spiritual pursuits:
I think it would be very cool if you were in an environment that is accepting in …

I think there’s a lot of problems with the structure of our, like, work world, only that … I mean we’re not allowed to break and go and like, meditate […] It’s sort of like all that idea of accommo … workplace accommodation and you know, being able to work from home and having prayer and all this kind of stuff. But it’s still an accommodation that’s not, like … in a non-western society it is an accommodation for a certain group of people … And if you’re not part of this group, should you be using that?

Here Amelia equated spiritual practice with religion and as such, decided that it is not permitted in the workplace except as a religious accommodation. She feels religious practices are acceptable, but spiritual practices outside of an established religion are not. Also, Amelia seemed to be forgetting her own comments about the effects of meditation carrying over into her life.

In addition to her personal life and the workplace, Amelia has struggled to capture spirituality at church. Although Amelia was quite active with her church until she was 18 or 19, at 25 she only occasionally attends. She used to believe that people who only attended church at Christmas and Easter were hypocrites, but now she is doing this herself. As a student, she worked at many part time jobs that required her to work evenings and weekends. She found herself not attending church on Sundays, much to her mother’s dismay. Beyond the trouble with timing, Amelia began to discover that she “never really sensed that sense of spirituality in church, which is really interesting to think about. I feel guilty that I don’t. You just feel that you’re there and it’s Christmas Eve and you’re supposed to be praying…” Somewhat like a mother, Amelia also found
herself “watching Manuel and making sure that he’s not being annoying. When we go to church, I’m more conscious of him tapping his foot or kicking people in front of us.” Church has not been a place where Amelia could experience her spirituality or explore her inner life.

*Spiritual Structure versus “Destructure”*

In addition to experiencing two extremes of spiritual experiences (high and low energy), and struggling to integrate the spiritual into her daily life, Amelia also identified a need for structure and “destructure” in terms of her spirituality and religion. Amelia listed one of her hobbies as organization because “[I] love organization and love making structure for myself.” For this reason, she loves that religion offers meaning and structure, especially when she was young:

Because you want that structure when you’re a child, right. 'Cause children want structure. And I like structure just so I can stay focused and stuff like that. But I want reasoned structure. Like I want, like as an adult we should be able to question why are we doing this.

Amelia’s ADHD often makes her feel scattered in thought and mind, and so she appreciates a framework or structure to assist her in focusing her thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. This framework must, however, also be flexible.

Amelia finds the structure of church to be confining and restrictive, and not conducive to nurturing her spirituality. For example, Amelia believes in the power of prayer and its positive effects on herself and others, and as a form of prayer, she attempts to keep others in her thoughts throughout the day. However, she has not been able to truly “tap into that sort of thing” due to her education on the structure of prayer. She explained:
I don’t think like, that to pray is to sit down and you have to go through the whole ritualness of, you know, the whole whatever it is you need to say before you pray. … I think that if you periodically think of somebody during the day that your thoughts are with them, then I think that’s just as strong as say, like the structured kind of … the structure … the structure, you know. Which is really interesting ’cause I love organization and I love making structure for myself. But when it comes to religion, I’m just like … I destruct. ’Cause to me, I always question why.

This dichotomy of structure and destruct is one that Amelia does not understand completely, she just knows that it exists for her. She described wanting the structure of her religion because she functions better with imposed structure, yet she prefers her spirituality to be destructured because she has not encountered the spiritual in ritual.

*Perspectives on Religion*

In addition to her involvement with the United Church, Amelia has also had exposure to the Catholic Church. As a result, both religions play a large role in her discussions about spirituality and her inner life even though she does not attend church at the present time. For a variety of reasons, Amelia does not feel that going to church nurtures her spirituality. Church and religion seem to play out in her life in four ways: family influences, being the ‘other,’ ethics and morality, and service to others.

*Family Influences*

Amelia’s parents have not only been members of the church community, but they have also been active in the administrative structure of the institution. Her father was chairperson for a long period of time, so Amelia has been an observer of the day-to-day
politics involved in the functioning of the parish. She reported that “I’ve been witness to too many stupid politics, fighting, all this kind of stupid stuff that goes on in my church.” She was highly sceptical of the infighting, in particular over rules being reviewed or rescinded. In this respect, Amelia was more critical of her own religion than of the Catholic Church:

[…] there’s structure like in the Catholic Church. There’s tradition. Like, there’s usually a reason why you do things a certain way. And in my church it was just because. Like, it’s just … stupid, like. I don’t how else to say it.

Amelia was not interested in the politics and found it distracting to her spirituality.

Amelia reported that her father’s spirituality was based much more on emotion than her mother’s, which is based on a sense of social community and ritual. Amelia identifies much more with her father not only in terms of spirituality, but in personality as well. In our conversations, Amelia spoke very well and rather often of her mother, but she felt that they do not have much in common. When it came to spirituality, Amelia said:

My mum’s very spiritual in and outside of church but I never got the connection with the church that she had. My mum … it’s a very social thing to go to church and to see all the people that she likes. She gives them hugs and stuff like that. I think that’s the sense of mothering maybe in her. Like she likes to take care of people, so she goes to church and stuff like that. And she’s really good friends with our pastor and his wife. So for her, it’s more of a social thing. So I didn’t really get as much out of it. Going to church.
Amelia did not share her mother’s social connections with others at the church, and instead she felt that she had few friends there.

Amelia felt comfortable talking about her spiritual beliefs to me and to her minister, but she was not comfortable with the idea of having the same conversation with her mother. Amelia explained that “maybe because I’d be worried that my idea of what spirituality is - doesn’t conform to her idea of spirituality. It’s just not a conversation we would talk about.” While she thought it might be “a valuable” discussion, Amelia did not have this type of relationship with her mother. Amelia reflected that “I talk with my mom about the money. Like, there are certain people you talk to about certain things. She just wouldn’t be the person that I’d probably talk to about - I don’t know.” With this revelation, Amelia identified a space between her mother and herself where they do not connect. This revelation bothers Amelia, and she struggled to understand it:

But usually there’s a reason why. Maybe … I don’t know. Maybe it’s because my mom … I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe because she already has that social thing like she does … maybe I don’t fit in with … I don’t know. I don’t go, so. I don’t know.

During our interview, Amelia was not able to satisfy herself with an explanation that accounted for her inability to speak with her mother on the topic of spirituality.

Amelia’s parents would like her attend church more often, and have even started sending emails requesting Amelia and Manuel’s presence at church on particular dates. When Amelia agreed, her parents placed it into her schedule. Rather than feeling pressured, Amelia thought of this as “cute.” While church may not be a spiritual place for
Amelia, being alone in the house on Sunday mornings is rejuvenating and she would much rather be at home:

And you know what? I’m actually really enjoying being home by myself on Sunday mornings. And I cook whatever the heck I want. And I just … relaxing, spending time with my dog. And I just really enjoy being by myself and being in charge on Sunday mornings. Like, it’s been really interesting and -…I’m not a morning person. I’ve always really resented the morning, though.

Perhaps it was the solitude of a Sunday morning, the lack of pressure to deal with school and work, or the expectation of Sunday being a day of rest, but Amelia is able to spend Sunday mornings addressing her own inner needs.

Church and the ‘Other’

Even though Amelia described viewing religion as a source of community, she had experiences both at school and at church where she had either been in the role of the other, or was fearful of being placed in that position. Amelia’s French school was in the jurisdiction of the public school board in Ontario, but almost every day, Amelia felt reminded that French Canadian students are primarily members of the Catholic Church. Once a month, a priest would visit all the classrooms, and many times she would be sent to a room with other non-Catholic students (primarily Jehovah’s Witnesses) where they played on the computers while the rest of her class was taking part in a religious activity. Amelia watched as the others received First Communion and “felt very rejected. Like, we were the other, right.” She recounted:

I was the English kid in the French school, too. And I didn’t have a French last name. So I was always the other. Always the other. But I also treated myself like
an other probably more than I should have. I didn’t … I was comfortable with that. I didn’t really want to integrate with other people.

Despite of her negative encounter with Catholicism in the public board, Amelia has a very positive opinion of Ontario’s Catholic school system. Manuel and his siblings attended Catholic schools, and Amelia was impressed with their curriculum, especially the required Grade 11 course in World Religions. This was a course that Amelia felt she could have connected with. Although part of the Ontario Curriculum, Amelia’s school did not offer it because they were small and, as she stated, “we were a poor school.”

Having experienced being the other in elementary and secondary school, Amelia did not want to repeat this at university. There were several Christian student clubs on campus, but Amelia did not join any of them (or other clubs for that matter). Amelia explained that “again I was afraid of being labelled as part of the group,” especially a conservative Christian group.

While she may not have considered herself an other in her church, Amelia definitely felt different or excluded due to her age. Amelia described her church as having relatively few young people in attendance, so she has not been able to make connections to many people. While she acknowledged that this was a dubious reason for not “being connected with the Lord,” she also acknowledged that church is a social community:

So the church doesn’t really do anything beyond teenagers to enhance that community. Like I don’t go to church and see people my age and there’s sort of like, I think you need to see people your own age. Maybe if I went, there would be more people that would go and all that, they can argue that if they want to. But
beyond just the church, I mean, they’ve got prayer groups and all those kinds of stuff. But there’s nothing there for me. So if there was something more of a community connection maybe I would go more often. I don’t know.

Instead, there was more available for families at her church than for teenagers and young adults without children. She stated:

Because they’ll have all these supports for parents and little kids go off to Sunday school and then you mingle with the other parents because the parents go back to … just that seems to be the way that it works in my church.

Amelia believes she might feel differently when she attends church with children of her own, but until then, there are few rewards to attending.

**Ethics/Morality**

Despite her opinion of the politics in church and her church’s lack of resources for young adults, Amelia still demonstrated respect for religion and saw it as the source of morality and ethics in society. According to Amelia, while her spiritual experiences and encounters allow her to be “in touch with [herself] and understand … [her]self”, which then “carries over in any kind of decisions that [she] make[s] every day, whether they be ethical decisions … or feel[ing] bad about something”, the ethical decisions themselves are based in her religious upbringing. Amelia explained:

For me it comes from the way that I was brought up. The Golden Rules, and the Ten Commandments, and that’s what guides a lot of my decisions. I think that those are important rules regardless of what religion you are. Those are just … be nice to other people and they’ll be nice to you! Like, duh! Common sense kind of rules.
Amelia believes it is essential for children to learn about the world’s religions so they could be better informed and make their own decisions as adults.

While Amelia expressed a positive opinion of the Catholic Church and its education system in Ontario, she did not carry this good opinion to Catholicism’s position on moral and social issues, in particular in comparison with her own religion. She explained:

Everybody’s mad at the United Church because of the, like, you know, performing the gay marriages and that you can have someone from a, who’s a homosexual … or a lesbian is a pastor at the church and it’s not a problem. Well, it’s not. And if you look back at history of what, Catholic Church, the stuff that they’ve done. I’m like, you guys have done a lot of technically immoral, much more immoral things than if you think that homosexuality’s wrong.

Amelia also stated that Catholicism should give lay people more freedom in interpreting and understanding their faith. She elaborated:

I think that the head of the church has to give people more credit that they are more intelligent than just to follow things. I think that people themselves need to give themselves more credit for being more intelligent than they really are because they just seem to follow it […] And I think that the church, Catholic Church needs to give credit to the people that, like, invented the religion and saying that you have to consider the historical context of how the religion was created and that kind of thing. Because now they’re going, oh, they’re not modernizing the religion. And I don’t think that’s, I think that’s not right.
Amelia’s beliefs are firmly rooted in a more contemporary societal context, and the United Church better reflects this. However, in our conversation Amelia also identified the traditions of the Catholic Church as one of its strong points.

Service to Others

Amelia holds community service in high esteem; and she is involved with humanitarian service through her family’s participation in The Rotary’s Children of Chernobyl Program. For the past five summers, Amelia’s parents have brought a young boy by the name of Christopher into their home for respite visits. Amelia said she feels so close to Christopher that she regularly refers to him as her little brother and brings him to her place of summer employment where he can perform odd jobs. During the year, Amelia and her family collect provisions in the way of clothes and other necessities so Christopher does not need to take a part time job to help his mother. If he can focus on school, Amelia said, then “hopefully he can afford to have a higher education which will then lift them out of poverty.” Amelia said she was spurred by the idea of empowering others, and “wanting and needing to help people.” She continued: “I said to Manuel we need to make a lot of money in our jobs so we can do a lot of good stuff for other people.” This also extends into opening their homes to others in need. Amelia and Manuel would like to adopt children in need because of their determination to provide service to others.

Uncomfortable in Embracing Femininity

Amelia’s parents raised their children according to relatively loose gender roles. Amelia said she felt that she is much more like her father than her mother in many ways. She said “I’m very much my dad’s daughter. We really like the same stuff. And he’s a
public speaker.” Amelia described how as a child, she had a great deal of difficulty accepting herself as a female, and took much more pride in being a tomboy:

I used to get offended when people told me I walked around with a purse and I … for a long time, I walked around with a bag. Shoulder bag. Instead of a purse. I was always very uncomfortable embracing my femininity. So that … I mean … I have my own issues with that. I don’t even know why that is, either. My sister was a tomboy, too. I don’t know. It’s not like we were made to play baseball or assume a male stereotype. I don’t know why we both were tomboys, so. My brother was very sensitive. He danced!

This description of herself was very different from the Amelia who sat in front of me. During our interviews and throughout our work together, Amelia dressed in very feminine colours, and wore frilly clothing, cosmetics, and sparkling jewellery. Amelia said she loves to dance and she loved the costumes that she wore for performances or competitions. These two versions of Amelia appear inconsistent; while Amelia still struggles with her femininity and asserts her persona as a tomboy, she is now much more confident with herself and her ‘girliness.’

Amelia presented herself as an independent young woman who is very critical of traditional gender roles and consciously rebels against them. For example, Amelia is quite opposed to the stereotypical opinions of Manuel’s father, especially when it comes to cooking and housework. When Manuel was younger, he wanted to become a chef; however his father, who believes that cooking is woman’s work, discouraged this. As a result, Manuel did not take cooking classes in secondary school, but instead studied AutoCAD (Amelia complained that he never used it). Amelia explained:
His dad doesn’t believe that a male should be cooking and will make fun of him if he cooks, and his dad desperately tries to make me cook. I will withhold my passion for cooking because I don’t want to play into his gender stereotypes. Which means I’ll never cook for his dad. I don’t tell him that I cook and that kind of stuff. Where Manuel was not allowed to cook and he was told, even though he said to his dad, “I really want to be a chef” … this was when he was in high school … ’cause he was passionate at the time. His dad told him that he had to withdraw from Home Ec class because it was a girl’s work.

Amelia described feeling pressure from her future father-in-law to be a traditional wife, but she has refused to cook for him, even though she truly enjoys cooking. She has been making a stand against the assumption that women are responsible for this household duty. However, her defiance has the consequence of keeping Amelia from an activity that brings her pleasure. Since she has not been completely comfortable with her femininity, she refused to participate in an activity that has been deemed ‘women’s work.’ This could partly explain Amelia’s defiance to Manuel’s father.

Being female does come with its advantages, however, and Amelia recognized that girls are able to explore their emotions and intuition much more than boys. Amelia believes she is “privileged that I can be emotional and that I can have reactions to things and nobody will think that I’m weird.” In this respect, Amelia compared herself to Manuel, who she said is “a very sensitive person, but … he fakes a lot of ma … machismo. That’s what we call it (laughs) … with his guy friends, right. So he can’t express those things to his friends.” Amelia credited this difference to their upbringing, but as well to the notion that “people are more accepting of females. I’m getting all teary
eyed about this! You’re allowed to be more in touch with your spirituality and emotions and all that kind of stuff, so.”

Amelia believes that there is a societal acceptance of women’s emotions and intuition, the latter of which is fostered by her spiritual practices. Amelia spoke of her own experience with intuition:

Intuition is definitely a feeling like you get (unintelligible). You overwhelming know if it’s the right answer or that … it’s usually around that is it the right answer or it’s an overwhelming feeling that there’s eminent danger or something like that. So that definitely has to do with it.

She also believes that her intuition is part of what makes her stay in touch with herself, but typically, she does not always follow her intuition “when it doesn’t tell you what you want to hear.” Amelia described seeking out others to “reaffirm or make sure that you do what your intuition is saying, right. There’s checks and balances.” Amelia described relying on others at times to help her make significant decisions, even if “I know that’s the right decision, but maybe it’s not the right time. Or maybe it’s not, maybe I shouldn’t be so selfish.”

Summary

Amelia’s inner self has been nurtured by nature experiences, meditation in the tanning bed, time spent with Manuel, and joyful dance experiences. These experiences are full of awe, wonder, and passion that can make her feel “warm and cuddly.” Amelia has connected with her spirituality in a range of locations and situations, but she has struggled to make it part of her everyday experiences. This was particularly evident in her
difficulty in integrating her spiritual self into the workplace. At the time, Amelia did not see how the two could possibly be combined.

