Meri Kahanee Sono

(Listen to My Story)

A (Step) Mother’s Journey Of Healing And Renewal

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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**Meri Kabanee Sono** *(Listen To My Story): A (Step) Mother’s Journey of Healing and Renewal*

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**A B S T R A C T**


This thesis will take you along on my journey as a South Asian woman and the mother and stepmother of a cross-cultural stepfamily. Through the form of an arts-informed autoethnography I will illustrate how I underwent personal and spiritual transformation while (step) mothering four children. It is a story that “both cuts and heals” (Luciani, 2000, p. 39). In this work I show how mothering and stepmothering can “deteriorate into martyrdom if a mother gives her children and spouse the love and care she doesn’t feel that she herself is worthy of receiving” (Northrup, 2005, p. 13). I explore how the pressure to be a “good mother” and “good stepmother” left me feeling inadequate, resentful, doubtful of my abilities and neglectful of my own needs.


This story is also about healing and renewal and my process of recapturing a sense of self by returning to spirituality. By sinking into my life as a mother and stepmother and viewing my life circumstance as a “vehicle for waking up” (Chodron, 1991, p. 71), I cultivated a conscious state in which anger and resentment was replaced by awe and wonder. I strengthened my agency by directing nurturing and caregiving to myself, pursuing my creativity, and sharing childrearing more equitably with my partner. Mothering and stepmothering became sites of empowerment as I found joy in my relationship with myself, my children, and the community around me.
This research provides an example of how meaningful knowledge production can occur in alternative forms to mainstream academic discourse. Arts-informed, auto-ethnographic research offers insights on human relationships and interactions in the world by fostering an epistemological shift for the researcher as well as the reader. As Sameshina and Knowles note (2008), this methodology is “transformational in process and possibilities” (108).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very fortunate to be surrounded by a community of inspiring, loving, and generous people who have lent me their time, creative insight and energy. I am grateful to all of you for supporting me through this process.

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That search led me to my spiritual teacher Yogini Mangala Anshumati. Mangala, I cannot fully express how blessed I am that I met you. You are a powerful source of inspiration, courage, and love that has changed my life, my relationships, and my whole presence in the universe. Through you, I am learning to live in the world as a mother and stepmother with tenderness, grace, and humility.

My ability to bring this project into an academic setting relied on the guidance and insight of several outstanding professors: Gary Knowles, Ardra Cole and Jack Miller. Gary, your support, reassurance and trust in the process were pivotal in enabling me to produce this work. Ardra, thank you for sparking my interest in arts-informed research and showing me how academic work can be heartfelt, evocative and meaningful. Jack, thank you for bringing discussions of spirituality into the classroom and wider academic settings. The groundwork laid by all three of you made it possible for this thesis to happen.

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I want to thank the many others who made my experience as a graduate student, a mother and a stepmother, rewarding, fulfilling and most importantly, fun. The many students, professors and staff at OISE who help make it a welcoming place to be, the many moms (and dads) who make me feel like I am part of a community, and to my satsanga, who are always there to remind me of what I really value in life.

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I want to thank my two children for keeping me in the present moment. Whenever I stray too far away, you two bring me right back to the moment at hand with your jokes, impromptu dance routines, riddles, games, hugs and kisses. Guess what? I love you!

To my parents, thank you for laying a spiritual foundation in our family and keeping the spark of faith alive. Thank you to my sisters for gently guiding me back to a spiritual life. All of you have been an essential part of my journey.

I also want to thank the rest of my family, my brother-in-law, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, nephews and niece, for enriching my life with their warmth and love.
DEDICATION

For my mother and father,
who taught me the value of family life
and the integrity of commitment
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Note:
All photographs were conceptualized by
Tania Junther in collaboration with Jasjit Kaur Sangha.
They have been used with permission from Tania Junther (www.creativebungalow.com).
Dear Reader:

You may find yourself wanting more information about my life as you delve into my story. In fact, you may feel entitled to more information about my life. I bring you in so close – why not reveal everything? However, like Brenda Brown (2000), “I can’t tell the whole story, the complete story, all of the story, but I do have a story to tell” (p. 3). I have chosen, intentionally, to leave out many important and personal details about my life – especially those pertaining to my family. As Knowles (2001, p. 231) explains, these omissions are, “designed to protect the innocent and the guilty, as it were, those whose lives may be hurt or elevated in the process of revelation.”

It has always been my aim – above all else – to maintain the respect and dignity of all the people I have included in my story. So, when you find yourself wanting more, understand that those details you are missing were not a mere oversight on my part but, rather, a purposeful omission. Above all else, please remember that this story is only my interpretation of these experiences: “I have tried to write faithfully of my life as it seemed to me. If you have a different story to tell, go right ahead. I would love to read your version” (Little, 1987, n. p.).

Enjoy,

Jasjit
The work of a thesis is a process, not an event; it is about the journey, not only
the destination. And this journey is as much about self-learning and personal
transformation as it is an academic exploration.

(Cole, 2003, p. 9)
Read this thesis from your heart, that quiet place deep within. Let your mind rest as you accompany me on my journey.

-Jasjit
Meri Kahanee Sono
LISTEN TO MY STORY
A (STEP) MOTHER'S JOURNEY OF HEALING AND RENEWAL

JASJIT KAUR SANGHA
Chapter One (Ek)

Crossing Worlds
Days, I go without a name
in the street whose name I know.
I sit for hours without a name
before the tree whose name I know.

(Goldberg, 1980, p. 25)

Not because of me, not because of you, just that
the summer, embracing both of us together,
put me so close to you
there could be no escape.

(Gorbanyevskaya, 1980, p. 405)
in the skin of these stories i hold
a history that keeps me awake
at night. the kind that cries in
the next room and you breathe
relief to know she is still
alive….i take her in my dark
arms and rest her over the
steady rhythm of my heart,
soothing her with whispers of
our story.

(Sandhu, 2006, p. 102)
A journey into motherhood is an unknown adventure. We enter with the skills and limitations that we have learned from our own parents and caregivers. How this journey will unfold cannot be said: it is a mystery. In the end we will have participated in the creation of a unique human being – this is our fruit. But the true nectar of parenthood is self-knowledge.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009a, n.p.)
C r o s s i n g  W o r l d s

I am growing weary after weeks of looking for a new apartment. The room I currently rent is in a beautiful house on a quiet, tree-lined street across from the Governor General’s residence in Ottawa – and it drives me crazy. Although the street is picturesque – with latté-sipping residents and their well-groomed dogs leisurely strolling past manicured lawns – I find it stifling. I’m 25 years old and I value vibrancy, friendship and fun.

I have one more house to see. I don’t have to knock when I reach the front door – it is wide open.

“Hello?”

I take one unsure step through the doorway. A tall young man with gentle blue eyes and a head full of curly brown locks walks toward me. My heart skips a beat.

“You must be here to see the room?”