On the one hand, Amelia’s bible is a source of intellectual engagement and protection, and on the other it is a reminder of Amelia’s learning disability. Even though she struggled to read in front of her Sunday school group, there was something significant about her bible that turned it into a prized possession. Amelia’s description of her bible was not that it was a connected to God or the divine, but that it provided the knowledge to make informed decisions about God. In addition, this bible offered her a certain amount of protection and security just by being a bible.

Amelia described welcoming the structure provided by the church, but in terms of her spirituality, this structure fails. The difficulties with religion she expressed were not necessarily in regards to her social beliefs, as the United Church is a socially liberal denomination that matches her own beliefs, but rather that the structure of prayer and ritual does not connect with Amelia’s inner life or spirituality. However, it has provided her with the moral structure she cherishes. While Amelia has experienced a lack of community within the church, she recognizes that service to others is an essential component of her life.
Chapter 8 – Kim: Community and Relational

At 24, Kim has graduated from university with her bachelor’s degree and is currently pursuing two master’s degrees, one in social work and the other in divinity. Kim is a mature young woman who is very thoughtful and deliberate when she speaks, so our interviews were quite long and detailed. The oldest of four children, Kim lives at home with her parents and her 15 year-old brother. While he is more interested in a career in construction than attending higher education, Kim’s two younger sisters are away at university. The next youngest girl is completing a term of university in Central America, while the youngest sister is also pursuing a degree in social work. Kim’s interest in this study is based both on the topic of inner life and spirit and on her interest in qualitative research, which she has conducted for her undergraduate thesis.

Attending Toronto’s public schools for her elementary and secondary education, Kim had always been a high achiever but was not impressed by the structure of the schools. At university, Kim chose an interdisciplinary arts and science undergraduate degree, with a minor in biology, that required her to take a broad range of courses including Western Civilization, logic, and calculus. Unlike more traditional programs, the arts were integrated into the science courses and science was integrated into the arts courses. For example, in addition to completing calculus problems, Kim wrote an essay course relating to calculus. Kim found this integrated style of teaching and learning to be very appealing.

Kim had many interests and has no difficulty in providing me with a long list of hobbies and interests. She enjoys physical activities and the outdoors, and often runs through the conservation area near her parents’ home. She likes to go camping, canoeing,
cross-country skiing, swimming, and hiking. Kim is a musical person and has learned to
play several instruments including the piano, saxophone, and is now teaching herself the
guitar. Kim chose the guitar because she can sing with it, in addition to carrying it with
her. Kim loves to read and will usually choose a novel to read for pleasure; but most
recently she has been reading non-fiction books related to spirituality. Kim also enjoys
working with children, has worked at a summer camp, and has been a soccer coach. Kim
takes an interest in current affairs, social justice, and the environment. To this end, her
undergraduate thesis focused on ecospirituality and environmental action.

Kim had a story to tell about her family’s membership in the Unitarian Church.
When she was young, Kim’s family did not attend church, nor did they belong to a
particular denomination. At nine years old, Kim realized that she had Jewish friends and
Christian friends who belonged to various denominations and she asked her parents why
“everybody else was something and what were we?” Her parents did not have an
immediate answer for her. While her mother grew up Anglican and her father was
Catholic, both left those churches for various reasons, including the exclusion and
condemnation of others. When masses changed from Latin to English, Kim’s father
discovered that he did not agree with the message of the liturgy. Although they were
married in an Anglican church, their priest suggested they investigate the Unitarian faith.
So, many years later when her parents started searching for a new church after their
daughter’s questioning, they “found a home for themselves” in the Unitarian Church.
Kim still remembers the first time she attended that church, and it has become an
essential memory of childhood.

*Running in the Woods and Karaoke*
Due to her education in divinity and her plans to become a minister, Kim is particularly attuned to moments of spirit and self-reflection. Kim recalled two specific spiritual experiences that she shared with me: one in solitude and the other within a group. In part to stay healthy and in part to be in the outdoors, Kim enjoys running in the conservation area near her home. When she runs, she recites meditations that she created for herself. She does this to center and feel connected to herself, to her surroundings, and to others in her life. One autumn day just over a year ago, Kim was on one of her meditation runs when her experience occurred:

I was just running along doing that [reciting meditations] and I was coming up the top of a hill and there was a stream trickling by and leaves falling from the trees. It almost was like snow. It was in the fall … They were all just coming down. And I just had to stop and I sat for about 10 minutes and just was absorbed in (unintelligible), nature often does. It gets me in that kind of zone. Sitting and listening. I had my eyes closed for a while, absorbing it and breathing deeply and being really in the moment. There was a sense of connectedness to the divine (unintelligible) and spirit.

Kim felt that stopping during the run was unusual because she usually focuses solely on the run and stopping would interrupt the flow of the workout. She had the impulse to stop in the past, but Kim said she ignored that impulse because she was usually thinking about getting to work or to school on time. But this time when she came to the top of the hill, she felt that she had to stop and be there in the moment. When Kim spends her leisure time in nature, she reports that she is often caught by nature, such as while canoeing with a friend and being mindful of the sunset.
According to Kim, she has had similar experiences on other runs when she felt that she had to stop and interrupt her workout, but this one was the most powerful and the one she instantly remembered. An earlier experience took place in winter, when Kim sat and spent several minutes meditating in the middle of a snowbank. Kim explained:

Usually I don’t like stopping when I’m running. It’s more of a get out and get my … like I enjoy the process but I feel best if it’s just solid run and keep on going and … so I don’t usually stop. But there’s been a few times. One time I sat down in winter, too. There was snow on the ground and I just sat down. I meditated for a few minutes in the middle of a snowbank, like the snow. I think there’s something about things falling for me.

Kim made the connection that in both the fall and winter, things were falling. She said “it does capture something for me, too, when things are falling. And I likened it to snow the first time – it looks like it’s snowing leaves. It’s something I remember thinking before I sat down.” Whether the falling leaves and snow caught her attention during her running meditation and inspired her to stop or whether the falling leaves and snow triggered a spiritual experience out of her running meditation, Kim believes that these were an integral part of her experience.

Reflecting upon her thoughts and feelings at the time, Kim said she experienced a great sense of peace and joy. Overwhelmingly, however, was Kim’s sense of:

Connectedness to the world. And I think I often feel connected to a maybe source of love when I’m … be that God or something else. But just … kind of this … bubbling up of love and strong positive feeling. But in a peaceful way, not in a wanting to jump for joy, necessarily, but just sit and be in that moment.
In a previous quote, Kim used the terms divine and spirit when describing her experience, yet here she hesitated to say she was connected to God. Kim appeared hesitant to use traditional theology to describe her experience, but felt comfortable with the descriptors of divine, spirit, and love.

Kim’s moments in nature were primarily solitary ones, although she said she has experienced such moments while with others, such as when Kim had her second spiritual experience. Kim was working at Friendship Centre (a local community centre), assisting in a seniors’ lunch and karaoke event. Everyone was enjoying the karaoke and singing when Kim felt the need to take a few minutes out of her workday and journal her experience. Kim mused that this spiritual experience happened with “groups of people singing and not when it’s good quality music.” Kim felt she had to write this down because:

I felt … there, it was more the connectedness to other people and seeing the friendships people had and the, the way in which people come together in mutual support but also just the fun. How that is such a source of life and … There was a feeling of connectedness that was the main feeling out there.

Again, Kim experienced a feeling of connectedness with the seniors and as she emphasized, there was a strong sense of community. The community centre is also a church, and when the lyrics of the hymns are meaningful, Kim feels that same sense of community.

Kim’s awareness of these experiences was heightened when she joined an interfaith group at her undergraduate university several years earlier. She had wanted to join a ministry group at her church, but even though she identifies with people older than
herself, the members of these groups were over 40 years old and at a very different stage in their lives. Kim welcomed the opportunity to join Friends in Spirit and talk with others her own age, and eventually became a co-facilitator with the friend who originally invited her to join. In this “spiritual journey circle,” Kim meditated, journalled, and discussed issues with which she deeply connected. They also participated in various activities such as hiking and walking a labyrinth. Here Kim “found new ways of connecting to things, new language to use, more comfort with God language, which I hadn’t been comfortable with as a teenager. Probably because it isn’t used as much in the Unitarian Church.” The weekly meetings allowed her the opportunity to check in with her spirituality on a regular basis and see what else “was going on out there.” It was then that Kim went beyond just saying that something was beautiful and moving on. This was when she said, “O.K. that’s beautiful and I want to take some time.” As a student, Kim did not feel that she had the time to nurture her spiritual life, but with this group “I would start integrating it in other places and say ‘Hey, it’s not a waste of my time to sit and just feel connected right now.’ So I think there was a freedom.”

*Creating a Bowl in Safe Haven*

Kim’s interfaith group not only met at the university on a weekly basis, but they also organized outings and retreats. One such retreat three years ago brought Kim to visit a community centre for the homeless in Toronto. Safe Haven is not meant to sustain its patrons with services, and as such they only offered a few meals each week and ‘Out of the Cold’ one night per week (overnight shelter). Unlike other centres for the homeless, Kim explained that her group was not expected to “bestow our gifts upon the people there” and to help serve meals, even though they did during their retreat. Instead, Safe
Haven’s main purpose was to provide the homeless a sense of community and belonging. Kim was welcomed, ate with the patrons, and was asked to participate in their activities and games. She reflected that “it was just really neat to sit beside somebody and they welcome us.” There was an equalization of power at this centre that was a new and potent experience that made Kim more aware of the importance of community.

During one of the activities, Kim painted and decorated a small bowl, which was the item she brought to our interview. Kim divided the bowl into three sections, top, middle, and bottom, each one with its own meaning and reflections on her time at the centre. Around the top of the bowl Kim inscribed “sanctuary,” “walking together,” “light,” “community,” “friendship,” “love,” and “hope.” These are not only words that Kim wrote to describe the centre, but they are also words that seem to be of great importance in her life and spirituality. Beneath the words is a circle of people whose hands are joined. These people represent not only the patrons of the community group, but also Kim herself coming into the group as a human, not a professional. There are flames of various colours rising up which Kim described as “trying to break the bonds, but they’re not breaking the bonds of community.” The bottom of the bowl is “a line of brokenness and unbrokenness and that we all have components of. So here it’s really even, here it’s dotted, squiggly, and then broken again.” With this, Kim is expressing that which exists in us all of the time – that we are always broken and whole.

Kim keeps the bowl on a shelf in her bedroom where she can see it on a regular basis, yet it is not in a prominent place. Kim feels that the bowl’s spiritual significance is as a reminder that “events don’t happen just once,” but instead are ongoing experiences
of spirit. In addition to being a reflection of her spiritual beliefs, the bowl symbolizes the environment with which Kim wishes to surround herself, in her own life and in her work.

**Relational**

When Kim spoke about her role within the Unitarian Church, her education in theology, or her ministry, she spoke relatively little about God, Jesus, or The Bible. The few times she used the word God, she added “or something else.” Instead, the key terms she used to discuss her spirituality and role within the church were relational, a word Kim emphasized repeatedly. Kim’s use of the term relational can be broken down into the three categories community, equality, and connection, all of which permeate her conversations.

**Community**

During our interviews, Kim’s devotion to the divine was at times overshadowed by her devotion to others, and she emphasized that community was essential to her spirituality and future ministry. Although Kim spoke often of the church, she explained that it does not play the same role in her spirituality as The Friendship Centre, Safe Haven, and Friends in Spirit. These spiritual communities have been places where Kim can not only practice her ministry, but can also receive the relational gifts of being in community with others. In addition, the Friendship Centre is where one of her spiritual experiences took place, one in which she experienced a deep connection to community.

Due to her education and vocation, Kim has had the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of community in her life and ministry. Kim described her worldview as:

The importance of every person as part of a collective and as an individual. So, with a huge focus on community and a huge focus on individual journeys and
unique characteristics and personalities and seeing that uniqueness as gifts in community.

Kim speculated that we lose this essential sense of community regardless of our place in life and socioeconomic status. Kim gave the example of the rich who may lose community due to the strength of their material connections, and those on the street may lose community due to their focus on the necessities of life.

**Equality**

Kim’s bowl is both a product and a reminder of her beliefs about equality and social justice, as well as her experiences at Safe Haven. It was here where she was asked not to be of service to the community of homeless persons, but to come as an equal. Kim appeared to reject the typical hierarchal approach of service to others in favour of a web approach to community. Kim spoke to this worldview when she described her focus on “individual journeys and unique characteristics and personalities.” Here, Kim included the journeys of all in the community, not just those in her church community who tend to be white middle-class Canadians. Kim indicated that her church does not do a lot of work in the area of community beyond its own walls, and often the call for volunteers is for the benefit of the church itself.

Kim’s visit to Safe Haven was a new experience in that equality. The centre is designed so that the “traditional haves” are not in the power role; instead, the roles are reversed “in that we were expected to learn from them.” The homeless were not presented as “people on the street, but [as] people” who had different life experiences. Kim connected equality to community; as such, it became apparent to her that:
The sense of community is what we often lose and whether we’re very rich and disconnected because of the material connections or, I’m not stereotyping that if you’re rich that’s the way it is, but … As one potentially on the street and the necessities of life keep you from entering community in a lot of circumstances. Kim was able to recognize that circumstances in life often keep people from living equally in community. As someone who had been privileged in life, it was different for Kim to learn from the less privileged and challenge her sense of equality.

**Connectedness**

An essential piece of developing community and equality, and for nurturing Kim’s spirituality, was the connection to community and the divine. Kim saw herself not as an isolated individual drawing a one-way connection to God, but as a part of interconnected universe of self, community, and the divine. Kim explained:

> I think at the root of that [valuing the gifts of others] is really a connectedness to other people and to all life is really central. And so these times when I’m feeling connected, I think it’s tapping into that connected, the connectedness. That’s really key for me.

So being in community is one way for Kim to be “connected to something bigger than myself. Connected to people outside of myself. And not … in even people outside of my life, you know in a really personal way, you know, just connections in many ways.”

Connectedness is not just how Kim fits into community, but also how she understands God and her relationship to God. In fact, Kim described her idea of God as, “the connections between people. So like, you know, if you could see it, it would be this tangible connection happening between you and I right now and you know, between the
love, between people.” Connectedness is a metaphor that Kim said she has used often in the past, but now she has developed several others.

Kim’s view of spirituality and the world is not a hierarchical vision of God in heaven with humans striving to attain the rewards offered there. Instead, she views the world as an interconnected community of people, the divine, nature, and herself more in line with the notion of a web of interconnections where there is equality. She stated of Friendship Centre and Safe Haven:

I feel kind of really at my core, of connectedness to life and to God and to everything at both of those places and I think the key is the sense of community that results from everybody being welcome, so that my contribution is no different than somebody who’s living on the street versus somebody who has a PhD.

For Kim, all people are equal in connectedness.

Nurturing Inner Life

It was during her undergraduate years that Kim solidified her interest in ministry, in part due to her experience with Friends in Spirit. Kim especially enjoyed facilitating these groups and felt that her call to ministry was based on “just this feeling of rightness” in her connection with others and her spiritual life. The inclusion of spirituality in her work and life is holistic, as “it’s the final layer that often gets ignored” and which connects the other parts of herself. Kim reflected:

You often don’t just talk about your spirituality without talking about your emotions or your intellectual. I find you draw on all the other areas – social,
intellectual, emotional – when you’re talking about your spirituality, whereas some of the other areas you don’t necessarily bring spirituality in.

While the Friends in Spirit experience was essential for Kim’s vocational decision, it also provided a place for Kim to reflect on her inner life and spirituality in a non-denominational setting.

Kim actively nurtures her inner life, which she explained is the lens through which she is able to filter the outside world. Kim described her inner life as “a centeredness:”

A way and a means and a place to step back and reframe what I’m seeing in ways that fit more with how I want to interact with the outside world and how I want to interpret what I’m seeing around me.

When Kim focuses on the positive and reaches out to others, she is able to use her inner life to transform how she frames the world. The terms ‘reframing’ and ‘reinterpreting’ are descriptions Kim used often in discussing her inner life. In particular, Kim had noticed that she is not able to reframe when her inner life is being neglected. In nurturing her spirituality, she is better able to reframe negative experiences into ones that, while not necessarily positive, are manageable. Kim used stress as an example:

When I’m seeing the world and the pressures and allowing myself to come under the pressures that other people value, my inner life is a way of re-centering myself in the values that are actually important to me and ways of being that are important to me. So that I’m able to remember that and not get caught up in other people’s expectations – or even my own expectations that aren’t the ones that I don’t really hold [struggles with words], want to be true [laughs].
When this nurturing and time for centeredness is lacking, Kim can feel disconnected from her own beliefs and expectations. For example, perfectionism is one trait that Kim does not value, but she is prone to manifest it as a response to external and internal influences if she is not mindful.

On a more basic and fundamental level, Kim reported that nurturing her inner life makes her daily life richer, more meaningful, and less mundane. When she is not attending to her inner life, Kim notices changes in herself, whether it is self-confidence, how she feels, how she interacts with others, or “just my sense of peace with who I am and what I’m doing.” In the absence of this nurturance, Kim notices what is missing, which usually includes joy. Without this joy, the “mundane becomes the mundane only [laughs]” and it becomes harder to face life.

Security of person and place in nurturing inner life is a recurrent theme for Kim. Friends in Spirit has provided Kim with a safe place to talk about her inner life and spirituality, “and to explore new ideas without feeling threatened or like there’s a preset agenda. I think the openness is really important and the ability to take it in different directions.” A spiritual community is essential for Kim because she cannot always talk with her friends and family about these issues, simply because these discussions just would not arise.

*Rituals and Practice*

To properly nurture her inner life, Kim possesses a variety of spiritual practices and some rituals, none of which appear to be related to her time spent in the church or at mass. The rituals that Kim uses serve the purpose of reminding her of her beliefs and values, just by the act of being mindful. In a recent lecture, Kim’s class discussed “that in
doing a ritual, a ritual might just be noticing [spirit or spirituality].” To this end, Kim has created a ritual she performs with the bowl she created at Safe Haven:

I put pennies in it that I find on the ground. These are all things that I found on the ground. And so usually once a week I add a penny. Just a penny. I put them in my pocket and I put them in when I get home.

For Kim, this is not a means of collecting money, but rather is a means by which she can recall her values and beliefs about spirit. Kim explained:

Just the act of remembering the ritual of seeing [the bowl] and remembering that these are values I hold dear are a way of making the experience not a one-time experience but an on-going experience. As I encounter similar things in other ways it brings to my consciousness the way I experience those things in other contexts as well.

This ritual reminds Kim that spiritual experiences are continuous, rather than single events that fade with time.

While Kim has a small number of rituals, her spiritual practices are many and Kim’s inner life could not be sustained without them. Kim explained that we all have an inner light, or an inner spark of divinity, whether we call this our true self or what grounds us (Kim currently uses ‘grounding’ as her descriptor, but claims there can be more). This inner spark is “something that’s integral to my being and is something that kind of starts inward and moves outward.” Spiritual practices come into play because “the practices help me break down the barriers of, you know, systems in the society, the society that we’re living with and my own personality traits or practices that disconnect
me from that inner sense of self.” By using spiritual practices, Kim is able to allow her inner spark to break free of barriers so she can connect with her spirit.

One of Kim’s essential spiritual practices is her community involvement: “In true Unitarian fashion, service to others I also see as a spiritual practice.” Once again, it is at Kim’s community groups where this experience occurs – Friendship Centre, Friends in Spirit, and Safe Haven. In Friends in Spirit, for example, members are given a safe place to speak about their spiritual selves and listen to the wisdom and experiences of others. While an in-depth exploration of the experiences did not always occur, there was much to be gained from the affirmation given to one another. Kim believes her inner self is neglected “if I’m lacking in the conversations about it. I put a lot less time and energy in, don’t stay with those moments when they happen. So my spiritual life is greatly diminished when that ongoing talking isn’t happening.” This is a key component of Friends in Spirit that Kim is missing now that she is no longer part of that community.

Kim’s spiritual practices are also her creative and intuitive activities. Friends in Spirit facilitated this piece of Kim’s spiritual development through its encouragement of artistic activities. Kim explained:

[my inner life] is most easily expressed through creative means for me. And so, I might express my beliefs and my theology and my views on divinity in one way, and I would express my – I wouldn’t call that my inner life. I would – it’s too stuck in my head. I would call my inner life related to a more, my feelings, my way of being. And I feel like my head informs that. But my head isn’t the principle part of that. And so, when I’m speaking or, I think it comes out more in creativity, creative ways than it does rationally for me.
Kim expresses her inner life, or her way of being, through creative means rather than through theological debate.

For years, Kim has been constructing metaphors to clarify and explore her beliefs, inner life, and spirituality. One example of this is the description she used earlier to describe her understanding of God as the “connections” between people, the “tangible connection between you and I right now.” Kim relayed another metaphor for her understanding about God developed through her undergraduate education in the arts and sciences. This metaphor builds upon the biological principle of emergent properties:

It’s that, in studying organisms, particularly our systems, biologists used to think that if you studied the heart and the liver, or you studied, you know, A and B, and C and D, and each component part, you’d have the whole picture. And the idea of emergent properties is that the sum is greater than the whole. So it’s one of my images of the divine is the sum being greater than whole. So, God as emergent properties is one of my metaphors. I’m trying to think of a nicer one [laughs]!

Kim insisted that this was not a beautiful metaphor, but that it does relate to her interest in community groups. Through the interaction of those within the group, the sum of the individuals is greater than the whole. To carry her metaphor one step further, God may be emergent from the group.

Other verbal techniques employed by Kim include journalling and poetry. While Kim prefers talking with others, she will journal if she is alone. This is also a means of creative practice, “even if it’s just expressing feelings.” Kim questions whether what she writes is indeed poetry, and states that if it is, it is “not great poetry or resounding poetry.” In essence, Kim creates mantras or affirmations that she repeats to herself. These
can be one word or they can be stanzas; for example, Kim’s favourite affirmations are “Beloved” and “Thankfulness.” Kim reflects on these terms in different contexts, often beginning in the context of her inner life and then moving outwards to her relationships with others.

Kim engages in other creative activities, including drawing, which she does not do as often. Kim also enjoys playing music, and most recently she has been learning to play the guitar and hopes it will become a new form of expression. The guitar is one way that Kim may be able to share with others, in a way she could not with her writing: “I don’t always share what I write, but I feel like if I was able to put it into music…” Through song, Kim will be able to share with others; however, now she still has not made the songs come out the way she hears them in her head.

Kim lists many other spiritual practices including the mantras she repeats while running. This is her reflective time, plus Kim very much enjoys being out in nature: “There’s something about just being outside. So another is just taking walks or spending time outside. When it’s warmer I’ll just sit outside.” Visiting a mentor is also a spiritual practice, as going to church can be. Although she does not do this often, Kim has discovered silence through a Quaker meeting she attended. Kim found one hour of sitting in silence more meaningful than many other things she has done. As well, meditation is a practice Kim will use sometimes, but it is one she struggles with because “the emptying your mind piece, sometimes that doesn’t work very well for me and I just go with train of thought.”

Challenges/Struggles
The challenges and struggles that Kim has experienced in relation to her inner life and spiritual beliefs were revealed at various times during our interviews. While I have identified them by the terms ‘challenges’ and ‘struggles,’ Kim did not identify all of them in this way. Rather, some were normal components of her developing inner life. Kim has experienced times of struggle, which manifested as disconnection with her inner self, a fear of rejection, and doubts about the match between herself and her church.

As mentioned, one of the images on Kim’s bowl from Safe Haven is a line that changes from unbroken to broken, which Kim drew to represent the brokenness and wholeness that exists in everyone. Kim described various times of disconnection with her inner self when it was difficult to feel this wholeness. During one difficult period, Kim attempted to use a mantra that centered on being “thankful for contentment and happiness in my life,” but was at a point in her life where she did not feel content or happy. Kim told her story:

I was actually in tears as I was running – trying to, trying to say this thing that I found so centering in that bigger arching way. And at that particular moment – and I knew it was only a particular moment – I felt crushed. And it was so hard, that disjoint between, yeah, that life-giving practice and how it didn’t match with my state of mind.

Kim believes that intuitively she knew this mantra was not working, as well as knowing the reasons why it was not working. Based on this feeling, Kim shifted her affirmation to “Beloved. Beloved,” instead of forcing her “inner life to conform to what [her] head wanted as a practice.” Kim’s intuition guided her away from spiritual practices that were
not meaningful, or were too painful for her, to something more conducive to the state of her inner life. Kim believes that her intuition has guided:

[...] both my practices and my way of doing things in life. [...] Sometimes when I’ve reflected later, I come back to that the reason this wasn’t working out is that I was frustrated and that links to something I really valued being turned on its head in what I was doing without me even really realizing it. And so, at an intuitive level, I was realizing that it conflicted with my inner life or core being. But on an outer level I hadn’t gotten to that level of awareness yet.

Kim believes that her inner life is an intuitive guide to her spirit, especially when she is not yet able to verbalize or be aware of her spirit.

Just like any other young person in secondary school, Kim wanted to be accepted by her peers. Kim was afraid of rejection, especially rejection that was connected to her spirituality. While the response was not negative, Kim was taken aback by the response she received from a friend when she disclosed that she planned on entering the ministry. Her friend was not all surprised by the news because Kim “always loved church so much,” but Kim would not have described herself in that way. Kim remembered an earlier time:

[I was] describing my beliefs to people in high school and getting choked up almost because a) I was afraid of rejection and b) it was so important to me that to be rejected on the basis, you know, especially to, you know, evangelical Christian people who I thought would be judging.

Kim described how deeply she felt her spiritual life when she explained:
It was so important to me that to be rejected on that was much more threatening than to be rejected on a whole other spectrum of … For some reason, like I … my voice would go shaky just describing what Unitarianism was because people generally don’t know.

As it turned out, her friends were accepting of her choices, especially the university housemates who would make fun of her life in ministry in “a very fun and loving way.”

Friends in Spirit was one of the places that Kim did not feel judged but felt welcomed. This group offered safety, freedom, and openness to the discussion of spirituality, as young people came to this group with the purpose of delving into their spiritual lives, asking questions, and looking for affirmation. Many of Kim’s current friends came from this group. While Kim believes there would be acceptance at home with her family (she mentions her mother in particular) to discussions of spirit, the quality and depth of their interest was different from Friends in Spirit. While there is not a fear of rejection at home, there are not deep discussions, either.

As a teenager, Kim believed that the Unitarian Church was a perfect fit for her. She asserted that while she does belong within the Unitarian faith theologically, the church is no longer as fulfilling. Kim stated that her experiences at Friends in Spirit and Friendship Centre helped her to get “in touch” with a different spiritual self that was not being nurtured at her own church. Kim reflected, “that’s been an interesting - Just to note that in this last year, especially when I’m considering Unitarian Ministry and seeing that conflict. It’s been a bit of a struggle for me. Identifying what I was connecting to elsewhere.” This was particularly obvious to Kim at this point because she was just recently experiencing life without Friends in Spirit.
In addition to the lack of full spiritual nurturing, the social connection of the church was also missing. Kim can identify only a handful of young people at her church, whereas there are many families with young children. While her church is always looking for volunteers, it is usually for programs or tasks that need to be completed at the church, which does not allow for the opportunity to just gather and be together. In her frustration, Kim asked, “does anyone here even really know who I am? You know me better from what I’ve said than people that I’ve met at my church do.” Since much of the congregation seems to be satisfied with this arrangement, Kim wonders at times if this is the right place for her. Kim has experienced a space between herself and other parishioners, and a sense of superficiality in that others do not truly care about each other’s stories and wellbeing.

For these and other reasons, Kim and her boyfriend (a former evangelical) have been to other churches and other denominations. Kim’s mother had also left the congregation for several months. At Friendship Centre and Safe Haven, Kim found another way of being in community that is much more satisfying and Kim would like to find a regular church that also fosters this sense of community and spirit. Part of the appeal of the other centres is in the authenticity of personal stories. At the Unitarian Church, Kim experienced a formality to the sermon behind the podium. At Friends in Spirit, Kim interacted, shared, and reflected with other young people who were also interested in exploring their spirituality.

Kim has also found her studies in a Lutheran seminary to be very structured, which Kim believes is very limiting. She struggles to relate to the material when the language is confined, and at the seminary she is spending much of her time translating
text. Kim prefers to have open-ended questions to expand her spirituality, which she is not receiving in her studies. Kim said that when there is a lack of openness or:

When it’s closed, I prefer just to keep my own experiences close to my heart and not put them out there to - at risk of being judged. I think judgment is the main thing I would fear rather than any other repercussions.

Here Kim’s struggle with the church is combined with her fear of rejection in terms of her spirituality.

_A Tomboy and a Female Mentor_

Kim sat in front of me as a beautiful young woman with long hair, struggling to answer my inquiry about the effects being female has on her inner life. With a few false starts, Kim replied:

I’m a bit of a tomboy. I don’t [laughs] identify myself - I mean, obviously I identify myself as female, but [laughs]. Quite often I try to - separate myself from those things which I identify as, not just stereotypically female, but. I don’t know how that plays into it.

As a young woman, Kim still loves competitive sports, athletics, being outside, and “romping around.” She rebels against the traditional female qualities of being meek, the hostess, and the primary caregiver. Kim reported that to a great extent, her family did not encourage many gender stereotypes with their children. While Kim and her sisters played with trucks, her younger brother, Jeffrey, played with dolls. He also does the dishes as much as the rest of the family. Being nine years older, Kim remembered a change in him when Jeffrey started Kindergarten “in terms of his behaviour and his way of interacting.” Kim said “he seemed much more a boy when he hit school and peers and those pressures
than he ever had at home.” Kim showed concern when she explained that Jeffrey is very sensitive, but unfortunately does not feel free to express this part of himself.

In the home, Kim was taught that gender did not impact on what the children were capable of or could accomplish in life. Around the age of twelve, Kim argued that there were no differences between men and women, but she has since recognized that “there may be differences,” although she asserted that the research is inconclusive. Kim believes that “we’re all on a spectrum and that where I am on that spectrum is more determined by who I am than by my gender.” Many of Kim’s values, those of intuition, community, connection, and equality, are culturally associated with the feminine rather than the masculine. However, Kim strongly believes that her values are not unique to women and includes men as co-bearers of these values.

In speaking about her inner life, Kim often used the words ‘community’ and ‘connection’, but she also used the term ‘relational’. Kim views the world in terms of “things in relation with me and in relationship with myself, me in relationship with the divine, me in relationship with others, others in relationship with others.” Kim does not identify the relational as being uniquely female; instead being female, especially in modern society, facilitates the relational. Women find it easier to interact through the relational than men, who are much more likely to “face some trouble.” Kim does not imply that men are not capable, or there is a biological reason why men do not interact through the relational, but culturally the relational is not valued and is “dismissed as being female.” Kim described a paradox in which the capacity for relatedness is seen as a strength in females but a weakness in males. In this sense, it is diminished by being just
for women, “and so both lose out in that it’s not valued when I think it’s a valuable thing.”

Over the years, Kim has become less bothered by the fact that she has traditionally feminine qualities. She is now happy to be relational and sensitive, even though her boyfriend teases her with the insult, “You’re such a girl!” Kim is not comfortable with the suggestion that women are inherently sensitive and men are not, which she considers reverse sexism. Kim envisions a world in which both men and women are encouraged to develop feminine and masculine qualities.

Kim is very fortunate to have had a spiritual mentor, whom she met through the Friendship Centre. At the time, June was facilitating Friends in Spirit and invited Kim to attend. Eventually, Kim and June co-facilitated the group, spending about two hours together every week. During these meetings they would also talk about their lives and spiritual journeys, but the focus was mainly on Kim’s journey. Kim recounted:

Yeah, I feel like I grew so much spiritually and as a person just through interacting. And it wasn’t even like a course changed, it was more just, kind of unconditional support and questions to keep me thinking as I walked my own journey. And so her impact has been more of a support and a lifting up rather than a changing, but it’s really that time with her.

Kim played with the idea of whether her mentor’s power or strength had something to do with the fact that she was a woman. Kim knows both June and her husband, who is also spirituality active, but Kim said:
I noticed and been surprised by how much, and I don’t know if it’s partly her personality, but I feel much more comfortable with her and I haven’t ever gone to her husband to talk about, about my spirituality very much.

Kim speculated that it might just be June’s personality, since men seem to prefer to speak with June as well. After graduation, Kim moved away from Friends in Spirit, and so she no longer has regular contact with June. Although they still meet about once a month, Kim feels that this has been a “huge loss” of “unconditional support.”

Summary

Kim stands out from the other participants in this study in that she has chosen a career and path in life that centers on spirituality. While Kim states that she is theologically secure in her church, her conversation about spirit was not steeped in religious dogma or doctrine. Kim has had the opportunity and the desire to study spirituality and reflect on her inner life so that she was very well versed and able to put language to her personal experiences. She has sought out spiritual groups through which she could explore her inner self, and she has had the privilege of a spiritual mentor.

Reluctant to give women any unique characteristics when it comes to the spiritual, Kim equates women’s tendencies towards the relational as a cultural stereotype that devalues the relational by association. Kim considers herself to be a tomboy and rejects traditional feminine roles for herself, in addition to traditional masculine roles for men.

Like the other participants, Kim has had spiritual experiences in more than one location and situation: one running in nature and the other while with others in song. Kim has actively nurtured her spirit more than any of the others, but interestingly, Kim is the only one to report that she initially fought the experience because daily life required her
elsewhere. Eventually, Kim allowed herself to stop during her run and feel a connection to the divine.