“Yeah – my friend told me you have a room for rent?”

“Yup, she said you’d be coming by today. Come in.”

I follow him into the living room and survey the house. My eyes fall on items I have only ever seen
in 1970s sitcoms or movies – a psychedelic lamp, a disco ball, a stereo system with two turntables and flashing lights. Retro furniture decorates the room – a bright green sofa, a chrome table with red swirls, big mirrors on the walls. The walls are painted in primary colours. Huge windows are uncovered and sunshine streams in. He sits on the couch and I take a seat on one of the chairs – trying not to peer at him too often.

“I hope you don’t mind – there are two kids that live here.”

I nod, not sure what to say. A shy young girl crawls behind him on the couch. She climbs onto his shoulders, falling into his lap. A taller girl with tight curls skips through the kitchen and sits down beside me.

“Hi”

“Hi.”

“Are you our new roommate?”

“Ummm….I don’t know yet.”

She looks up at me and smiles. I smile back. He continues with his introduction.

“My kids are gone every weekend – they either visit with their mom or my mother. They’re pretty quiet the rest of the time.”

I nod again.

“Oh, and sometimes there’s a mess in the hallway when I have a show. I’m in a band.”

I nod some more.

“My friends and I jam in the basement, but we aren’t very loud. We won’t disturb you.”

I sit there, awestruck for a moment – I’ve never met anyone like him before. His daughter climbs back up to the top of the couch, moving around silently like a cat. The older daughter continues to sit beside me, happily.

---

1 He is a single parent with primary custody of the children.
“So, do you want to take the room?”

“Oh – yeah, sure.”

I hadn’t even looked at it yet.

**Taking charge of my own life**

I was in my mid-twenties when I ventured into the world on my own after spending many years in the comfort of my parents’ home, shielded from the realities of the outside world. Most mornings I sat down at the kitchen table and waited for my mother to place my steaming hot breakfast on the table in front of me. Lunch and dinner were no different. Apart from doing my own laundry, paying my phone bill, and tidying up after myself, I did not have any household responsibilities. My only concerns revolved around school, work, and maintaining my social life.

I completed an honours degree in Political Science with an enviable grade point average. After graduation I set my sights on either acquiring a position with an international NGO or a foreign posting with the government. My determination paid off. Six months after graduation I was selected for an internship through the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Ambition drove me to leave the sanctuary of home and venture 500 kilometres eastward to Ottawa. On my own, far from home and eager for opportunity, I was focused on success: a career that garnered respect, prestige, and the admiration of my family. I wanted to make my immigrant parents proud and show them the worth of their hard work.

Then I met him – my roommate, the musician, who wore paisley polyester shirts, had ears pierced more than 12 times and fingernails often painted sparkly, bright blue.

When I first moved in I felt awkward and unsure of my place in the house. It was always full of activity. Rare records, found by my roommate at garage sales and second hand stores, played
loudly on turntables. Feet pounded up and down the stairs, pots clanged in the kitchen and children scampered in and out of the house. The front door was always open and there were frequent visitors. At first, I kept the door to my room shut and spent my time reading or making phone calls. But over time, I was enticed to come out of my shell by the laughter in the kitchen and the smell of popcorn sprinkled with curry powder.

Once I let my guard down I was smitten. Most nights I had to force myself to go to bed after a post-dinner chat in the kitchen turned into a late-night talk with my roommate. We revealed our secrets to each other and contemplated the meaning of life over steaming mugs of ginger tea. Our friendship developed slowly and effortlessly. His daughters grew fond of me as well. They made me homemade gifts and left them for me outside my bedroom door – tiny hand-painted perfume bottles filled with water and flower petals from the garden, clay sculptures or drawings made in their after-school art class.

I lived a bohemian lifestyle, relishing in the lack of convention. I threw my make-up in the garbage, wore Doc Martens, and let my hair grow. I came to value friendship, simplicity, communal cooking and the present moment. The need for practicality and predictability slowly melted away and my future was no longer certain. My habits changed, my worldview expanded, and I became reacquainted with a part of myself that had been buried since childhood – the part that followed my heart, not just my mind.

My trips home to visit my parents were like stepping into another world.

I arrive at my parents’ house tired and cranky after a four-hour bus ride. I set my backpack on the floor and head into the kitchen. I sit down, put my feet up and wait for a cup of chai. But my mom has other plans.
“Aytah koy munday aya. Oh tanu university bara swal puchna johnda ha.”

She is acting coy, trying not to reveal too much. I go into my former bedroom and see a well-dressed young Indian man sitting at the family computer. It clicks. This is the guy my mom wanted to introduce me to – apparently he was a “good catch.” I speak to him for a moment and politely excuse myself.

- *

I lie on my parents’ couch, drifting into sleep as the afternoon sun warms my face. The doorbell rings. My mother answers the door. There is a flurry of activity as greetings are exchanged, shoes are taken off and everyone is ushered from the front door into the living room.

I get up to greet my relatives, feeling awkward in my tank top and tight jeans as they file in wearing Indian suits, dress pants and button-down shirts. Once everyone is settled, the attention turns to me.

“Ottawa kum kardi ya?”

“Hunji.”

“Government position?”

“Hunji.”

“Bhot change kum kida!”

I smile shyly, looking down at the floor. The others nod their heads in agreement.

- *

The house rocks as the bhangra music blasts out of the stereo. Friends are visiting from Toronto and

2 Translation: “There is a guy here to meet you. He wants to ask you questions about your university.”
3 Translation: You are working in Ottawa?
4 Translation: Yes.
5 Translation: You are doing a good job!
6 Translation: Bhangra is Punjabi folk music that is often remixed with other styles of music.
we are having a spontaneous dance party. We jump, dance, laugh and clap our hands in unison with
the beat of the Indian drum. Sweat drips from my face and the Punjabi lyrics strike a deep place in
my heart. I look over and see my roommate in the kitchen, looking unsure about joining in. His blue
jacket, silver brooch, bowler hat and clunky shoes make him look like an oddity.

“Come over here!”

I shout to him as loud as I can. He joins us on the makeshift dance floor, and jumps right into the
festivities.