At Safe Haven, Kim wrote her three main characteristics of spirit or relation on her bowl: community, equality, and connection. Kim found community in Friends in Spirit, as well as in community centres such as Friendship Centre and Safe Haven. She also recognizes the equality of all in that everyone has gifts to share and she understands that the deep connection of herself to her self, others, and the divine can be felt and created. Kim’s inner life helps her to reframe and interpret the everyday world into something infused with spirit; it is an inner life that she nurtures through a variety of rituals and spiritual practices. These practices include the creation of mantras, metaphors, poetry, music, and community involvement.

Kim has experienced several challenges to her spiritual life. There are times when she feels a disconnect from her inner self, and her spiritual practices suddenly do not work. However, when she allows her intuition to flow, she often knows what it is she needs to do at that time. Kim has a very real fear of rejection based on her spirituality and inner self, and as such has been guarded about with whom she shares this core aspect of herself. The lack of community and spiritual nurturing within her church is also a struggle Kim is currently facing, but this has not changed her determination to become a minister.
Chapter 9 – Common Themes

In the previous five chapters, I have provided a description of each of the participants’ spiritual experiences, plus I have summarized our discussions of their spiritual beliefs and understandings. The purpose of this chapter is to explore and examine the common characteristics and themes that emerged across the stories of the participants. The experiences described by the participants were spiritual based on their own definitions, understandings, and interpretations of the term because they were not given a definitive explanation of spirituality. The participants were able to make their own judgments and choices about spirituality and tell their own stories, which provided the data from which to understand the nature of the spiritual experiences of young women. My expectation was that each participant was involved in this study because she had a particularly meaningful experience that she was willing to share with me. What surprised me was not that some came unprepared with a story (specifically Maria and Theresa), but that all of the participants related more than one spiritual experience, often with differing emotions, intensities, and settings. Just as the literature on spiritual experiences described diverse settings, emotions, perspectives, and tone, each of the participants’ experiences exhibited characteristics that were diverse in setting, emotion, perspective, and tone. Some were representative of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) flow experience, such as Theresa’s basketball game and Kelly’s artwork, some of Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch’s (2003) numinous experience, such as Kim’s connection with the divine in the woods, some of Maslow’s (1970) peak experience, such as Maria’s dancing, and others of Buber’s (1958) I-Thou relationship, such as Kim’s relational experience during karaoke.
An overall analysis of the spiritual experiences described in this study reveals four major themes: characteristics of the experiences (setting, emotions, openness to experience, and sources of knowledge); finding place (the relational, and continuity and spiritual mentorship); questioning of paradigms (religion, female stereotypes, and mind/body dualism); and safety (fear of speaking of spirit, protection and good luck charms, and schooling).

**Characteristics of the Experiences**

**Setting**

The spiritual experiences of the participants fell into two general categories of setting and activity: the arts and being in nature. Each of the participants spoke of the importance of the arts to their spiritual lives, either as a source of the spiritual experience or in terms of their spiritual wellbeing. Flow experience is strongly connected to the arts due to the high psychic involvement required in either creating, designing, writing, or listening (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For example, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) explained that as organized auditory information, music restores order to consciousness while the ritualistic elements of a concert intensify the experience. As well, Duncan (as cited in Miller, J., 2007) illustrated that dance requires the individual to forget her self-awareness in order to connect with universal feeling and spirit.

Two of the most powerful spiritual experiences occurred during dance. Both Amelia and Maria called their experience a high-energy moment, filled with “hyperness” and “adrenalin.” It was an experience that Amelia categorized separately from her other spiritual moments. Part of Amelia’s adrenalin came from the rush of competition and she gave a long description of the process she went through backstage to help build her
energy. Amelia communicated much more about the intensity of her experience through the pitch, tone, and volume of her voice, the speed at which she spoke, the smile and excitement in her face, and the waving of her arms than she was able to in words. While Amelia’s experience was due in part to the anticipation of the dance, Maria’s experience was triggered by the setting and place. At the club, Maria was in a large, sometimes crowded room with hundreds of other people, dancing alongside her closest friends. The rhythm of the music, the freedom of the dance, and the social environment triggered Maria’s experience of flow.

Just as Duncan (as cited in Miller, J., 2007) described, both participants felt their sense of self disappear as they were swept up in the dance, an experience that gave them a sense of freedom, especially from the judgments and opinions of others. Rather than being self-conscious about dancing in front of the judges and an auditorium full of people, Amelia was unconcerned with their presence and focused on the experience. Here, ‘experience’ is a more accurate term than ‘dance’ because Amelia was also no longer attending to the technical aspects of her dance as everything blended together in an experience of flow. Lacking Amelia’s audience, a normally shy Maria was able to drop her self-consciousness and become part of the group consciousness while dancing at a club. Maria also experienced a sense of freedom from her everyday stressors – homework, work, and finances – and truly felt the opportunity to be herself. Maria had difficulty finding the words to describe her loss of self and struggled between descriptions in which she asserted that it was her, that it was beyond her, or that it was an exaggeration of her. While Amelia felt her sense of self dissolve as she became one with the music, dance, and the moment, Maria felt her conservative self dissolve to allow
another self shine through. Maria was possibly referring to the dissolution of her self and unveiling of her spirit, but she did not have the language to express it as such.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), music is particularly important to teenagers because music provides stability and teenagers are particularly prone to oscillating between “one threat to their fragile evolving personhood” (p. 109) and another. This was very evident in the experiences of Theresa, Maria, and Kim, who all believed that music was essential for their experience and connections to spirit. Theresa used music as a means of identifying and matching her moods, while Maria and Kim had their spiritual experiences facilitated by music while in the community of others. The music Kim was listening to was of poor quality, but this music, combined with a group of people coming together for enjoyment and support, and more importantly in spirit, facilitated a sense of friendship and connectedness that revealed itself to her as a “source of life.” On the other hand, the patrons of Maria’s club did not come together for a sense of mutual support and spirituality, yet the right music and lighting allowed a group consciousness to emerge within which Maria experienced a sense of spirituality. Not only were the beat and rhythm of the music essential, but all three participants indicated that the lyrics were also essential. The participants reported that lyrics have the capacity to capture their imaginations and express their emotions, so that music and lyrics bridged the connection with their spirituality.

Kelly revealed another aspect of the arts in nurturing spiritual experiences that was not evident in the musical and dance experiences of the other participants. While the others commented on the sense of freedom with music or dance, Kelly was acutely focused on the origin of her work of art. For her, the idea for her visual art piece was the
spark of the spiritual experience. While she manifested the piece, she was in a state of flow. There was a moment of creation that was the origin of the experience, the feelings of which continued to flow while she worked to produce her art. The experiences of the other participants highlight involvement in the arts, but Kelly’s observation highlights the significance of creativity within the arts.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990), James (1902), Maslow (1970), and Wilber (2007) all listed the natural environment as a common trigger for spiritual experiences, and this proved no different for these participants. Kim, Theresa, and Amelia, who were the most likely to engage in outdoor activities, all emphasized the natural environment’s ability to initiate an experience that awakened them to their spirituality. Rather than feeling as though their sense of self was being dissolved as in the experiences in the arts, in nature, the participants were more likely to report a sense of interconnection. Plotkin (2008) emphasized that humans are part of the natural environment and just spending time in nature reminds us of this fact. Theresa sensed this relationship when the line between the earth and sky disappeared at the beach and she understood that there really were no divisions in nature. She began to question society’s treatment of the natural environment, reflecting Noddings’ (1984, 2006) assertion that nature enhances empathy, affiliation, and morality. Kim reported an experience of interconnection; however, she felt connected “to the world” and connected to a source of love, God, or the divine. Similarly, Amelia felt in tune with nature and was able to focus on the beauty of the landscape when normally her ADHD makes it very difficult for her to focus on her surroundings. This feeling of interconnection stayed with Theresa, Kim, and Amelia after the experience.
While the experiences with dance were filled with adrenalin and excitement, the nature experiences were much more subdued and peaceful. The calming effect of the trees, mountains, birds, and lakes allowed the participants to reawaken to the natural processes of life (Miller, J., 2000, 2007), and as such, these experiences were much different in quality. Theresa was expecting just to have a fun day at the beach with her friends but she connected with nature and reflected on the interconnectedness of life. Part of the joy for Amelia was the solitude in Banff where she could ski down a hill for hours at a time without encountering another person and she could be present with the vastness of the mountains. While Amelia described this simply as “peacefulness,” Kim added to her statement of “I felt a lot of peace” by describing a “bubbling up of love and strong positive feeling.” The bubbling love was peaceful, in that Kim wanted to sit and experience the moment rather than do something such as journalling. Both Kim and Amelia felt calm while in nature as they could take the time to reflect on the beauty of their surroundings.

Emotions

The participants described several emotions that accompanied their experiences, including joy, awe, and passion. Many of these emotions overlapped during a single experience, adding to the unique quality of each experience for the participants. Joy was predominant in Maria’s experiences while dancing at the club. Maria felt free to be herself in the safety of her friends, which gave her an immense joy. Maria recalled that she “couldn’t stop smiling the whole time […] and like little things happen that you just burst out into laughs.” Noddings (1984) explained that joy is created in a moment of deep connection, of being in relation to an other, and when, as Buber (1958) contended, the
other is not constrained to a person. Maria felt the joy of being in connection to a part of her spirit, her friends, and the music. During her experience of dance, Amelia felt joy when she was on stage, an emotion she also expressed through her exclamation of “Whee!,” while Kelly experienced a sense of excitement, a “right before Christmas kind of feeling” during her walk. Kim described her karaoke experience in the Friendship Centre as joyful, and her experience while running as joyful but in a much more subdued way.

Hart (2003) explained that awe is a common descriptor for the spiritual experiences of children. My participants, though not children, also used the term to describe their nature experiences; after all, nature is a powerful force within which one can easily feel small or insignificant. Theresa experienced a sense of awe in her experience on the beach, Amelia while in Banff, and Kim and Kelly were also struck by a sense of awe while running in the woods and walking on a summer afternoon, respectively. Plotkin (2008) emphasized that nature includes the skies, stars, and the universe beyond the earth – something Amelia did not forget as she felt a sense of awe looking up at the stars while camping in Ontario.

Passion was a word used by Amelia and Kelly, but not by the other participants. Their spiritual experiences were very powerful and energized, and each described their experiences with a tremendous amount of emotion and enthusiasm. Amelia spoke at length about passion and dance, and stated, “I think that’s what spirituality is. There’s a connection with passion, right?” Amelia illustrated her point using the television show *So You Think You Can Dance*, in which Amelia distinguished between the dancers who are technically good and have the skills, and those who have passion: “the ones that really
love […] you can just see it in them.” Kelly felt very passionate about her first visual arts assignment and was overwhelmed not by the difficulty or volume of work, but by the experience of creativity. Without this passion or intense emotion, neither Amelia nor Kelly may have considered their experiences to be spiritual.

**Openness to Experience**

While Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argued that certain conditions must be met for flow to occur, Maslow’s (1970) only criteria for a peak experience was that an individual must be open to the possibility. This certainly seemed to be the case for this group, as there was no single uniform means of being open to the experience and each participant came from her own place in spirit. Notwithstanding, Kim and Amelia had some similarities in their background that fostered their capacity for a spiritual experience. As a seminary student and thus knowledgeable about diverse perspectives on spirit, Kim was very open to the possibility of experiencing spirit and had the language to describe it. In addition to her extensive reading about the spiritual and her membership in an interfaith group, Kim engaged in several spiritual practices including meditation on a word or phrase (which she was engaged in during her run in the woods). Amelia also meditated, but due to her ADHD, she found that she could only meditate with the support of guided meditation CDs, and usually only in the tanning bed. She also had a keen interest in religion, and had attempted to educate herself about her own United faith, as well as other denominations and religions.

Theresa and Maria both received their spiritual knowledge through their Catholic education, and while Theresa had tried yoga and meditation, neither sister engaged in any regular spiritual practices. However, they were both open spiritual encounters. For
example, each of the sisters described the dreams of female family members as a means of connecting to spirit or gaining knowledge about loved ones. In an interesting contrast, Kelly had the least religious knowledge and education of the participants, yet she was the most expressive about the power of her spiritual experience. Kelly did, however, have four years of Waldorf education which encourages the development of spirit.

There was an interesting contrast between the participants who found their moments of spirit to be few and far between, such as Maria, and the participants who had some understanding of spirit as available in their everyday lives. Kelly, whose experience was an isolated event, was beginning to lose “touch with all those thoughts” because she had not been able to connect as strongly with her spirituality again. She believed that she connected daily with her spirituality through her actions and behaviours, but the time that passed since her walk was making it “harder […] to be able to come up with that. Like, it was a moment I had. I think for me to achieve it again would be really, would be a gift.” Both Kelly and Maria described isolated spiritual moments in the past that were powerful and stood out in contrast to their daily lives; the others were capable of ongoing powerful experiences and were also more aware of subtle spiritual moments.

Several of the spiritual experiences were accessible to the participants because they were triggered not by particularly unusual situations, but by everyday events or possibilities. For example, Kim’s most powerful spiritual experience occurred in the woods by her home during one of her regular runs. When she finally allowed herself to stop and become absorbed with the falling leaves or falling snow, instead of focusing on her day’s tasks, she felt connected to the divine. Others, too, had their spiritual experiences during encounters with daily life. Theresa and Amelia were captured not by
an everyday occurrence as falling leaves or snow, but by something in nature they did not happen to see very often. Living in a southern Ontario city, Amelia did not have regular access to the snow-covered mountains or isolated rivers and lakes that triggered her nature experiences, but she knew that these were places where she could easily connect with spirit.

In addition to observing how everyday events could trigger their spiritual experiences, the participants also expressed a desire for everyday spiritual connections. Although Kim reported two significant spiritual experiences, upon discussion it became apparent that Kim cultivated and encountered connections to spirit in her daily life. After lamenting that she could not be in Banff very often, Amelia wondered, “how do you capture an everydayness?” Instead of Banff, she went to the tanning bed to try and “capture those moments.” Due to her ADHD, Amelia struggles to focus and maintain her attention; however, she still recognized the power of mindfulness and attempted to create a sense of everydayness. One way she tried to do this was by focusing her awareness on others: Amelia described believing in the power of prayer to affect her life and the lives of those close to her. Theresa also has attempted to create a sense of everyday spirituality with her New Year’s resolution to be mindful and in the moment, and to think and worry less. Intuitively, Theresa understood that mindfulness would cultivate her spirituality.

Sources of Knowledge

James (1902) and Maslow (1970) asserted that spiritual experiences are potential conveyors of knowledge that while true for the individual, need not be true for others. Gaining this personal knowledge is particularly relevant for adolescent girls since their silencing is due to their lack of understanding of their own voices and inner selves.
(Gilligan, 1982, Pipher, 1994). Each of the participants found knowledge sourced in their spirit in one way or another, either through a spiritual experience or through a desire to learn more about spirituality. The knowledge gained was in many ways about the person they were or the person they wished to become.

Kelly’s experience, in particular, was a revelation, one in which she “put everything out on the line and figured out what [she wanted] from it.” Kelly felt energy or spirit flowing through her so that “it was all inside […] and it just needed to come out and it did.” Kelly also recognized that while this experience was true for her, others may not have the same opinions and she did not expect them to agree with her, or even to understand her perspective. While her experiences were not quite as revelatory, Amelia described how she was also able to learn from her experiences with spirit, especially in connecting with her ethical beliefs, her interactions with her self, and her interactions with others. Similarly, Theresa credited her deeper understanding of nature to her experience of interconnectedness, plus she was inspired to reflect on modern environmental problems from a new perspective. For Kim, spirit was a real and existing force in her life. While she did not describe her experiences in terms of knowledge, as a student of the spiritual, these experiences reinforced her beliefs and added depth to her understanding of spirit.

Maria appeared to struggle the most with the knowledge she was presented with during her spiritual experiences, both in describing the nature of the experiences and in describing their meaning and significance. However, she was able to convey her understanding that a part of her spirit was concealed by her self, and through her spirit’s release she learned more about her inner life and the person she wanted to be, or thought
she was. Interestingly, Maria and Theresa related dreams as sources of knowledge and neither had difficulty in accepting the dreams as such. This is very similar to the findings of Chambers-Gordon (2001), whose Jamaican Pentecostal women received support from dreams, particularly dreams of deceased female relatives. Maria and Theresa felt very comfortable telling me stories of female family members who had knowledge conveyed to them through dreams, almost as though dreams were a very normal form of communication between people. Maria had been having vivid dreams about her grandmother since her death a few months prior – dreams which she believed were a part of the mourning process and coming to terms with her death.

Finding Place

The Relational

An overarching theme that became apparent across all the participants was the need for the relational or connection. The relational was spoken of overwhelmingly in terms of connection to a single other or to the community, but also in terms of connection to the self, spirit, and connection to the divine (such as Kim’s experience in the woods). In Buber’s (1958) terms, the relational is the discovery of spirit between I and Thou, so that Thou is transformed from an It to a reciprocate in the relationship. For example, each of the participants was interested in giving to others in the form of community service either as a career choice or a volunteer activity. Although to some extent this need for connection, it may be argued, was driven by the feminine ethic of care as proposed by Gilligan (1982), once the participants entered into this relationship of care, they appeared to discover the spirit between I-Thou.
Kim and Amelia ardently spoke of the need for community in their spiritual lives. Kim has reported continually searching for venues where she could cultivate these relationships, whether at the Friendship Centre, Safe Haven, or Friends in Spirit. Kim’s ability to take relationships beyond a caring-for relationship to a caring-with relational level (Noddings, 1984; 2006) was evident in her experience at Safe Haven. Here, visitors did not come to provide service to the homeless, but to learn from the homeless and to connect with them as people. Amelia continued to hold onto the values her family taught her when they brought her “little brother” from Chernobyl into their home every summer and welcomed him as a member of the family. This went beyond community service as this relationship was cultivated and long-term rather than a limited afternoon of volunteer work. Amelia stated that she hopes to adopt children one day. She explained, “you’re totally guided by wanting and needing to help people and I said to Manuel we need to make a lot of money in our jobs so we can do a lot of good stuff for other people…” While she spoke humourously, Amelia was very serious about choosing a profession that allowed her the financial freedom to nurture the relational with others.

Theresa, Maria, and Kelly have all chosen helping professions, either nursing or teaching, through which they could develop the relational with others. As Theresa struggled to decide if she wanted to become a teacher or a nurse, she was focused on “trying to find [her] purpose.” She saw both teaching and nursing as vocations, not merely jobs. Theresa knew that she liked to help people and “the whole like thing of, like, making a difference. Like small things matter.” Kelly wanted to become a Waldorf teacher “to help kids and make it easier – as easy for them as possible.” Here Kelly was specifically connecting to her own difficulties as a child with a learning disability, where
she “found it really hard to have teachers try to teach me how to overcome the disability without them having any idea where I was coming from.”

Kelly and Kim also had connections to others who facilitated their spiritual experiences. Kelly believed that it was the “power of the company,” specifically her boyfriend, that sparked her experience that summer afternoon. While he did not have the same experience as Kelly, he was able to nurture hers by talking with her and asking questions. Kelly was not sure that the experience would have happened, or at least not in the same way, without him. Kim, too, felt the power of others when karaoke with the seniors facilitated a relational spiritual experience. For her, the power of community certainly played a role.

In addition, Kelly and Kim also discussed fostering connections to spirit. During her experience, Kelly felt that she was connected with her spirit and understood what that meant in terms of her outer self and society. By the end of her walk, Kelly was able to find a place of relation between her outer self and her spirit in such a way that she felt she was being true to her authentic self. Kim was also at a place in her life where connections in general were fostered, so that connection with her spirit, whether through her spiritual practices or reflections, was not an uncommon occurrence. In addition, both of these participants believed that their creativity, or their practice of the arts, facilitated their connection to their spirit. For Kelly, this was firmly grounded in her creative thoughts within the visual arts, while for Kim this was explored mainly in poetry or the creation of metaphors.

For the other three, however, connection with spirit was a place of some confusion. Amelia knew that due to her ADHD and the ubiquitous conversations in her
head, she needed guidance and structure to help her connect with her spirit (such as meditation CDs). Despite this, she also believed that her spirit could be known to her through intuition; for example, she stated that “you overwhelmingly know if it’s the right answer or that … it’s an overwhelming feeling that there’s eminent danger or something like that.” The problem for Amelia was that she doubted herself and any connection she made with her spirit. She did this mainly because she did not always “like the answer,” at which time she sought the advice of another “to either reaffirm or make sure that you do what your intuition is saying.” Here Amelia was referring both to self and spirit, in that she may have felt connected to her spirit, but in trying to relate that to the everyday world, often in the form of decision making, she was not confident in the translation. Amelia often became lost in possibilities and lost the sense of what she felt to be her connection to her spirit. She wanted the support of significant others, in particular her parents and disability advisor, to ground her.

The relational connection between the self and spirit was unclear to Maria. On one hand, Maria felt very confident and had “faith” in herself to make the best decisions based on her Catholic education. On the other hand, however, Maria still struggled to know her authentic self. Maria believed that in dancing at the club, she had a glimpse into her spirit and the person she actually was, but she was still sorting this out at the time of our interviews. Theresa seemed to intuitively understand that her worrying and thinking interfered with her connection to spirit, and it was precisely for this reason that Theresa made the resolution to focus on being in the moment. Both Maria and Theresa were uncertain about the differences between their spirit and their selves, and the relationship between them.
Continuity and Spiritual Mentorship

In addition to connection to others, community, and spirit, the participants discussed another type of connection, one that may be described as connection to significant persons. In their own ways, these participants needed to understand where they fit in terms of their families and lineage, in terms of knowledge of the spiritual, and in terms of the spiritual mentors who gave their lives continuity. In her work with students, Kessler (2000) identified a deep connection to lineage where her students needed to feel a connection to their roots, their family, and their ancestry. Kessler stated that, “connecting to the people and the land from which we come can embed us in a chain of continuity that deeply stirs the soul” (p. 27), so that a sense of lineage and family history can provide personal power and nurture spirit. The sense of connection and continuity expressed by these participants was not limited to family members, however, and also included spiritual mentors or role models. These connections can be understood through Slee’s (2000) personalized faithing, which is the way faith can be expressed in terms of heroes or heroines of faith. For Slee (2000), one of the characteristics of women’s faith development is the exemplification of a woman’s core and fundamental values through a parent, spiritual mentor, or biblical person.

The exception to this need for continuity or spiritual mentorship was Kelly. While Kelly clearly spoke of the past, she did not do so in a way that conveyed a need to locate her ancestry, although she did willingly attend church as a child to spend time with her grandmother.

Lineage and a connection to maternal figures were common themes for Maria and Theresa. The recent death of one of their grandmothers may have initiated their reflection
and inclusion of their grandmothers in their discussions, plus both regretted that they could not attend the funeral. Both of their grandmothers were strong independent women, and even though they lived in different countries, Maria and Theresa were very close to them. When speaking of their spirituality, both of the sisters were more likely to refer to their grandmothers, who were devout Catholics, than their parents. In fact, Theresa’s item of spiritual significance was a necklace given to her by her grandmother when she completed Grade 8, and as the youngest child, Theresa reflected that family treasures were rarely passed down to the youngest. Even though she did not wear the necklace or the frog charm that was once her mother’s, Theresa reflected on their personal significance in her own life and in the lives of her children to whom she would pass them down.

In addition to keeping herself connected to her grandmothers and family, Maria also indicated that she enjoyed reflecting on her own past, especially with pictures. Maria’s item of spiritual significance were pictures of her and her friends before the last night they were at the club. Already Maria felt that she and her friends looked much older. Through the pictures, Maria was able to locate herself in the present by reflecting on where she has been and the people that have been in her life.

Maria, Theresa, and Amelia all looked to religious and spiritual traditions to connect to spiritual knowledge (Kim, the seminary student, spoke very little of religious traditions). Even with their criticisms of the churches, all credited their religious instruction for providing them a moral foundation. As well, all three expressed an interest in their religion’s teachings on saints and angels. Maria spoke of the saints as role models, but she also believed they were a real presence in her life. While her father did
not believe in them, Maria felt she was like her mother in that “I do believe. Like, sometimes there’s – you just get these gut feelings – where there are spirits or angels.” Theresa also agreed with the Catholic Church’s teachings on the saints and angels, and looked upon them as role models and active influences in her life. Amelia actively searched for the angels present in her life by attending workshops aimed at finding her personal angels. In addition to their respective religions’ teachings, Theresa, Maria, and Amelia searched for other sources of spiritual knowledge. Amelia and Maria were reading books by Sylvia Browne, while Amelia and Theresa practiced meditation and mindfulness stemming from Eastern spiritual traditions. All three also had experiences with dreams, or close family members who have, so that they understand dreams as a means of connecting to themselves and to others.

Kim has been studying her own religious doctrine as well as other spiritual traditions both inside and outside the seminary. However, Kim has also forged relationships with spiritual mentors and with one woman in particular. The spiritual mentor here represents not only an open and receptive other who allowed Kim to experience Kim’s spirit, but as a mentor and not a friend, she brought previous knowledge and wisdom to be shared with Kim. In a somewhat similar vein, Theresa and Maria have used their grandmothers, the saints, and even angels as bearers of that spiritual knowledge.

**Questioning of Paradigms**

Understandably, in trying to discuss their thoughts and experiences, the participants spoke many times in terms of negatives and what they did not believe, as well as in the positive and what they did believe. Slee (2000) identified this tendency as
apophatic faithing, in which women state what spirituality and faith are not rather than what spirituality and faith are. What the participants did not believe in terms of their spirituality seemed to overlap to form a category I have called ‘questioning of paradigms.’ I have deliberately used the term ‘paradigm’ because these participants appeared to be questioning key components of systems and worldviews. Although I have not used Plotkin (2008) as an overall framework, his notion of the Wanderer in the Cocoon leaving the old personality seems to be an appropriate complement to Slee’s apophatic faithing. Plotkin (2008) argued that the adolescent must leave the home of the old personality, which was framed in terms of cultural influences such as family and society. Having once accepted cultural frameworks, the adolescent must challenge these embedded beliefs and cultural stereotypes in order to connect with his/her own soul or authentic self. The three paradigms the participants discussed in large detail were religion, female stereotypes, and dualism (body/spirit split).

Religion

Each of the participants held a religious affiliation, with Kelly as the exception. The other four all expressed criticism of their particular faith tradition or community and questioned their membership in the church, either for disagreements about social issues or for a lack of belonging. In his five-fold path, Tacey (2004) named this tendency ‘adolescent separation’: a time when an adolescent asks questions of her faith tradition but does not receive satisfactory answers. In Tacey’s (2004) experience, these adolescents will renounce their faith; however, none of the participants in this study expressed a renunciation of their faith. Instead, they still identified with their family’s faith tradition, although none believed that the church or mass nurtured their spirituality.
Theresa and Maria described themselves and their family as “non-practicing Catholics” although their mother was somewhat devout and their grandmothers very devout. Both of them also explained that there came a time when they found they did not agree with the dogma and teachings of the church, especially in terms of social issues and sexuality. Theresa stated that she was pro-choice, in favour of same-sex marriages and unopposed to sex before marriage. Maria used the example of church restrictions on the marriage of priests to illustrate her doubts about the church. Both participants described the church as too “traditional” and unwilling to change with the times. Neither one had plans to reaffirm their Catholicism, instead both were looking elsewhere for their spiritual knowledge. Maria asserted that she wanted to believe because she still believed in God and the saints, but she was expanding her understanding by reading popular books on spirituality. Theresa was also expanding her spiritual knowledge, in that she was interested in yoga and meditation, and strived to learn how to be in the moment. Theresa described religion as “believing in, like, certain beliefs” whereas spirituality was “something inside of you that you believe in and, like, how you intake things around you. It’s more personal than a religion.” In this way, Theresa separated religion from spirit.

In addition to her experience in the United Church, Amelia spoke at length about the Catholic Church, which she was exposed to through her education and her fiancé. Amelia shared Maria and Theresa’s criticism of the Catholic Church’s position on social issues such as homosexuality and marriage for priests, and she felt that Catholicism should become more liberal like the United Church. Amelia gave credit to her religious upbringing for her ethical and moral foundations, such as the “Golden Rule.” Amelia did not realize, however, that she had a fundamental disagreement with the underpinning of
the modern Christian faith. Easter is the most important event in the Christian calendar because Jesus’ death is believed to have saved humankind from original sin and allowed for everlasting life. Amelia, however, stated that she refuses to attend church at Easter because “there’s too many deaths in normal life that I don’t need to subject myself to the same funeral every single year over and over and over again.” Amelia continued to state, “So see? I’ve made an informed decision and I’ve rejected that particular part of it, right (laughs)!” without understanding that she has rejected an essential part of the Christian belief.

Like Maria, Amelia has looked elsewhere for her spiritual beliefs. While angels were a part of her church’s beliefs, Amelia went beyond those teachings and tried to make contact with her own personal angels. Amelia attended an energy session that focused on talking to your angels, but she lamented that she could not talk with them because a deceased childhood friend jumped in front of them proclaiming “Look at me! Look at me! Why do you need them? Look at me! Look at me!” Amelia has continued to feel the presence of this friend and she believes that he is one of several personal angels that guide and support her in her daily life.

Coming from the United and Unitarian Churches respectively, Amelia and Kim were very similar in their criticisms of their faiths. I expected seminary student Kim’s dialogue to be much more dogmatic and her devotion to the church much more noticeable than it was. While Kim did speak of God, her language was infused with non-denominational terms for spirit, such as relation, connection, and God as emergent property, rather than dogmatic terms such as Holy Spirit. Although she was not ready to leave her church or her faith, Kim was struggling with her church, particularly its
inability to nurture her need for connection to community, which was also Amelia’s main criticism of her church. Both of these participants were in their mid-20s and unmarried with no children, a demographic they did not see reflected in their church community. Kim laughed as she told me there were only “like five young people at our church,” and Amelia stated that “the church doesn’t really do anything beyond teenagers to enhance the community […] I think you need to see people your own age.” Both also felt that the church focused too much on administration and politics rather than building a sense of community within the congregation. Kim felt that most of the volunteer activities at her church focused on attending to the church’s administrative needs rather than gathering for the congregation’s spiritual needs. Amelia felt that she had witnessed too much politics and infighting through her parents’ participation in the church’s activities. As a result, she was not interested in becoming more active in the church. Neither girl felt that the church nurtured their spirituality. Kim continued to wonder if anyone at her church truly knew her, which was obviously a source of distress. Kim has found her work in the community at Friendship Centre and the interfaith group Friends in Spirit to be much more conducive to nurturing her spirituality than her church.

While Amelia, Maria, and Theresa credited their religious upbringing for their strong beliefs in right behaviour (even if they were now struggling with the church), Kelly credited her strong beliefs to her spiritual experience. Since she did not have a religious history with her family except for some Anglican masses with her grandmother, Kelly did not use the language of religion or express a struggle with religious faiths. Instead, her walking experience affirmed a strong foundation with which to approach the world.
Female Stereotypes

Four of the five participants expressed a struggle or conflict with how they fit within traditional female stereotypes, particularly the stereotypes of a tomboy and a girlie-girl. According to the participants, neither a tomboy nor a girlie-girl was an acceptable role for a girl in society. Kelly, Kim, and Amelia all considered themselves to be tomboys as children, and as such, they did not feel that they were typical girls. Kim said that she was still a tomboy, and struggled as she explained that “I don’t (laughs) identify myself – I mean, obviously I identify myself as female, but (laughs) I quite often try to […] separate myself from those things which I identify as, not just stereotypically female.” Kim is an athletic person, which is perhaps the root of her tomboy image of herself, and she took it as an insult when her boyfriend said, “you’re such a girl!” Although Amelia reported that she was a tomboy when she was younger, she now enjoys pretty, feminine things. Kelly, on the other hand, was taking a stand against female norms that she considered outdated and meaningless. Kelly based this opinion on her revelatory spiritual walk, but it was also likely rooted in her mother’s feminism (Kelly called her an “equalist”). Conversely, Maria has always felt herself to be a girlie-girl, enjoying feminine things and boy bands, but she hid this because she did not feel this was socially acceptable. Only Theresa, the youngest and also very athletic, did not indicate an issue with being too girlie-girl or too tomboy. Since Theresa’s brother also studied nursing at one point in time, she did not consider nursing or even teaching to be stereotypically female professions.

All participants saw some advantage to being female in terms of spirituality, and even though they did not perceive a gender difference in spirituality, they perceived a
gender difference in expressing spirituality. Each of the participants believed that it was easier for girls to be in touch with and to discuss their spirituality because it was culturally acceptable for girls. Theresa recognized that she could experience joy and excitement while being with a puppy while an adolescent boy was not expected to be as joyful and excited. Kim defined spirituality in terms of the relational, which was not exclusively female; however, she reflected that men “aren’t as free to enter into a relationship in the same way.” While Kim stated that she does not believe the relational is restricted only to females, she did report believing that modern culture makes it very difficult for males to experience the relational. Kim expressed concern that the relational is a seen as a strength for women, but as a weakness in men. In this way, “a relational way of interacting” is dismissed and in the end, both men and women lose. In fact, most of the participants perceived a double standard in society’s acceptance of women’s spirituality as compared to men’s. Noddings’ (1984, 2006) ethic of caring was apparent in these perceptions. The participants understood that they held an advantaged position in society in terms of expressing their spirituality, but at the same time they were careful not to suggest any inherent superiority. In fact, they were careful not to criticize men and sympathized with men who are constrained by society in this way.