Caught between two worlds

I could have continued to live the bohemian lifestyle, blissfully detached from the expectations
and obligations of my family – they were too far away to know of my everyday life, and visits
home were less frequent. But I was a Punjabi girl at heart – even though I spent a lot of time in
Ottawa socializing with my roommate and the polite, skinny musicians and artists who called
on him. This was glaringly obvious sometimes, especially when I was sitting with a group of
friends at the kitchen table and staring into a sea of blue eyes and pale skin. My brown skin
and immigrant sensibility stood out. There were times when I did not speak my mind because
my views were in such sharp contrast to their perspectives. I felt silenced. A familiar feeling of
being different would creep into my abdomen.7

Despite these differences I was falling in love with my roommate. He wooed me with his
culinary skills, appreciation of Indian culture, and quirky personality. Nearly a year passed
before I was able to accept my feelings for him because I was afraid of the consequences. My

7 Rajiva Mythili (2004) explains how silencing occurs: “The subject, while perceiving her experiences through
an interpretive framework of racial difference, may also suffer from self-doubt about the validity of her percep-
tions. With the exception of overt racism, how does one determine what contexts are/are not colored by racial
undertones?” (p. 149). I found that in Ottawa, compared to Toronto, expressions of racism were very subtle.
There were many times when I was unsure if racism or ignorance was behind something that happened. Howev-
er, it was clear that my roommate was not harbouring racist sentiments.
parents were hoping to play a role in the choice of my future mate. As a young, successful, eligible woman, I was on the “Aunty Circuit.” Every now and then my mom mentioned an Aunt telling her that so-and-so’s son “wanted to settle down and get married.” I was always intrigued – just a little bit. Whose son? Had I met him before? What was he like? What was he doing?

Part of me wanted to fulfill my parents’ dreams and go along with their wishes. I wanted to make them happy – but not at my own expense. I had seen this happen too often with other Punjabi girls raised in Canada. These young women, afraid to express themselves freely, regulated their behaviour and broke their own hearts to please their parents. I had succumbed to that pressure as well by choosing a practical and secure career path, being aware of my reputation, even regulating who I fell in love with – I rarely dated cross-culturally. For most of my young adulthood, my peer group consisted only of Indian people – particularly those who were Punjabi and Sikh. It was not until the latter part of my time at university that I expanded my circle of friends. Choosing to leave home to build a career was the first step in forging my identity and taking ownership of my own life.

8 In Punjabi families that practice arranged marriages, women play a defining role in finding a mate for their adult children and / or the adult children of family members or friends. These women are referred to as “Aunty,” a term of endearment for an older woman who may or may not be a relative.

9 Cultural preservation was important to my parents. As Handa (2003) states, many South Asian immigrants see their children as “the inheritors and future transmitters of cultural practices and artifacts” (p. 4). There is a fear that children may “forfeit their authentic, ethnic identity, or worse still, fall prey to the ills of modern Western society” (p. 4). For South Asian women, this cultural preservation is deemed to occur primarily through marriage and mothering. My parents were not adamant that I have an arranged marriage but it was their wish that I marry within my cultural community.

10 According to Wilson (2006), the behaviour of South Asian women is regulated within South Asian communities through the practice of sharam – a prescribed behaviour that emphasizes “shame, shyness, modesty” (p. 12). As Wilson explains, historically, “the effects of sharam were to discourage women from crossing patriarchial boundaries and breaking out of prescribed molds of femininity…” (p. 12). This can be problematic for South Asian women who are raised in Canada yet still expected to adhere to traditional cultural values. Handa (2003) outlines how this leaves South Asian women feeling fragmented through “the constant hiding of selves, the feelings of shame this can elicit, and how this affects all aspects of self-esteem” (p. 166).

11 The work of Handa (2003) demonstrates how this angst applies to many young second-generation South Asian women. She asserts, “allegiance to home and family is a central component of her identity as an ‘acceptable’ daughter and community member” (p. 30). When this loyalty started to shift for me, and I started to favour personal autonomy over family ties, I felt like I was being split apart. As Sandhu (2000) outlines, this shift takes time to traverse, “negotiating an identity that is meaningful and representative of our lives is a
The worlds I inhabited were so different that sometimes I cried in my pillow, not sure where I belonged. My family was my base for years and their pull on me wavered, yet, on the other side, those in the little utopia I lived in did not know my history. My freshly-pulled roots were still searching for new soil. It was a time of flux and it was exacerbated by the intensity of the feelings I had for my roommate. My feelings were growing stronger every day and it was becoming painful to hide them. One day when my heart was feeling full and I did not know what to do, I opened my diary and wrote, “I think I’m in love with ________!” I left his name blank just in case anyone should come across it.

Soon afterward I made a decision that changed the course of my life.

* *

We sit together, like always, in the kitchen. The black-and-white tiled floor contrasts with the burgundy walls and the retro print curtains. I sip my tea and lean back in my chair, feeling totally at ease. He starts to speak about his future plans.

“*I’m thinking about moving.*”

“What?!”

I lean forward in my chair, awaiting an explanation. My shoulders are suddenly tense.

“I need a change. I might go to Vancouver with my sister and the kids.”

I’m shocked. My head starts to pound.

“When?”

“Sometime in the summer, when the kids are off school.”

“For good?”

difficult task. Each of the multiple cultures that infiltrate and affect our lives has an influence on shaping our identities. Some of the cultural influences are conflicting and others are more complementary” (p. 86). I walked the “tightrope of culture” (Handa, 2003) as I sought to define myself in and amongst these conflicting and complementary values and influences.
“Yeah – you’ll have to find new roommates.”

I swallowed hard. I was going to lose my best friend.

* *

Arriving home after work, I notice that the house has been tidied up. The carpet is vacuumed, the dining table is cleared off, and there is no clutter on the floor. Sensual music plays on the stereo, “Sweeeeet brown su-gar I love you....”

I look up and see my roommate come out of the kitchen. The blue checked shirt he wears lights up his eyes. They shine when he looks at me. My face flushes and our eyes lock.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

I feel lightheaded, and sit down on the couch.

“How was work?” he asks.

“It’s so boring. I might quit and move back to Toronto.”

He nods his head and sits beside me silently. The air is heavy with unspoken words.

I look into his eyes and feel a rush of emotion. He moves closer to me and puts his arm around my shoulders.

* *

I pick up the phone to call my parents. I have no idea how to tell them that my life has changed overnight. I am in love and following my heart.

“I’m driving to Vancouver,” I tell my mother, as I nervously clutch the phone.

---

“Oh ho! Teri knockri da ki hoga? It is her turn to be shocked.

“I quit my job.”

“Hai ma marjama! Tousi kis nal challahyna?” I’m going there with my roommate.”

“Oh jara kol doh bucha ha?”

“He’s my boyfriend now.”

Her stunned silence fills the airwaves and I feel a wave of shame wash over me. In a matter of seconds I have shattered my mother’s dreams for me.

A new journey

With a promise to call my parents everyday, I set off on a cross-country adventure with my new boyfriend while his daughters played under sprinklers and ate ice cream with their maternal grandparents. We had the summer to ourselves: spending hours in the car listening to melancholy folk music, and taking long breaks, delighting in the summer sun. In his soothing voice, Lou Barlow sang to us: “I think I love you, but I don’t know what love means / Girl of my dreams or a friend that one day leaves / Could I trust this?” Lou asked the questions I was quietly pondering. Was this relationship going to work?

The summer trip cemented our relationship. I do not remember the conversations as much as the feeling: I wanted to be with this person more than anything else. We visited his family in Regina and I was touched by their love for him. His face glowed as they squealed with delight that he was there with his new girlfriend. The trip was paramount for me. I had never been

13 Translation: What will happen to your job?
14 Translation: I’m going to die! Who are you going with?
15 Translation: The one with two kids?
on such a long road trip or seen the rural Canadian landscape: the beauty of the prairies, the majesty of the mountains, the force of the ocean, and the wisdom of the old growth forests.

By the end of the summer we were inseparable and when it came time to part, parting was not an option. I wanted to go back to Toronto. The fluctuations in my life were overwhelming and I craved the reassurance of having family and friends within easy access. So, we packed up the car, put on another CD, and drove back to Ontario, past the now-familiar prairies and the craggy rocks and deep blue lakes of northern Ontario. The eastward drive home was more solemn. I was no longer just hanging out with my best friend and living for the moment; I was consciously making a commitment to build my life with him. Living with him also meant that my life now included his two young daughters.

We arrived on my sister's doorstep weary and exhausted. Reality set in quickly. If I was in Toronto by myself, I could have stayed with my parents as long as I pleased, climbing back into the nest they had created. My dad would cover rent, food and bills, while mom cooked up savoury and flavourful Indian dishes. I was still welcome there, but my boyfriend was not. My relationship would not be granted legitimacy in their eyes or those of my large, extended family unless we were willing to commit publicly and get married. My life was getting more and more complicated.

17 As Thiagarajan (2007) explains, “Indian culture emphasizes filial piety with the requirement for children to fulfill a complex system of obligations and responsibilities towards parents” (p. 93). Talbani and Hassanali (2000) avow, for South Asian children, and especially girls, “the idea of marriage is inculcated as an important goal in their lives” (p. 618). As a young adult, I questioned the institution of marriage, but did not snub it. By choosing a mate on my own who was not from my cultural community, I “…questioned and challenged traditional cultural norms to make choices that were personally important” (Thiagarajan, 2007, p. 89). Yet simultaneously I felt conflicted. Thiagarajan explains, “when women reject arranged marriages, not only is there a threat of rejecting cultural traditions, but their identity as well” (p. 11).
You understand? We’re grafted together.
We’re one, lulled into one another.
I won’t jump off, won’t drown.
To dive would mean
Letting go your hand.

(Tsvetayeva, 1980, p. 394)
Chapter Two (Do)

Stepping Forward
I’ve stitched my dress with continents,
bound the equator round my waist.
I waltz to a steady rhythm, bending slightly.

(Cassian, 1980, p. 351)

Each day I shape and fold
an origami bridge
and set it on the table
between us in space.
Only a few heartbeats wide,
it invites one to cross….

(Ackerman, 2002, p. 18)
Taking our stepmothering journey one step at a time also often means taking, facing, and affirming our feelings one feeling at a time…a myriad of discombobulating feelings from anger and exhaustion, to being overwhelmed and confused.

(Thoele, 1999, p. 72)
Your unhappiness is not caused by the situation itself, but by your resistance to it, and by the subsequent seeking you adopt in an attempt to avoid or change your present circumstance. So your core complaint, unhappiness and dissatisfaction has to be dealt with first. You must search deeply within yourself to understand what you want, resist or seek, and realize that this is the cause of your lack of fulfillment.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009a, n.p.)
S t e p p i n g  F o r w a r d

It is one of the coldest days of the year, dark and dreary. The ground is covered with snow and ice; bitter wind bites my face as I walk out of the house. My black wool coat provides little protection from the elements and my dress shoes slide across the ice. My body shivers as I inch my way to the car. I hear my aunts calling out:

“Tyan rucko!” 18
“Aapna lengha chucko!” 19
“Hai hai, itni dahnd!” 20

Nobody is happy to depart the house in minus 20 degree Celsius weather, wearing Indian suits made of silk, chiffon, or taffeta. The wind cuts right through the fabric, leaving the women with stiff legs and chattering teeth. My bridal lehnga is the most elaborate: gold embroidery on yards of red silk. It is heavy and cumbersome, too long, and held up with suspenders high up on my waist. But I love it anyway. I want to wear a traditional lehnga and not stray too far from Punjabi wedding conventions.

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18 Translation: Be careful!
19 Translation: Pick up your lehnga!
20 Translation: Oh my, so much cold!
This situation is ironic – I'm dressed as a traditional Punjabi bride but the wedding is anything but traditional. My husband's pale face provides a sharp contrast to his bright red turban as he sits with me in front of the Guru Granth Sahib. His two daughters wear pink and purple silk lehngas and watch patiently as the ceremony unfolds – awkwardly pushing their blonde hair under their head coverings. I play the part of the demure Punjabi girl very well, walking dutifully around the Guru Granth Sahib during the wedding rites, with my head covered and my eyes gazing downwards. I am comforted by the words of the Granthi as he sings passages from the Guru Granth Sahib. It is idyllic. A perfect example of East meeting West.

But the knot in my stomach does not go away. It tightens as I look at my relatives and family friends sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor of the gudwara. There are many happy faces but I feel anxiety and disapproval. I let everybody down. My family had come to Canada, enduring the harshness of racism, separation from family, loss of prestige, familiarity, and a sense of belonging to create a better life for their children. This is how I reward them – by marrying outside my culture and becoming a stepmother? It is so unheard of that my face flushes and my heartbeat quickens as I think about what must be going through the minds of my relatives.

“Gora munda day nal kyo bya kita?”

“Odakol do bacha bi hun? Hai hai!”

21 Translation: Sikh holy book.

22 Translation: A person who has devoted their life to learning about Sikhism, working in the gudwara, and studying and reading the Guru Granth Sahib.

23 Translation: Sikh place of worship.

24 My parents immigrated to Canada in the early 1970s through “the points system” in which criteria such as language, occupation and education formed the basis of entry into Canada rather than ethnic and racial criteria (Elliott & Fleras, 1990, p. 57). This changed the demographic in Canada quite rapidly. By 1981, nearly two-thirds of new immigrants were immigrants of colour (p. 60). This bred resentment in mainstream Anglo-Canadian society and new immigrants were subjected to a backlash. The South Asian community was subjected to taunting, discrimination in hiring, and overt racism such as vandalism of Sikh places of worship and white youth gangs that preyed on South Asian immigrants (Krauter & Davis, 1978, pp. 91-92; Bolaria & Li, 1988, p. 181). My parents endured this harsh welcome for the sake of their children's futures but they had a lingering lack of trust of mainstream Anglo-Canadian society. My marriage and the subsequent integration of my husband and his daughters into my larger family offered opportunities for this skepticism to be dismantled.

25 Translation: Why did she marry a white guy?

26 Translation: He has kids! Oh my!
The ceremony ends and I breathe a sigh of relief. My worries are put to rest as one relative after another comes up to my husband and me, offering congratulations. With warm hugs they introduce themselves to my husband and welcome him into the family.