**Dualism**

In discussing their spirituality, the participants often touched on the dualism of spirit and mind, even if it proved to be a difficult, philosophical topic of discussion. While Maria was the only one to explicitly speak about the exclusive nature of the rational and spiritual, each of the participants addressed the debate in some way. The participants appeared to be struggling with the constraints of dualism and showed
glimpses of their own holistic understanding of mind and spirit. Amelia, for example, worked within a paradigm of the mind/body split (her discussion of the spiritual in the workplace), but her interest in guardian angels and being mindful of others throughout the day evidenced otherwise. Kim was the exception to this struggle with dualism in that she easily understood her spirituality and inner self to be the core of her daily life and her interactions in the world.

While Kelly had no difficulty in understanding her spiritual walk in terms of an intellectual exercise and used this to explain her belief system to some people, she lived it as a spiritual awakening, which was how she described the experience to herself. Kelly’s discussion of her inner self reflects the literature on spirituality, in particular the role of the self and the spirit (Jung, 1959; Miller, J., 2007). For example, Kelly stated her inner self helped her gain perspective while her outer self interacted with the world and was often predominant in social settings. Kelly identified her authentic self as the source of her humanity, and as the place where her inner self and outer self came together. This authentic self is likely spirit as described by J. Miller (2007). Kelly did not identify with a reductionistic split between mind and body, which may be due to her Waldorf education, of which she spoke very highly. Theresa took a very similar position as Kelly in which she described herself as a “thinker,” but Theresa reported that the spiritual was also very strong so that the two were interconnected.

Education was a positive force in Maria’s development of spirit, even if she found herself struggling with spirit and the rational, which to her were very separate. In her third year of university, Maria found that she could not be her authentic self, especially her girlie-girl self, in the classroom. While Maria held strong spiritual beliefs, she did not
believe that they belonged in an educational setting such as university. Here she clung to
dualism when she said the school taught her what she needed to prosper in the material
world and the spiritual guided her beyond the material world. However, when Maria
reflected back on her Catholic schooling, she did not experience the same split. At the
time of our interviews, Maria was volunteering in a Grade 8 class that was preparing for
their confirmation which brought about positive memories.

Safety

The emergence of safety as a theme in this study was not a topic that was
discussed in great depth within the literature. Kessler (2000) understood that she needed
to establish a sense of security for the adolescent students who attended her retreats and
Tacey (2004) explained that the youth he taught were very protective of their spirituality
and were not willing to expose it to ridicule. The participants in this study, however,
revealed that while a sense of safety did include the role of others, it included protection
from other threats which extended beyond just the physical or emotional. The theme of
safety was evident in three areas: the fear of speaking of spirit, protection and good luck
charms, and disability and schooling.

Fear of speaking of spirit

Most of the participants expressed reservations that discussing their spirituality
either in a public forum or with others who may not be open and receptive to their
opinions. The very social Theresa was the exception. She declared that she enjoys talking
with others and does not usually hold anything back. At the other extreme, Maria was
very shy and reserved, and would not share her spirituality or any experiences with
others, even those whom she trusted. The other three, however, struggled to decide with
whom they would share or not share their spirituality. Kim’s description of her difficulty in talking to predominantly fundamentalist Christians in secondary school about her spirituality is poignant. Even though Kim displayed much more confidence in speaking about her spirituality with me, she still became rather emotional recalling her fear of rejection based on her spirituality because her spirituality was and is so important. Since graduating from secondary school, Kim has found a community in Friends in Spirit, a group of university students willing to talk and openly share their spirituality. Kim felt the freedom to engage in this discussion because the others were present and wanted to explore their spirituality.

Kelly wore her spirituality on her body, so to speak, in that her unshaven legs were a representation of her spirituality and her spiritual experience. Kelly explained that she became very selective about the people with whom she discussed her spiritual experience and the people who received a much safer explanation. Kelly was also taking other people’s feelings into consideration because she did not want to threaten others “with the fact that I disagree with a lot of their lifestyle choices.” Kelly felt the conversation could become more difficult when she had to explain herself to people who were unsettled by her choices because Kelly felt that she was responsible for helping them to restore their balance and sense of rightness in the world.

While Maria and Theresa did not suggest they would have difficulty speaking with their mother about spirituality, Kim, Amelia, and Kelly believed they could not do so easily with their mothers. Kim felt that she could talk about her spirituality at home and with her mother, but that her family did not explore their spirituality to the same extent that she did so the conversation would not be comfortable. Kelly not only lacked
support from her parents for her beliefs that stemmed from her spiritual experience, but in fact she received active opposition. Kelly’s father “hates the fact” that his daughter does not shave her legs, and her mother “hates the fact” that Kelly is perceived as the “black sheep of the family.” Since Amelia’s mother has very deep religious convictions, Amelia also does not feel that she could talk with her mother about spirituality.

Interestingly, in identifying with whom they would feel comfortable discussing their spirituality, Kelly, Kim, and Amelia all mentioned me. Kelly said “I love talking about it because you’re wanting to learn from it and you’re wanting to take something from it.” Kim reflected on the difference between people at her church and myself, and asked, “Does anyone here even really know who I am? You know me better from what I’ve said than people that I’ve met at my church do.” Kim and Amelia both emphasized the importance of speaking in a venue where they do not feel judged, which this study allowed them to do. While Amelia could talk with her minister, she felt that “there’s a biased opinion there. And it’s really obvious. Where, like, you may be biased, but you don’t, you still let me talk and you still let me say my opinion.” Kelly, Kim, and Amelia have strong spiritual convictions and all three appeared to appreciate this study as a means to open up and explore their spirituality with me as a receptive and open audience.

Protection and Good Luck Charms

In order to protect their significant and delicate inner self, some of the participants had either good luck charms or items that offered them protection. For example, not only was Theresa’s necklace and frog charm infused with spiritual significance, but she also identified them as good luck charms. Although she did not wear these items of jewellery, just having these items inherited from her mother and grandmother gave Theresa an
added sense of security. Similarly, Maria explained that she had a rosary in her car because it made her feel safe, as though it was there to protect her. Again, Maria and Theresa’s items of protection could be linked back either to their Catholicism or their Central American heritage, but that would be beyond the scope of the present study. Regardless of their religion or heritage, however, the spiritual significance of these items of protection remains.

Maria and Theresa were not the only ones with spiritual items of protection, however, as Amelia also found security in her bible. Although she had several bibles, Amelia believed that the first bible she received at Sunday school had the power to protect her. She explained, “there’s almost like a sense of like, I’m protected ’cause I have it there. Nothing evil’s going to happen in my bedroom […] It’s really silly when I think about it, actually, but that’s why it’s there (laughs).” While items of spiritual protection may be dismissed as supernatural fantasy in a materialistic worldview, a more holistic worldview may hold a place for talismans. Dismissing them as “silly” has not changed their significance for the participants.

**Schooling**

The educational influence on Maria’s struggle between spirit and body was apparent, yet at the same time her Catholic education fostered her spirituality and her sense of her self. Theresa also felt that her Catholic education nurtured her inner self and her sense of her place in the world at large. For example, the theme in her English class was man’s search for meaning, which inspired her to reflect upon her own views. Maria and Theresa both spoke positively about their Catholic School education and the support they received in finding their inner selves and spirituality, not just from a religious
perspective. Kim, however, struggled and did not feel that the traditional school system supported her growth and development. Even as early as elementary school, Kim felt that while she was learning, she “hated” the confines of the classroom and felt she was wasting her time. Kim continued by saying that “the school system [d]idn’t allow me to be as creative as I wanted to be.” This changed only when Kim entered university where she had “a bit more freedom.” Kim was particularly critical of the competitive nature of school and the narrowing of achievement to only reflect grades on a report card. Eventually, Kim only looked at her assignment marks to ensure she was passing a course, but she did not view her final marks. If she had the option, Kim would have preferred to attend a school that did not have grades, but had a pass/fail program.

Kelly and Amelia both have learning disabilities which made their education very challenging. Kelly had great difficulty in school until Grade 3 when she was transferred to a private school that specialized in teaching students with disabilities. Part of the reason Kelly wants to become a teacher is because she has had the first hand experience to understand and support children with disabilities. A second reason Kelly wants to become a teacher is due to her experience at the Waldorf School: “I didn’t want to become a teacher until I went to that school.” Kelly had such a positive experience that she credits it for her openness to her awakening and for her academic success. Kelly considers her learning disability to be a part of her, in that she will “carry that with me.”

Amelia spoke at great length about her education at a French school and as a person with a learning disability, both in school and in Sunday school. Amelia became very emotional as she described her anxiety about reading The Bible in class when she had such difficulty reading. Amelia remembered that “it was so embarrassing. Well, my
disability just bites the dust. (laughs). Sorry. Affects your entire life!” Due to this negative early experience, Amelia originally did not want to read the bible that now holds such an important place in her life. For both Kim and Amelia, learning how to cope with their educational struggles was central to their understandings of themselves and their spirituality.

Summary

Using their own definitions of spirituality, the participants were able to describe experiences that they considered to be spiritual and that held meaning and significance in their lives. The characteristics of the spiritual experiences described by the participants were not profoundly different from the descriptions in the literature, especially in terms of setting in nature and through the arts. The difficulty for the participants was the limited exposure to diverse settings that facilitate spiritual experiences, especially encounters in nature. The exception to this was music, which was easily accessible by those participants who sought it out. The participants described feeling different emotions during various spiritual experiences ranging from peaceful and calm, to awe-inspiring, and to passionate and joyful. While all participants were open to the experiences, common life stressors became a barrier. When the participants were able to put their worries and concerns aside, they were more likely to have spiritual experiences which became sources of knowledge through which they learned more about their selves, what they believed, and their spirituality.

A challenge faced by each of the participants was finding their place in the world. This was evident especially in terms of the relational, such that finding connections in spirit to self, others, community, and the divine was essential to understanding their own
spirituality. At times, place was found through the establishment of continuity in their lives, which sometimes spanned generations. For others, this continuity was established through connection to spiritual mentors and role models.

While on this journey to find their places, the participants confronted common worldviews and paradigms, which they questioned and challenged. Several of the participants found it difficult to accept the doctrines of their parents’ faith traditions and could not accept the tenets of these religions. Similarly, the participants struggled to accept female stereotypes that make both being very feminine or less traditionally feminine unacceptable. In addition, the paradigm of the mind/body split did not fully address the ways in which the participants understood their spirituality.

Finally, safety emerged as a key theme in terms of the spirituality of the participants. Spirituality was a personal aspect of immense significance such that the participants were very careful when speaking of spirit for fear of being rejected. Some felt the need for protection and good luck charms, both for their physical selves but also for their spiritual selves. One of the locations of threats to their spirit came from school, either due to its lack of support for spirit or for its lack of support for individual needs. This was not completely the case, however, as the Catholic and Waldorf schools appeared to have protected and nurtured spirit for the participants.
Chapter 10 - Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the spiritual experiences of young women because these experiences are expressions of the inner self and spirit. Previous research has demonstrated that girls have felt disconnected from their inner selves and have struggled to know the world not from a feminine perspective with which they could identify, but from a perspective that was foreign to them (Gilligan, 1982, 1988; Pipher, 1994). Gilligan (1982, 1988) and Pipher (1994) ascertained that young women do not see reflections of themselves in society, either through female worldviews or women’s roles in the dominant culture, so their inner voices, including their spirituality, are unclear even to themselves. This research expands the scope of past literature that has explored educational, societal, and cultural influences to focus on girls’ relationship with their selves, for it is in the spiritual relationship with the self that a girl’s authentic self is revealed.

This chapter returns to the original research questions and draws together the literature and the findings of this study. First, each of the three subquestions are addressed: What types of spiritual experiences do young women have?; In what ways do these spiritual experiences affect the way in which young women interpret or interact with the world?; and What are the characteristics of the spiritual understandings of young women? Second, the main research question is discussed: What is the nature of the spiritual experiences and spiritual understandings of young women? Finally, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are identified.

What Types of Spiritual Experiences do Young Women Have?
Maslow (1970) emphasized that peak experiences, in this case, spiritual experiences, were essentially the same at their core but different in terms of cultural and personal factors. The participants in this study shared relatively similar cultural backgrounds. All were raised in Judeo-Christian backgrounds in Southern Ontario (Maria came to Canada at four years of age), were middle-class and attended (or would be attending) university. Three of the participants were Caucasian, while two were Hispanic. These factors impacted the types of spiritual experiences reported, so that while the participants in this study each had multiple spiritual experiences, they were relatively similar in terms of setting and emotions.

Previous research into spiritual experiences emphasized the role of the arts in facilitating and nurturing spirituality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kessler, 2000; Miller, J., 2007; Steiner, 1996). Indeed, engagement with the arts contributed strongly to the spiritual experiences described by the participants, especially music, dance, and the visual arts. Music is widely accessible in western culture, and the participants had access to music either through their MP3 players, at concerts, clubs or karaoke events. Thanks to recorded and live music, the participants did not need any musical ability, only musical appreciation to spark a spiritual experience. The type of music was left to personal choice, and simply listening to the music was useful in establishing connections to inner self.

Music is a component of dance, which was also a strong facilitator of spiritual experiences. In each of the spiritual experiences occurring during dance, the technical steps and moves of the dance were not instrumental in producing a spiritual experience; instead, the feeling of being one with the dance and with the flow of the body focused the
attention of the participants so that they were lifted beyond the events of the moment. A sense of freedom was experienced during dance, one in which the worries and concerns of the average, everyday world were forgotten and insignificant.

Kessler (2000), J. Miller (2007), and Steiner (1996) argued for the value of the arts in education and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) lamented that arts are often cut from school budgets in favour of other academic courses. The findings of this study emphasize the significant role of the arts in reinforcing and nurturing the spiritual for young people. With the exception of the Waldorf School, the participants had to look outside of school institutions for their arts connections and experiences, and they typically criticized traditional education as a rational endeavour that did not integrate creativity, the arts, and spirituality.

Another setting identified in the literature as fostering spiritual experiences and connection to spirituality was nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kessler, 2000; Maslow, 1970; Miller, J., 2007; Steiner, 1996). The participants described their spiritual experiences in nature as spontaneous, and simply being in nature appeared to be enough to trigger an experience. While the experiences in the arts were typically high energy and described as joyful and even passionate, the experiences in nature were described as awe-inspiring, calm, and peaceful. Being in nature allowed the participants the opportunity to leave their worries, concerns, and anxieties elsewhere, and they were much more able to be present in the moment. The problem, however, was the lack of access to nature on a regular basis. Even when that access was more easily available, as it was with Kim, attuning to nature and not to everyday life was a struggle.
Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch (2003) identified the connection or disconnection to self as essential to their understanding of spiritual experiences. While the categorization of the experiences was not the purpose of this study, it was apparent that most of the spiritual experiences reported were described as events when the participant’s sense of self dissolved. This dissolution was a positive experience for all the participants for a variety of personal reasons, but many spoke of the feeling of stress reduction, joy, and peacefulness. In alleviating their worries and stress, the participants experienced an increased connection to their inner selves, others, community, nature, and the divine, such that being present in the moment nurtured their understanding of their spiritual nature. It is important to note that none of the experiences were described as negative, nor did they in any way frighten the participants. In fact, the dissolution of the sense of self was reported as a positive experience because their self housed all their anxieties.

In What Ways do these Spiritual Experiences Affect the Way in which Young Women Interpret or Interact with the World?

While the experiences varied, some participants had spiritual experiences that greatly affected their lives. In some instances, the spiritual experiences confirmed their beliefs, but the experiences also provided the participants with a new vantage point with which to view the world. In this sense, Plotkin’s (2008) notion of the Wanderer in the Cocoon finding her place is a very apt understanding of this time of life. The spiritual experiences of the participants provided them with a direction to their place, in this case, to their inner self.
These significant or revelatory spiritual experiences directly impacted how the participants interpreted the external world and their beliefs. Either something was experienced intimately during the experience, or the experience triggered an immediate thought about a variety of modern topics, including environmental issues such as pollution, species extinction, and vegetarianism, and social issues such as gender stereotypes. During the experience, the participants’ positions on societal issues were revealed to be overwhelmingly and personally true, so that the participants felt compelled to change parts of their lifestyle or their beliefs on a particular issue.

Revelatory experiences such as these were certainly not the only spiritual experiences. The participants also used their experiences as direct sources of knowledge about spirituality that could then inform their beliefs after the experiences. As such, the experience itself could be informative in that it revealed the relational or I-Thou relationship, which can then be an initial place of learning to be integrated with other concepts held by the participants.

For each of the participants, their spiritual experiences, even the smaller and less intense ones, were a significant feature in their lives and in their understanding of their inner selves. While each used the tools they had to make sense of the experience and of their spirituality, only Kim had the structure and education to pursue this knowledge. The others, however, all searched on their own for a framework within which to understand their spirituality, either by reading popular books on spirituality, making a New Year’s resolution to be in the moment, or attending a workshop to find personal angels. Intuitively, the participants seemed to know that this was the right course for them and that nurturing their inner selves was important, but their religions lacked the answers or
the moral authority to provide that nurturance. While Tacey (2004) suggested that when turning away from religion, youth first turn towards secularity, this does not appear to be the case for these participants. Three may have turned away from their religious faiths, but they have only turned towards the secular in terms of school. In their personal lives, they have continued to affirm their inner selves and their spirituality, and they are simply looking for ways that make sense to them.