**Newlywed**

The reality of my new life set in quickly. I did not have the luxury of living alone with my new husband to contemplate our future together. The day after the wedding I came home to a tiny, rented apartment in Toronto and my two young stepchildren. There was no money or time for a honeymoon. Instead of planning a romantic getaway I had to decipher how to live in a space where my privacy was seriously constrained. Our family of four was living in less than 700 square feet with a significant portion of the kitchen occupied by computers, spare parts and cables of every shape, size, and colour. My bedroom was no longer a haven I could escape to when I needed solitude. The French doors in the rented old Victorian home were missing glass panes and the warped wood prevented the doors from shutting tightly.

This was a consequence of choosing to live close to the downtown core of Toronto rather than in the suburbs with my family. My new husband and I both valued the cosmopolitan atmosphere and youthful energy of the city. But rent was much higher in Toronto and vacancy rates were at an all-time low, making it impossible to maintain the standard of living we had in Ottawa. Moving to Toronto also meant that my husband and stepdaughters had less family support. Visits to Ottawa were limited to long weekends and holidays. This created a situation in which

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27 Translation: How much education does he have?
28 Translation: How much money does he earn?
29 Due to space constraints, my husband had no choice but to set up his makeshift computer lab in the kitchen, to help him experiment and develop marketable skills.
my stepdaughters had significantly less support from their grandmother and mother.

As the matriarch of this new family, I was totally bewildered by all the responsibilities that fell on my shoulders. Maybe I would not have minded the changes in my life if they had happened gradually – if I had a chance to test the waters and decide for myself if I was ready to jump in. But in married life there is no trial period. I could not have dinner with the family one night, and eat out by myself the other six, and I could not take an interest in my stepdaughters’ lives one day and ignore them the next.

Although I knew what I was getting into, I was still astonished by how much my life and my relationship with my husband transformed. In a very short time we went from being inseparable best friends and lovers to strangers sharing the same living space. The realities of day-to-day living, settling into a new city, trying to build our careers and raise two young girls left us with little time to enjoy each other. His focus on building a new career was so strong that it took over his life and most of his free time. His dedication was admirable but I missed his presence and resented my new responsibilities.

I roll from my left side to my right, trying to get comfortable. I can’t fall asleep. I hear my husband’s fingers tapping on the keyboard.

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30 Morinis (1986) elaborates on how the naiveté of new stepmothers can backfire on them. “The stepmothers who expected an ease of transition to being a stepmother found their initial attitude was replaced by a subsequent arduous and troublesome reality” (p. 109). I realized after becoming a stepmom that my husband was a father first, and that the needs of his young daughters would supercede mine. After getting married I felt like I was “third in line” – a term used by Church (2004) to describe stepmothers who feel they are “trailing their partner’s work as well as his children” (p. 104).

31 In the early years of my marriage it was difficult for me to come to terms with my new responsibilities as a stepmother. Like many of the stepmothers Morinis interviewed, I dealt with “role confusion.” I did not know what “rights and obligations” were part of my new role as a stepmother (p. 115). For me, this bred anger and resentment because I felt “trapped and imposed upon” (Morrison, Thomson-Guppy & Bell, 1986, p. 16). Jones and Schiller (1992) elaborate, “…stepmothers are shocked…by their own anger…when they realize how their new roles promise to alter their lives in a way they never anticipated.” (p. 7).
“Honey, when are you coming to bed?” I call into the kitchen.

“How soon?” No answer.

“Honey!” No answer.

I look over at the clock. 2 am. I’ve had it. I get out of bed, march over to his computer and stand in front of the monitor. He moves me aside and continues working. I sit on the chair beside him, waiting for him to finish. He looks up at me sympathetically.

“Okay, I’m coming to bed.” He turns off the computer and gets up from his chair.

* *

“You missed a spot!”

I bark at my ten-year-old stepdaughter while I supervise her housecleaning.

“You missed another spot!”

I speak louder, feeling my impatience rise. She sweeps the area and puts down the broom, heading down to her basement bedroom. I look at the floor and start to yell.

“This isn’t clean! Come back up here and do this properly!”

She returns to sweep again, tears forming in her eyes.

* *

I pass my stepdaughter’s room on the way to the bathroom. She sits on the carpet reading a book. There are clothes everywhere and I see dirty dishes hiding in the corner. Her report card sits on her desk.

“Can I look at this?”

She nods reluctantly.

I read it quickly and my heart sinks. Her transition from grade six to seven has been problematic.
She sits there, somber, as I read, anticipating my irritation.

“I can’t believe this! You get so angry when I ask you about schoolwork! You never let me help you!”

I take the paper and shake it in front of her.

“Look at your marks!”

I am so disappointed in her – and in myself.

Switching roles

I did not want to change my relationship with my stepdaughters. I would have been happy playing a minimal part in their daily lives and just being a fun and quirky roommate. But circumstances were different now. I created the order and structure I thought was needed in the household and became the annoying enforcer of chores and homework. My idea of family life was very different than my husband’s and I was convinced my way of doing things was “the right way.” I was as perplexed as my stepdaughters were about how our relationship changed in such a short time and with such negative repercussions. They used to scramble to hold my hand when we went for a walk or invite me into their room to proudly show me their latest art project. I had always felt loved and accepted by them and I thought that they had felt the same about me.

When I was the roommate, I had no problem shutting the door to my room to let the girls know I did not want to be disturbed. I never worried about whether they were doing well in school or if they had clean underwear. In Toronto, their father’s absence from the activities of

32 As Smith (1990) explains, “most stepmothers plunge into a controlling, disciplining role with their stepchildren in an effort to dispel some of the confusion about who and what they are” (p. 72). This intrusion often meets with resistance from stepchildren, who “are already part of a family and may not want to alter that dynamic” (Church, p. 22). As Morrison et al state, the problem is exacerbated because “it takes a while to establish the particular rhythm of a new family, and the process can be painful. Stepmothers…can be hurt when their efforts are rebuffed or their values are questioned” (p. 150).
the household – due to computer classes or work – left them relying on me more. I had to take a greater interest in their lives. The problem was, I had no idea what I was doing. The needs of a ten- and twelve-year old were beyond my realm of experience. My lack of experience with children, the weight of the responsibility I had as a stepmother, and my tendency to want control and order pushed me to clamp down on my stepdaughters.

I wasted a huge amount of energy compelling the girls to adhere to my values only to have them resist my intrusion into their lives. I wanted them to behave like I had as a young Punjabi child – obedient, deferring to adults, studious, and tidy. I checked their homework and hovered over their shoulders to ensure they completed it. I became angry when I found apple cores and soiled clothes on the floor in their rooms. Focusing on their habits kept me dizzy. Our constant battles prevented me from feeling connected to them and seeing them for who they really were – two young children in need of love, guidance and nurturing.

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The beat of the mall music thumps in my ears as I wait for my stepdaughter to show me the clothes she is trying on. I hand her some more jeans over the top of the change room door.

“Take a look at these – I think you’ll like them.”

She finally steps out and admires herself in the three-way mirror, smiling at her reflection. She is on the cusp of adolescence and starting to develop her unique style.

“Do you want to buy that outfit?”

### Notes

33 He was enrolled in a two-year college program but most of his learning was happening at home, in the makeshift lab in the kitchen. He took any chance he got to sit and experiment with his new skills.

34 Of all of us my stepdaughters faced the biggest displacement. Our new family structure affected their sense of familiarity and belonging. Bray and Kelly (1998) summarize, “Children often enter a new stepfamily feeling like spiritual orphans. They wonder where they belong now that the family that valued and nurtured them is gone…” (p. 150). Yet because of their age, “children in stepfamilies have to conform to the requirements of the new family before they have a sense of belonging to it” (Robinson & Smith, 1993, p. 94). As a new stepmom, it took me some time to understand the needs of my stepdaughters. I was totally consumed with the changes happening in my own life.
“Yeah, but I don’t have enough babysitting money for everything.”

“That’s okay; I’ll put in the rest.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you!”

The apartment is filled with laughter as my two stepdaughters giggle incessantly on the phone with their mother. Their voices reverberate through the house in stereo – one of them is on the upstairs phone, the other on the downstairs phone. It is nice to hear their happiness, but I dread what I know is coming.

I finish preparing our meal.

“Dinner’s ready!”

Their conversation starts to wind down and I hear them saying their goodbyes. My stepdaughters arrive at the table still giggling but as they pull up their chairs, their shoulders slump and a somber silence fills the room.

I sit on the couch, listless. My partner walks into the room.

“What’s wrong?”

I sigh. “Nobody notices how much I do around here.”

He sits down beside me and rubs my back.

“I do.”

“Yeah, but nobody else appreciates what I do.”
He knows what I mean. He responds in a gentle tone.

“We can’t expect the girls to appreciate what we do for them now. They’re kids.”

I nod my head. I get it. But the ache in my heart does not leave.

Stepmothering

Choosing to follow my heart led me into a world I never expected, a world in which I played the role of a mother without the rewards.\(^{35}\) Despite initial resistance to my new life, as time passed, I accepted responsibility for my stepdaughters. I worried about their well-being and tried to play a more active role in their lives. It became second nature for my family members to ask me what to do next. What was the after-school activity for the day? Where were the swimming goggles? Did I get a chance to book the dentist appointment or sign the school permission slip? I became adept at answering everyone’s questions, and I took pride in being the person everybody needed.

But I was regularly reminded that I was just the stepmother. If I said the wrong thing, or lashed out angrily, the girls would pull away, and I had to begin the slow work of repairing our relationship. There were moments of closeness with my stepdaughters: braiding their hair, taking them shopping, or listening to what happened that day at school. But these moments never lasted in the stress of our daily lives.\(^{36}\) Loyalties were constantly fluctuating, and sometimes

\(^{35}\) According to Ganong and Coleman (2004), “Stepmothers are in a difficult situation in light of cultural values and ideals attached to women in families” (p. 134). There is an assumption that, as women, they “will naturally feel maternally towards their stepchildren” (Church, 2004, p. 51). This in turn pressures stepmothers to fulfill a maternal role. “Although they are not the mothers of their stepchildren, in order to be a good woman, they are asked to be responsible for the quality of family relationships and for the well-being of all family members” (Ganong & Coleman, p. 134). However, as Church warns, fulfilling a maternal role is a “double-edged sword for stepmothers” as they may experience backlash from the stepchildren, the stepchildren’s mother, or other family members (p. 50).

\(^{36}\) As indicated by Thoele (1999), “shadows” from the past play a role in how stepfamily members relate to each other. She takes the term from the work of Carl Jung who refers to the shadow that resides in our subconscious. Rowland (2002) outlines the meaning of the shadow in Jung’s work: “The shadow is literally the image of the thing the person has no wish to be. All the ideals, qualities, habits that the ego represses or denies…” (p. 31). Thoele comments on how “inexperienced, childless stepmothers are often shocked by the shadow aspects
family life seemed more like a war zone with intricate alliances and clearly outlined battle zones. My alliances were weak because I was the newest addition to the family and the person who caused all the changes.

My husband's relationship with his daughters was fluid and effortless. They had a long history and a deep bond that surpassed any intimacy I had access to. I was the custodial stepmother and responsible for the day-to-day care of my stepdaughters but I could never replace their mother – nor did I want to. It was an unenviable position. Many more changes still needed to take place before I could begin to feel close to my stepdaughters again.

37 Morrison and Smith (1993) assert, “it is highly likely that loyalty conflict is the root of most of the stress suffered by individuals in stepfamilies and others in their family network” (p. 94). Divided loyalties are complex and they affect everyone in the stepfamily. Lutz (1983) claims that one of the consequences is that stepchildren are in a “double bind” because “the more they care about their stepparent, the worse they feel” (p. 371). This leads to the stepparent experiencing stress because they “feel positive and negative feelings coming from their stepchild” (p. 371). The adults in the stepfamily also experience loyalty conflicts as they strive to balance their relationship with the children's needs (Morrison & Smith, pp. 94-98).

38 The development of “intimacy and authenticity” in a stepfamily can take anywhere from 4-10 years (Papernow, 1988, p. 61). The process is very slow and subtle, and can be fraught, especially, in the development of relationships between steppmothers and stepdaughters. According to research conducted by Carter and McColdrick (1989), “the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship was the most problematic of all stepfamily relationships” (p. 405). They claim that stepdaughters are more likely to experience loyalty conflicts because they “feel more responsible for emotional relationships in a family” (p. 405), thus making it more difficult for them to develop emotionally close relationships with their stepmothers. While Carter and McColdrick suggest that “stepparents should try for mutual courtesy, but not expect a stepchild's love” (403), Thoele (1999) and Prather (1996) suggest otherwise. They see the cultivation of relationships with their stepchildren as stepping stones on a spiritual path.

39 Morrison et al (1986) assert that the stepchildren's natural mother plays a role in the stepfamily, even in her absence:

The natural mother is a part of the children’s family and always will be, whether or not she shares in the parenting, sees the children on a regular basis, or tries to avoid responsibility. Whatever she chooses to do, she will have an impact on life inside the blended family and on the stepmother who is providing the children's daily care (p. 14).

This was the hardest part of being a stepmother – knowing that I could never establish a bond with my stepdaughters that fully acknowledged my role in their upbringing.
Having Come This Far
always has to go further.
That is how she got her name.
Having Come This Far marks time
by where she has been, where she is,
where she will travel.

(McKim, 2003, p. 25)
Chapter Three (Tin)

Becoming

A Mother
...They built a dwelling place. But a child grew between them as they slept, as they tried to feed themselves.

(Glück, 1980, p. 559)
In the beginning of my mothering journey the endurance tests were strong. It was an initiation process in which my ego and body were thrown into the fire repeatedly, often in rapid succession.