*What are the Characteristics or Patterns of the Spiritual Understandings of Young Women?*

This question proposed to explore the overall themes or patterns in the spiritual lives of young women. Theories of spiritual development were particularly useful in comprehending these patterns, but none fully encompassed the experiences of the participants. For these young women, spirituality was understood in terms of the relational, as non-gendered, as neither religious nor secular, as located in non-traditional sources of knowledge, and in terms of safety and privacy. Finally, spiritual understanding was characterized by a lack of language with which to describe their spirituality or their spiritual experiences.

*Relational*

Gilligan (1982; 1988), Noddings (1984, 2006), and Slee (2000) agreed that girls and women relate to the world in terms of the relational, a sense of connection to others, and an ethic of care and responsibility. The relational is best described by Buber’s I-Thou relationship in which spirit resides between I and Thou. Having the education to discuss the relational, Kim was the only participant to use this word while the others variously used the terms ‘connections’ or ‘interconnections’ to describe their understanding of
spiritual relationships. In using these terms, the participants did not view spirit or spirituality as something foreign, above, or separate, but as a concrete observable component of their inner selves.

The relational was experienced in multiple ways, starting with the spiritual experiences. During these experiences, the participants sensed spiritual connections to their selves, others, community, nature, and the divine. They also fostered the relational in their lives through community service, either as volunteers or through their chosen careers. This state of being was both normal and desirable. Religious perspectives that denied an ethic of caring in the relational, or an I-Thou relationship, were easily rejected. In this way, these participants made their decisions based on their personal knowledge and experience rather than deferring to an absolute doctrine. Confirming Noddings’ (1984, 2006) assertions, spirituality and decision making overlapped in this study, such that both were based on the connection between their selves and the other, whether the other was a person, community of persons, nature, or the sacred.

Gender

There was some contradiction in how the participants viewed their spiritual lives in terms of the feminine. The participants viewed spirituality as non-gendered, yet at the same time they held the perception that being female gave them permission to express their spirituality. Although not unanimous, the initial reaction to questions into the role of the feminine in their spirituality was to deny that there was one. Any attempt to see a connection between being female and the spiritual was interpreted as an attempt to view women as superior to men, and the participants did not want to imply that women held any special status. Gilligan (1982) demonstrated that girls make an effort to include
everyone in games or activities and are careful not to hurt the feelings of any member within the group. Evidence of this inclusivity was apparent in the participants’ attempts to include men in the discussion of spirituality, so that their understanding of spirituality did not reflect gender. Due to an understanding of spirituality as non-gendered, the participants were unsure how their own femininity could play a role. After having established in their conversation that spirituality is non-gendered, each of the participants also contended that girls receive the benefit of a double standard in terms of spirituality. The participants felt that it was acceptable for women to discuss and express their emotions, but it was not acceptable for men who may be accused of being too feminine or weak. So while spirituality itself was considered non-gendered, perhaps in an effort to maintain the ethic of care, the participants described the practice and expression of spirit and spirituality as gendered.

Again in seeming contradiction of their assertion that spirituality is non-gendered, the only spiritual mentors or role models identified by the participants were women. This could suggest that these young women saw reflections of themselves and their spirituality in these spiritual mentors and role models, reflections which Gilligan (1982) contended are essential to girls’ development. The participants witnessed ways of relating and interacting with the world that made sense according to how they understood their inner selves and the external world, particularly in terms of care and service to others. The spiritual mentors became representations of right behaviour and spiritual knowledge. Slee’s (2000) concept of personalized faithing was also evident here in that faith, or in this case, spirituality, was communicated in reference to heroines of faith – women who exemplified a woman’s core and fundamental values. The role models, in particular, were
significant in that these heroines of faith were also ancestors, thus connecting the participants to their lineage.

Non-religious

With some exceptions, the participants rejected religious doctrines and traditional faith dogmas. This rejection confirms Tacey’s (2004) assertion that youth today are turning away from the religions of their parents; however, here the religions were not discarded outright. Instead, parts of the doctrines were rejected, particularly those that opposed homosexuality, abortion, sex before marriage, and equal gender roles. The participants then did not necessarily oppose the philosophical foundations of religion, such that the participants who were raised within a faith tradition did not claim to disbelieve in God or the divinity of Jesus. Their rejection of portions of doctrine was based on a rejection of dogmas that did not work within an ethic of care and responsibility through which they understood their spirituality.

The participants also rejected traditional religions because the churches failed to nurture their spiritual lives or a sense of community. Each of those brought up within a particular faith recognized the positive influence of religion on their development and their basic belief systems, but they did not feel nurtured beyond this point.

Even though the participants generally considered themselves to be non-religious (with Kim as the exception), they definitely considered themselves to be spiritual. Spirituality was perceived to be the moral compass by which the participants led their lives. None of the interview questions inquired about moral beliefs, yet each of the participants discussed some of their beliefs when they spoke of their spiritual lives and inner selves. These young women asserted their personal moral beliefs, especially about
homosexuality and abortion, even if was in opposition to their church’s doctrine. The participants used their spiritual experiences, their spiritual practices, or their own connection to spirit to make their decisions about their behaviour and actions. Their spiritual selves became the ‘map’ from which to guide their behaviour.

According to Tacey’s (2004) five-fold path, adolescents turn to the secular for perspective after rejecting religion. While the participants in this study may have been losing their religion, they were not losing their identification with the spiritual, nor did they feel a need to do so. These participants, save one, had not made any attempt to identify themselves as secular, humanist, agnostic, or atheist. The others may have qualms about their place within their denominations, but they showed no indication of identification with the secular and, in fact, wanted to believe rather than to disbelieve.

The participants were surrounded by and immersed in a secular paradigm, such that they struggled to balance their understanding of the rational and their knowledge of the spiritual. This separation was most apparent in the public and post-secondary traditional educational systems in their separation of spirituality and the secular. The participants felt that they needed to disconnect a part of themselves while in school and were not permitted to be present in their spirituality, or to even be present as a female, in the classroom (with the exception of Kelly). Spirituality remained a private matter as the participants were asked to bring their intellect and nothing else to their education. This became very confusing for the participants and fostered a sense of disconnect between the rational and the spiritual, which they stated were interconnected. The exception here was the education provided in the Waldorf School, and to some extent in the Catholic
schools. In these locations, the participants were asked to engage their whole selves in the classroom and combine the spiritual and the intellectual.

**Sources of Knowledge**

In the non-educational lives of the participants, their spirituality was a valued source of knowledge not just for personal aspects, but also for information on the external world. In particular, some of the participants used dreams, saints, and angels to guide them through Plotkin’s (2008) journey to find their place in the world. Hart (2003) observed that at a certain age, children were expected to stop believing in non-rational phenomena and to only accept objective and verifiable knowledge; however, some of the participants in this study believed that there was much to be gained from these sources, even if they were not socially acceptable. In fact, dreams were not only valued, but at times consulted and nurtured as sources of information that were as rational as sensory material. While some argument can be made that the Roman Catholic and cultural background of the sisters from El Salvador affected their belief in saints and angels, their beliefs were reinforced by popular figures speaking about such occurrences, such as Sylvia Browne. In addition, they were not the only participants who held the belief that angels and saints had an active role in their lives, rather than passive as biblical or historical figures.

**Safety**

While Kessler (2000) and Tacey (2004) both identified adolescents’ need for a safe environment in which to discuss their spirituality, an unexpected discovery was the pattern this sense of safety and need for protection took for some of the participants. Several artefacts of spiritual significance also possessed the power to protect against
harm. While this protection could take a physical form, for example against car accidents, it also took the form of general, spiritual protection that could protect against evil or ensure that only good things would happen. Some items were religious, such as a rosary or a bible, but they could also be ordinary items, such as a necklace and charm. In the latter case, these ordinary items became spiritually significant and thus powerful due to their hereditary nature, having being passed down from a grandmother and mother.

Each of the participants spoke about the significance of her spiritual experiences and spiritual life, and that significance meant the experiences were far too meaningful and private to be discussed with just anyone. All of the participants were very selective to whom they divulged their spiritual experiences and beliefs because they felt that spirituality is very personal and revealing it makes them vulnerable. The participants identified me, however, as an example of someone who was willing to listen non-judgmentally, and for this reason they were willing to share. This finding reflected Slee’s (2000) conversational faithing in which simply talking about spirituality in a safe atmosphere was welcomed and perceived as a positive experience. Through these discussions, participants were given the opportunity to discover their own truths about their spiritual lives.

Lack of Language

A final pattern of spiritual understanding that emerged from this study was the participants’ lack of appropriate language to express their spiritual knowledge for the most part. This is no different from the previous literature on spiritual experiences, as Hart (2003), Hoffman (1998), Kujawa-Holbrook (2001), Maslow (1970), and Smith (2005) all identified a lack of ability to verbalize spirituality as an impediment in their
research. As a seminary student, Kim was the exception to this finding, and although Kelly did not use the same spiritual language, as a Waldorf student, she had some language to explain her understanding of self and spirituality. The others, however, had a great deal of difficulty finding the language to discuss their inner selves and spirituality. Even the participants with the Catholic education who reported that their schooling provided them a means with which to develop a sense of self did not take from it the language with which to discuss their spiritual lives. In addition, growing up within the United Church and attending Sunday school did not give Amelia the words with which to fully express her spirituality. The participants did, however, use the language of Slee’s (2000) narrative faithing and expressed their spirituality through stories of transition and struggle, and inclusion and exclusion. All of the participants discussed their struggles, both past and present, in experiencing, expressing, and understanding their spirituality. Each of the participants also recalled stories of having been excluded from a community, faith, or religion based on their personal beliefs and experiences of spirituality. Rather than describing their beliefs and experiences in detail, the participants were much better able to express their spirituality through storytelling and narrative.

Main Question: What is the Nature of the Spiritual Experiences and Spiritual Understandings of Young Women?

The findings of this study reveal that these young women view their spirituality as essential to who they are, how they understand themselves, and how they interact with the world. They are also deeply interested in nurturing their spirituality and inner lives, and not finding this in religion, are looking elsewhere for a spirituality they can believe in. Some found spiritual support through women who shared an ethic of care and
responsibility. The participants were able to see reflections of themselves in these spiritual mentors and role models.

The participants followed a journey that loosely mirrored Tacey’s (2004) five-fold path, but was ultimately a path of their own creation. For example, instead of rejecting outright their respective religions (if they had one), these young women voiced their questions and doubts about their religion’s doctrines and teachings. In doing so, they were able to keep the parts of the religion that made sense to them, especially in terms of spirituality, and discard those elements that violated their ethic of care and responsibility. Since they did not fully reject all of religion, they also did not turn wholeheartedly to secularism to fill the void. Instead, these young women were in the process of creating their own personal spirituality with the tools at their disposal, whether those tools be the spiritual aspects they kept of their own religion, material available through popular culture, or their own intuition of spirit. None of the participants, including the seminary student, felt their spiritual needs fully addressed or nurtured within their religion and thus had to turn elsewhere for spiritual guidance, but in the process they did not reject spirit.

Tacey’s (2004) work is significant in that it addressed a generational shift in youth spirituality. In a similar way, this research reflects a generational shift in female youth spirituality, especially as understood alongside the work of Slee (2000). Recall that Slee (2000) identified a recurring pattern of regaining faith within her group of women participants which followed a route of paralysis, awakening, and relationality. Her participants were primarily baby boomers and older, all of whom had a different experience of society, culture, religion, and feminism than the participants in the current study. Slee’s (2000) participants reported feelings of fragmentation and disconnection,
which presented a challenge for them to overcome. While the current participants have certainly struggled with the materialistic paradigm of the rational/spiritual split, the role of gender in their spirituality, and may have felt disconnected from religion, they did not describe their experience of themselves or their spirituality in the same terms.

Picking and choosing their religion and spirituality could be an example of these young women fulfilling the first task of Plotkin’s (2008) Wanderer in the Cocoon, which is to leave the home of the first personality. Plotkin (2008) argued that this was a cultural task, and in this study, one could see the participants rejecting religious doctrine as a cultural norm. Kim, Kelly, Maria, Theresa, and Amelia all felt empowered to pick and choose the pieces of religion and spirituality that suited them, regardless of what religious authority might say, and they are each still in the process of developing their spirituality and spiritual understanding.

The second task of the Wanderer in the Cocoon is to explore the mysteries of nature and the psyche in which the quest is for the adolescent’s own spirit through spiritual experiences (Plotkin, 2008). The participants in this study had spiritual experiences regardless of whether or not they engaged in spiritual practices or were searching for the experience. While Kim and Amelia formally nurtured their spiritual experiences, the others simply took part in what felt right for them. Theresa attempted to reduce her tendency to worry by being in the moment, Maria listened to music and danced to break out of her shyness, and Kelly used the arts to nurture her inner self. The participants were open to the possibility of the experience, which according to Maslow (1970), is all that is required.

Limitations
As a small-scale qualitative study, the results presented here are not by
themselves generalizable to the population, nor were they intended to be so. This was an
exploration of the spiritual experiences of a small group of young women in Southern
Ontario. In terms of ethnicity, the two groups represented by the five young women were
Hispanic (Maria and Theresa) and Caucasian (Kim, Kelly, and Amelia). While this
presents a limitation in terms of ethnic diversity in a multicultural country, the study does
offer similarity in terms of educational and societal experience. Maria was the only
participant born outside of Canada, although she was raised since the age of four in her
family’s new country. Maria and Theresa grew up in a predominantly white middle class
community and attended schools that while Catholic, were still predominantly attended
by white students and taught by white teachers. Amelia was raised in the same city, and
thus had similar ethnic exposure as Maria and Theresa. Kim and Kelly were both raised
in a much larger, ethnically diverse city, although they each now live in a smaller, less
diverse communities.

Not only was this group homogeneous in terms of upbringing in middle class
neighbourhoods, they were all raised within a Judeo-Christian background. Maria and
Theresa were Catholic, Kim was Unitarian, Amelia was United, and although Kelly’s
family had no religious affiliation, she attended Anglican masses with her grandmother.
The results of this study must be understood in terms of this background so that while the
study focused on the spiritual as opposed to the religious, there was relatively little
religious diversity that could add new spiritual experiences or insights. In contrast to the
socioeconomic homogeneity of the participant group, their educational background was
diverse for such a small group. Kelly attended two private schools, one specializing in
teaching students with disabilities and the other a Waldorf School, Maria and Theresa attended Catholic schools, Amelia attended French schools that were unofficially Catholic, and Kim attended public schools. While this adds to the diversity of experiences of the participants, it also does not allow any conclusion to be drawn in terms of any specific educational influences within this study.

Another limitation that might be raised by some is the difference in age between the participants – 18 to 25. While on the surface this appears to be a great difference at a significant time of life, there were several similarities. Although they had achieved various levels of education, each of the participants was still in school. Each of the participants lived at home except for one who lived in residence. Instead of being a detriment to the findings of the study, the age range was a strength in that the findings were true for young women. Indeed, despite being the youngest participant, Theresa’s spiritual knowledge and experience was comparable to the others, and in some ways more sophisticated than some of the others.

Future Research

The indications are that young women are not wholly embracing or rejecting religion (in this case, Christianity), but are comfortable creating their own personal spirituality with available information. This has implications on theoretical models such Slee’s (2000) pattern of regaining faith and Tacey’s (2004) five-fold path, suggesting that these youth may be following a slightly different journey. A larger study could provide further information into the route of this journey and also confirm its generalizability. Other forms of methodology may be explored, such as narrative inquiry, arts-based research, or participant-driven research questions and research design to further allow the
voices of young women to dominate the research. Youth voices could be increased by having them participate more fully in the research process, including in the design of the study, developing research questions, carrying out the research (perhaps in journal form), analyzing, and concluding.

In terms of the spiritual experiences themselves, it would be informative to include more religious and cultural diversity amongst the participants. Again, a larger population group may be warranted to explore cultural and religious impacts on the spiritual experiences of young women. Another approach to understanding spiritual experiences may be through a focus on the arts or on nature, rather than through religious affiliations. This would allow a study access to more participants such as Kelly, who had such strong and meaningful spiritual experiences, yet had no religious ties.

Although school and education were not topics pursued with regards to spirituality and inner lives, these became topics of interest in the interviews. Several of the participants spoke to the inadequacy of traditional education to address their needs of the self or even of the intellect. Future research could focus on adolescent girls or young women who attended holistic schools or ones that focus on the whole child, such as Waldorf Schools. Do these young women have a stronger sense of their spiritual selves? How do they make sense of their spiritual experiences? Do they experience a sense of spiritual silencing? In addition, Kelly reported that her Waldorf education had a positive effect on her as a student with a learning disability. An interesting study could examine the possible impact of Waldorf or holistic education on students with learning disabilities on their academics, their sense of self, and their spiritual self.
Another unexpected result of this study was the need for some of the participants to have access to items of protection and to have the comfort of the saints and guardian angels. Is this common amongst girls in late adolescence? Are there cultural or religious factors involved? What are the roots of this need? What do the girls feel they need protection from? Why do these items give them the sense of safety they need? Research that probes these questions of insecurity would provide greater insight into the experiences of young women and their spirituality.

Conclusion

A normal everyday occurrence or activity can be transformed into a spiritual experience when duality dissolves and unity is encountered. Whether it is Schon’s (1983) reflection-in-action, Jackson’s (1995) spirituality in basketball, Maslow’s (1970) peak experiences, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) flow, or Buber’s (1958) I-Thou relationship, spiritual experiences are moments of deep connection to and unity with self, spirit, others, community, nature, the sacred, or the divine. The young women in this study had experiences that to some may be interesting or noteworthy, but to the participants themselves, these experiences held deep meaning and allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of their inner world and their place in the external world. In ‘owning’ their spiritual experiences (Pipher, 1994), these young women gained a better understanding of themselves and their place in the world (Plotkin, 2008).

Education has a central role to play in the nurturing of spirituality, and educators can fulfil this role by embracing the opportunity to teach about spirituality and the various spiritual faith traditions. The spiritual experiences of the participants in this study were positive, provided a retreat from the stress of daily life, and allowed them to connect
with their spirit. Exposure to the arts, to nature, and to spiritual practices and experiences are a few means by which schools might support the spiritual development of students. By including spirituality in the classroom, students can gain the sense of inclusion and community that these participants found lacking. Ultimately, adolescent girls and young women need this spiritual support in education to be framed in a way with which they can identify.
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Spirituality and Adolescent Girls

Have you ever had an experience when you’ve been:

- In the ‘zone’, whether during sports or another activity
- Completely caught up in music, dance or artwork
- In a state of awe or wonder
- Felt connected to something larger than yourself

If you have, and you’re a young woman 16 to 25 years old, you are invited to take part in this study. I’m asking girls to join a journey of exploration into their spiritual experiences and understandings. The primary purpose of this study is to understand and learn about the spiritual experiences, beliefs and understandings of adolescent girls. There are many ways to define spirituality, and people of all beliefs, religions and ethnicities are invited.

This study involves 2 one-hour interviews, a short item presentation (part of the second interview) and a 3rd one-hour follow-up interview. Interviews can take place in your home or in a central location. If you are under 18, parental or guardian consent will be required.

This is a study that seeks to listen to girls express their ideas, thoughts and experiences. The voices of girls will be the central feature of this research.

If you are interested and would like more information, please contact Karen Csole, doctoral student at OISE/University of Toronto, at (905) 545-4255 or kcsoli@oise.utoronto.ca
Appendix B

Letter of Introduction

The Spiritual Experiences of Adolescent Girls
August 31, 2006
Dear Girls and Parents,

Thank you for expressing interest in this study. I am a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. For my dissertation, I am conducting a qualitative research study into the spiritual experiences of adolescent girls (ages 16 - 25). The primary purpose of this study is to understand and learn about the spiritual experiences, beliefs and understandings of adolescent girls.

I am inviting you to take part in this exploration with me. There is no requirement for specific religious beliefs or affiliation, although this question will be asked for data collection purposes. Questions will be restricted to the spiritual questions and understandings, and to explore the relationship between spirituality and knowledge.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in 2 one-hour individual interviews, an item presentation, and a 3rd one-hour follow-up interview. You will have the option of reviewing and commenting on your own interview transcripts. The interviews can take place in your home or in a central location, and will be audiotaped to allow for transcription. During the first interview, you will be asked to discuss a time when you felt ‘in the zone’, a sense of awe, wonder, mystery, or completely caught up in a transcendent or spiritual experience. The second interview will start with a presentation of an item that helps to describe or discuss your inner life. You will be given directions for the item presentation. The follow-up interview will give you an opportunity to comment on the transcription of the interviews and give clarification. You may withdraw from this study at any time.

All data collected will be used for the purposes of my dissertation and subsequent academic writings or reports and will be kept confidential. Participants are free to discuss the research with their family and friends, but the researcher will not share any data with the parents. All data will be destroyed in 5 five years. If you have any questions about this research project you may contact my advisor, Professor Jack Miller at jmiller@oise.utoronto.ca. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Ethics Review Office at 416-946-5763, ethics.review@utoronto.ca

Thank you for your interest.
Sincerely,

Karen Csoli
PhD Candidate, OISE/UT
kcsoli@oise.utoronto.ca
Appendix C
Informed Consent Form

By signing this form, I understand that:

- Participants will take part in two interviews, an item presentation and third follow-up interview, all focusing on the topic of inner experiences and spirituality.
- All research information provided by me will be used for academic purposes only.
- All data collected will be kept confidential. The researcher will not reveal what the participants say to any parent(s).
- All names will be replaced with a pseudonym of the girl’s choosing.
- Participants have the right to not answer a question during any of the interviews.
- Participants have the right to withdraw their participation from the research project at any time without explanation and without penalty.
- Participants agree to have the interviews audiotaped.
- The dissertation advisor will have access to the data during advisory meetings.
- A summary of the results of the study will be made available to the participants.
- The researcher may use the data from this study for conference presentations and papers as well as academic journals.

Participants and legal guardians may contact my thesis advisor or me at any time if you have comments or questions about the study.

Dr. Jack Miller                              Karen Csoli
OISE/UT                                      22-2373 King St. E.
252 Bloor St. W.                             Hamilton, ON
Toronto, ON                                  L8K 1X9
M5V 1V6                                      (905) 545-4255
(416) 923-6641 ex. 2633                    kcsoli@oise.utoronto.ca
jmiller@oise.utoronto.ca

Consent to participate:
Having read and understood the above information, I, the undersigned, agree to participate (allow my daughter to participate) in this research. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Ethics Review Office at 416-946-5763, ethics.review@utoronto.ca

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Appendix D

Interview Protocol #1

1) Background information:
   a. Age, grade
   b. School: public/private/religious
   c. Family’s spiritual background (or religious faith)
   d. Siblings (how many, gender, age)
   e. Hobbies, extracurricular activities
   f. General interests

2) Can you tell me what interested you in this study?

3) Can you tell me about an experience when you felt completely caught up in an activity, such as being in the zone, feeling a sense of awe, heightened sense of awareness or mystery or of connection? Follow-up questions for description: age, when, where, activity, elaboration.

4) Are there other times when you’ve had these types of experiences? Some possible times when they might have happened are: while listening to/playing music, while dancing or during some other artistic activity; during sports or a physical activity; in nature; being with other people. Follow-up questions for description: age, when, where, activity, elaboration.

5) If these experiences occurred earlier in childhood, ask for any other experiences that are more recent. If there are none, ask why she thinks they have not happened again.

6) How do you describe these experiences? How do they fit in with your views?

7) Did you tell others about the experience? Why or why not?
   a. Who did you tell?
   b. Did their reaction influence how you understood the experience? In what way?
   c. What does it mean for you to be able to talk with someone else about this?

8) Preparation for Interview #2: Give the presentation protocol for the second interview and provide clarification, if needed.
Appendix E

Presentation Protocol

For the second interview, you are asked to bring an item that has significance to your inner life. It can be anything from a rock, a picture, a book, etc., OR it can be something that you make or write that reflects your inner life. You may want to think back to our discussion today and reflect on the thoughts and feelings you had during these experiences. I’ll ask you to talk about your item for 5 – 10 minutes, starting with what the item is, why you choose it, and the meaning of the item.

If you are concerned about forgetting something you want to say, you can make point form notes and use this to help you.
Appendix F

Interview Protocol #2

1) Now that you’ve had a chance to think about it, is there anything you want to add to what we talked about last time?

2) Presentation: Did you have any trouble finding something to discuss today. If yes, why? Please talk to me about the item you have. Questions for clarification: why did you choose this item? When did you make/acquire this? What is the story behind it? What significance does it have for you?

3) In what ways do your inner thoughts/dialogue help you deal with the world around you?

4) In what ways do these thoughts/dialogue affect the way you view the world?

5) How does this dialogue/inner thoughts make sense to you as a female?

6) Has this dialogue become an important part of how you know yourself or the world around you? How so?

7) How do these inner thoughts/dialogue relate to your intuition? Creativity?
Appendix G

This is an excerpt from Interview #1 with Theresa. We were talking about her spiritual experience while playing basketball, but had gone off-track. In this section, I was returning to the subject at hand.

Interviewer: O.K. (pauses) Why don’t you then, tell me. Try to talk to me a little bit more about playing sports.

Theresa: O.K.

Interviewer: O.K. So you say especially when it’s a close game, you really felt something.

Theresa: Well, Yeah, cause you always want to win, right. So it’s just in your nature to win. So you just kind of you push yourself and you like try to do your best and you then you push your friends to like to play just the same, you know what I mean. Like you can’t, you don’t want to be trying all the time, like trying so hard with all your effort and stuff and they don’t care. So you kind of just want to get everybody going so you try to like pump everybody up and jump around and stuff. So you just like psyche yourself up.

Interviewer: Tell me about how you try to psyche yourself up.

Theresa: Music.

Interviewer: Music?

Theresa: Yeah. I’m usually (unintelligible). I guess that’s my – if I’m like upset then I have my low key music, and if I’m hyper then I have my like, jump around the house music. Laughs.

Interviewer: O.K. Can you tell me more about what that does for you?

Theresa: What music? It kind of just like explains all those (pauses) it shows what I’m feeling almost. Like, there’s like a time when my grandma passed away earlier on this year, like in September.

Interviewer: Oh, I’m sorry.

Theresa: No, it’s O.K. But like, she lived pretty far. She like lived in a different country, so, I know the idea that she’s passed away but I haven’t really felt it. But when we first found out it just – I wasn’t very happy. You kind of try to mourn it. So like all my music was just mellow. It wasn’t like I meant to do it, it just happened that way, like. I didn’t have any of my like normal, like, fun songs that I’ll like go with my friends and we’ll like sing together and something. It’s just. It was a lot more low key, like, I don’t know. You
know like Ben Harper or – it was just very like acoustic, like mellow stuff. When I go out with my friends, too, you have like, you crank up the Brittany Spears (laughs). I don’t like her it’s just on.

Interviewer: So if used to pump yourself up for the game, what is some of the stuff you’d listen to?

Theresa: There’s like some old school rap. Techno’s a big one. I have buddies that like, before their soccer games I’d go visit them and like. And to go to the games we’d like open my car doors and like crank all this techno stuff up and we’re like, Black-eyed Peas. Just to get them going. (Laughs.). It’s fun. Yeah. Techno, like anything with a fast beat that will get just like jumping, just going, so.

Interviewer: O.K. Now how do you, ’cause one of the things you said before about pushing yourself. Talk to me about the difference between when you’re pushing yourself and when you’re just playing.

Theresa: Well, like, it’s like a scrimmage. Like you can just be like scrimmaging, just playing around like. There’s no effort it in, you’re just playing around. But when you’re pushing yourself like, you try harder. Like you focus more on what you’re doing.
Interviewer: Before we get started today, was there anything that kind of stuck with you from last time that “Oh, I have to say that. I forgot to tell her that!”?

Kim: There was nothing in particular.

Interviewer: O.K.

Kim: Um, I think at the end if I feel things haven’t fully come out, I’ll restate [pause] like there were a couple of things that I was wondering, Hmm, was that completely clear, but I feel like it might just clarify. Even just with this. So.

Interviewer: O.K. There’s actually only one thing I wanted to clarify with you. And that was when I was transcribing. I just wanted to make sure I had the name of the community centre right – that you worked for in Hamilton.

Kim: Friendship Centre?

Interviewer: O.K. That’s what I thought.

Kim: [clarified spelling].

Interviewer: K. That’s what I wanted to make sure. O.K. So first of all, I wanted to ask you, so we’re starting tonight with the item. Did you have any difficulty in deciding what you wanted to show tonight?

Kim: Um. Nope. This is my, my special thing. The other thing that I considered was my journal. That I decorated the cover of and has a bunch of things in that, you know, between clippings and drawings and. Like it’s diverse. Nothing very special, wasn’t expecting any great gifts or anything, but (laughs)! But it has [pause] and the other thing is that this one is something I – I’ve shared in other places and so I wasn’t sure if it was – I don’t know. Yeah. But this is, I think this is uh, more my uh, still something I really – it wasn’t hard to pick.

Interviewer: O.K. So if you could tell you about the item. Maybe it’s beginnings, how you came to have it.

Kim: Well, I [pause] it was at a retreat and we, we made them. So the drawings and the uh, uh, it’s all my own thoughts that stemmed out of this one retreat that was really meaningful for me. It was with Friends in Spirit.
Appendix I

This excerpt is from the second interview with Maria and is an example of the questions I asked flowing from the artifact presentations. It began with other conversation and an invitation to ask questions or to add to previous comments.

Interviewer: That’s fine. Now we can start with this.

Maria: The homework.

Interviewer: The homework, yes. I know. It sounds so terrible, doesn’t it?

Maria: I brought these pictures because they’re a momentum because it was the last time I went to - Cause remember how I told you like, my inner, the way I felt was, that club I went to – what was the last time I went to it and it was when my friend Lisa over here. She moved to BC and I haven’t seen her since. So I was like, it was kind of like. So these pictures kind of like are a reminder. This is us getting ready right before going out and stuff like that. So it’s always like, that build up to going there and like dressing up and you’re like, wear your make-up, depending and stuff like that, so.

Interviewer: So this was taken before your friend went to BC.

Maria: Yes.

Interviewer: In the summer, was it?

Maria: Yeah. I think she left mid-June.

Interviewer: O.K. And I just want to say it because I want to have it on tape. So there’s 2 pictures…

Maria: Yeah.

Interviewer: That we’re looking at. O.K. And this was before you went out to the club that night.

Maria: Yeah.

Interviewer: O.K. So tell me more about what the pictures mean to you, then.

Maria: I don’t know. It’s just us acting pretty much silly. Like we were just like, kind of like, let’s take the, ’cause we always do, we’d al- We always try to take pictures but we always just take pictures just before we go out because it was my friend’s mom who took the pictures. She’s always like, “Mom! Take the pictures! Take the pictures!” So then she takes all of our pictures before we leave. So. It’s kind of interesting. (laughs)
(speaker? Probably interviewer): They’re nice pictures.

Interviewer: So do you, have you been going back to these pictures since then?

Maria: Oh, they’re on my wall. (laughs) They’re just [pauses] Like, I have pictures on my walls and stuff like that, so. It’s always nice to look them once in a while. And it’s kind of funny, too, cause she’s coming down on Sunday. So I was going to go see her and stuff like that. (unintelligble)

Interviewer: Oh, that’s nice. So you’ve got this up on your wall. So when you come by and you just happen to look at it – how do you feel? What do you think?

Maria: It’s kind of makes me smile cause you’re like, oh, the good old times, kind of feeling. It just makes you reminisce about everything you go through and stuff like that.

Interviewer: O.K. Now is there anything different about these pictures compared to other pictures that you have of your friends?

Maria: I don’t, not, really. Just like we see each other grow up, so you’re kind of like, our facial expressions and stuff like that. We change, even like, our wardrobe or what we wear and stuff like that, have changed. There are times we graduated high school and we look back now and we’re like, wow, we look so young! And then, like, now, we’re like, we look a lot older. It’s kind of shocking cause it was only like 4 years ago or a few years ago since I graduated high school, but for some reason we’ve developed so much. And we’re growing up so fast. Like, I was talking to a friend of mine, like, we were talking and we were just having like a conversation and stuff, and we were just reminiscing about - remember when we were 19 and we used to go out so much! And like blah, blah, blah. Now we’re getting old and then. I was talking to my sister, my sister turns 19 in April and she’s like – I want to go out with you guys. But now we’re getting to a point where we don’t want to go as much as she would want to go out. Like, it’s just that growing up process and you just don’t realize ‘til someone else tells you and stuff. It’s kind of interesting, how like, when I look at my pictures, I’m like, wow, this was only a couple years ago but we all look so different. Even our personalities, you can tell like through pictures how much we’ve changed and stuff like that. It’s interesting.

Interviewer: O.K. Can I ask you why this? Why did you choose to bring that in?

Maria: Because it was like, the night of the last time I went to that, to where the club, stuff like that. And it’s just like a momentum, like so it’s like, this is the last time the 4 of us were together since she moved away. Cause we’re like all best friends, kind of deal.

Interviewer: So when you found out about the homework,

Maria: Yes.
Interviewer: Did you immediately start thinking about this? Was it later that it came to you?

Maria: I had another picture in mind but I couldn’t find it.

Interviewer: (laughs)

Maria: But this one, I find that this one was, like there’s other pictures that (unintelligible) but this one’s just a little more significant just for the fact that it was that time and it was, well it wasn’t that long ago, but. It just feels a long time ago.