(Kramer, 2003, pp. 183-184)
The dilemma of martyrdom in mothering arises because of the confusion of dualistic thinking. However, when you are in unity with yourself, you are in a truly selfless, uncomplicated state, and you emanate equal love to all beings. You love yourself as you love your children: there is no separation between you and them. There is no ‘I’ or ‘other’; there is no duality. In that state of selflessness there is only service to one and all, which includes one’s self.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009a, n.p.)
My mom beams at me as she approaches the dining table with a steaming hot plate of pakoras. My mouth waters at the smell of fried potatoes, onions and spinach battered with chickpea flour and sumptuous spices. A cup of chai flavoured with cardamom and cloves warms my hands. I sink into the chair, enjoying the hospitality. She continues her flurry of activity, stirring pots, kneading dough and grinding spices. I sit and watch as usual, but this time I have a good excuse – I’m nine months pregnant.

My sister calls me into the living room.

“Okay, we’re ready for you!”

I waddle slowly into the room and my eyes widen. A mountain of presents awaits me. Close relatives and friends are present for my baby shower. I am humbled by the outpouring of support. My sister guides me to a seat on the couch. Even though I am due to give birth in two weeks’ time, I have not really considered the arrival of a newborn. Opening presents starts out ordinarily. My sister passes me gifts; I open them one by one and say “thank you.”

Slowly I realize that these presents are not for me but to help me take care of another being, a
tiny new baby. The gifts pile up: washcloths, flannel receiving blankets, sleepers, bibs, a bathtub, baby soap, baby cream, soothers, diapers, more washcloths, more receiving blankets. My breathing becomes heavy and my heart pounds. A voice screams inside me: “OH MY GOD! I’M HAVING A BABY!”

Then they bring out the piece de resistance: the new baby stroller. I can barely thank anybody. There is a huge lump in my throat. The voice screams again, “I AM GOING TO BE A MOTHER!” The others chat, laugh and examine the new stroller, but I can’t get off the couch. My breathing is quick and shallow and I feel anxious. My cousins come over to give me hugs and encouragement.

“Good luck with the baby!”

“I hope your labour goes well.”

“I’ll come and visit after the baby’s born.”

LABOUR?! Beads of sweat form on the back of my neck and at my temples. My mind races. The baby kicks, bringing me back into my body.

Dismantling myself

The first few months of my daughter’s life were like boot camp. The shrill screams of this tiny being jolted me awake many times a night. She dared me to try and sleep through her cries. Her mouth opened wide, demanding nourishment, and the longer she had to wait for me to fumble around and prepare a bottle, the harder it was to soothe her. Once she was satisfied I was released from my duties and allowed to rest.

But then I was summoned again – exhausted, her screams ringing in my ears like a sharp whistle – ordering me to change her diaper, give her a cuddle or relieve the gas in her tummy.

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40 Due to a series of complications, my daughter did not latch on to my breast. After two months of trying every recommendation – from finger-feeding to attaching tubes to my nipples – I gave up. In an effort to save my sanity, I resorted to bottle-feeding.
She decided when I ate, slept, took a shower, or had a break. Every day I was at the mercy of her will. I was her servant, trying everything I could to keep her happy and prevent her from screaming. She took every selfish or self-centered part of me, stomped on it, and returned it to me soft and mushy.

However, even with all the demands, I enjoyed being home with her, with the pressures of the world outside of the bubble I created for myself. My days revolved around naps, feedings, a possible outing, and back to more naps, feedings, and cleaning up. I came to relish the peace and quiet of the afternoons when my daughter slept and I had a chance to sit down and take a break. I craved some time to myself before the rest of the family came home.

I was surprised at how attached I became to her, and she to me. Our love was immediate and reciprocal. I had no idea I could love another being so much. There were afternoons when tears rolled down my cheeks as I held her in my arms and listened to Stevie Wonder singing “I believe when I fall in love with you, it will be forever.” My love for my daughter sustained me as my role in the home evolved.

The birth of my daughter shifted the family dynamic. She served as an ambassador of goodwill and was loved and adored by all members of the family. The family felt more cohesive, more like a family unit. There was less of a sense of a “minifamily” (my husband and his two daughters) within the family structure (Kismet, 1987, p. 131). The stepfamily shifted away from this Biological Model in which a “biological link” determined kinship, to an Extended Family Model which had a more “expansive view of kinship” (Church, 2004, p. 148, 198). My own shift in perceptions about children contributed to this happening. As Morinis (1986) outlines, this is not an unusual occurrence for stepmothers. She maintains, “Stepmothers who felt that they began by being rigid in their standards and expectations of the stepchild were able to be less judgmental after giving birth to their own children” (p. 142).
I’m exhausted and hungry. The baby has fussed all day and I haven’t had time to eat lunch. I pace back and forth with her in the living room, waiting for my partner to come home. As soon as I sit down for a minute to rest she cries again. Reluctantly I stand up and continue to pace and rock her. I hear a key turning in the door and I stand directly in front of it. My husband is home.

“Can you hold her?”

I transfer the baby to my partner’s arms and walk away. He cuddles her while I prepare myself something to eat.

“So, what’s for dinner?”

I look at him like he’s insane.

“Did you cook something? You’ve been home all day.”

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The neighbourhood bustles with activity. It’s a warm spring day in Toronto and people are everywhere.

“Excuse me.”

I steer the baby stroller around a group of people having a smoke break on the sidewalk.

“Excuse me.”

Laughing teenagers stroll along in front of me.

I find my voice irritating after repeating the same words over and over again. I struggle with the stroller through narrow doorways and up the little step into the fresh fruit and vegetable shop.

It takes me over an hour to get the groceries I need for the family. When I finally leave the market, there are plastic bags tied to the sides and handlebar of the stroller, and even on top of the canopy. The baby begins to cry on the way home and I hurry my pace – nearly tripping over the streetcar tracks.
I walk through the park to the new mom’s group and see them clustered together under the shade of a big tree. The moms smile and laugh. The little babies sit on blankets or waddle around the picnic table. I overhear snippets of their conversation as I approach.

“I do a load of a laundry every day; I can’t imagine life without a washer and dryer in the house.”

“I’m thinking about driving over to Riverdale Farm tomorrow. Anybody want to come?”

“We bought a new carpet for the living room, so he the baby somewhere to play.”

I feel like a misfit. Most of the mothers are older than me – exuding a confidence about mothering I don’t have. My face flushes and I wonder how I can integrate into the group. Could I talk about juggling stepmothering and a new baby? Or about living in a tiny apartment with five people, two small bedrooms and no laundry?

**Normalizing women’s work**

It was amazing how fast it happened. Overnight I went from being an independent, married woman – able to decide on a whim to visit a friend, go see a new movie, or go out on a date with my husband – to the mother of an infant, confined at home most of the time, rarely with time to myself. I found pleasure in ensuring that the house was neat and tidy. My new daughter kept me so busy that I did not even realize that this shift was happening. Once I had a moment to breathe and notice that I was fulfilling every imaginable gender stereotype, my role was so normalized (and relied upon) in the family routine that nobody questioned it.

44 At ages 10 and 12 years, my stepdaughters were old enough to stay home alone for short times, so my husband and I tried to make time for date nights.

45 In her essay “The Myth of Co-Parenting,” Edelman (2002) writes about her experience in a similar situation, “…there was something more than vaguely unsettling about feeling like my choice hadn’t been much of an actual choice. When one parent works ninety-two hours a week, the other by necessity has to start picking up the slack” (p. 172). My husband didn’t work quite so many hours (although he came close), but still, his work schedule meant that the responsibilities of tending to our new baby fell into my lap. This was disconcerting be-
Since I was home anyway, my husband thought it must be easy for me to buy the groceries, tidy up the kitchen and maybe even walk over to the laundromat with a bag of dirty clothes. If I told him that I took a nap with the baby, he was even less sympathetic to my complaints about the housework. He spent most of his time in a windowless cubicle high up in an office tower, so in his eyes, my ability to stay home and do things other than stare at a computer screen seemed ideal. In many ways I was lucky. I was able to be with my baby most of the time while my partner provided for our family. I did not want to be in a situation where my partner and I both worked full-time and I had to compensate for his erratic hours. I already shouldered the bulk of the childrearing and household responsibilities. I had witnessed this kind of stress in other families and I wanted to live my life differently.

So I made a choice. I put my husband’s career ahead of mine and I sat back and changed the diapers. I applied to graduate school and put my daughter in a neighbourhood daycare part-time. I made a conscious decision not to work full-time and my partner supported me financially. However, I still felt weighed down by what was expected of me because I was a cause the care of an infant was much more intensive than tending to the needs of my stepdaughters. I oscillated between interpreting the situation as “a choice or a trap” (De Marneffe, 2007, p. 669).

My husband’s determination paid off, and he eventually landed an entry-level position in the world of Information Technology. His time was even more pressed than before as he was on-call, often having to dash to work at a moment’s notice or have his dinner interrupted by a call from his employer.

My anger was all the more confusing because it was combined with genuine, heartfelt love and concern for the well-being of my daughter. De Marneffe (2007) describes this pull towards mothering:

The desire to mother is not only the desire to have children, but also the desire to care for them. It is not the duty to mother, or the compulsion to mother, or the concession to mothering when other options are not available. It is not the acquiescence to prescribed roles or the result of brainwashing. It is the longing felt by a mother to nurture her children… (p. 668).

I wanted to care for my daughter but out of my own desire to do so, and on my own terms – not because it was expected of me.
mother. If she fussed too much, my husband inevitably handed her over to me. There was an understanding in the household that I tended my daughter’s needs, and my stepdaughters followed their father’s example. They helped me out by babysitting, but when I was home, my daughter’s care was left up to me. It seemed that my newly-cast role of primary nurturer applied not only to the baby, but also to the rest of the family. Nobody said I should care more, or be more concerned about them, but

Rich (1976) addresses the dichotomy between finding joy as a mother while nurturing her children and frustration as a mother when faced with expectations from others that she follow a prescribed role. She differentiates between these two experiences of motherhood by stating that motherhood refers to “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (p. 13). O’Reilly (2007) offers her interpretation of this statement, “In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women’s own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power” (p. 794). This power is outlined by bell hooks (2007) in her work “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance.” hooks explains that for Black women living under racist oppression, the home was one of the only sites where nurturing could take place:

Black women resisted by making homes where all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world (hooks, p. 267).

This dignity-restoring work, carried out primarily by Black matriarchs, strengthened and supported the larger Black community and was recognized as a source of status (Collins, 2007, p. 81). Collins emphasizes that because of this status, “Motherhood, whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother can be invoked by Black women as a symbol of power (p. 281).

Thurer (2007) relates how the assumption that women should be the primary caregivers of children is pervasive in society: “our current myth holds that the well-being of our children depends almost entirely on the quality of their upbringing (read mother, since it is she who usually has primary responsibility for raising children)” (p. 334). However, this assumption does not hold true for all communities. Collins (2007) points out, “African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible” (p. 278). This shared responsibility for mothering is also prevalent in Aboriginal communities: “In many aboriginal cultures generally… mothers are not necessarily the primary caregivers for their children. Indeed, mothering is not an activity reserved for the biological mothers; it is practiced by grandmothers, aunties, older siblings, cousins, etc.” (Lavell-Harvard & Lavell, 2006, p. 8). It was strange that my husband and I became ensnared in the myth that Thurer outlines, considering that we both grew up communally. I always lived with my parents, my Aunt and other visiting relatives. My husband lived with his mother and her friends. We both grew up being taken care of by adults other than our parents, yet this myth, this idea that I, as the mother, had to fulfill this role of the “good mother” still infiltrated my consciousness.

Before I knew it, I was living out this myth with the whole family. I became everybody’s caretaker. I wanted to be a “good mother” and a “good stepmother” because I told myself that the children’s well-being depended on me. The notion of being a “good” mother / stepmother was directly tied to me believing I had to fulfill the myth that Thurer (2007) describes. A good mother is described as being “altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful” and always putting the children first (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 36). While these qualities are admirable, they create a mother who gives herself up for her children; it is an “impossible ideal” (p. 43). As a stepmother, I was also compromised. Burns (2001) explains that trying to be a “good stepmother” can lead to
walking around with a baby on my hip gave that impression, and my family's attitude toward me began to shift.

* *

My husband is busily working on the computer past midnight. Again. He is still wearing his work clothes: a button-down shirt and dress pants.

“What are you doing?”

“Working.” He doesn’t look up.

“At this hour?”

“Something’s wrong with the network.”

“Is it going to take long?” I ask hopefully.

I want to spend some time with him before the baby wakes.

“I don’t know.”

His voice is tense.

“Can you take a break?”

Finally, he turns to look at me.

“If I don’t do this now, they’ll just find somebody else for my job.”

I sigh heavily and rub his back. I hear the baby crying and go upstairs to soothe her.

* *

I walk into the house with groceries in my arms. My daughter toddles ahead of me. My stepdaughter sits by the sewing machine, looking forlorn. Jeans material is scattered everywhere. Her graduation backlash, “If a stepmother does good things for her stepchild when the natural mother doesn't she may not be appreciated because, ironically, it shows up the mother’s failing, which is painful for a stepchild” (p. 238).
party is tonight and she is trying to make a dress.

“Is that your graduation dress?”

“Yup.”

“You didn’t finish it?”

“ Nope.”

I start to say something but refrain. I begin to put away the groceries. My little daughter tugs at my pant leg, asking to be picked up. I look over at my stepdaughter again. I approach her.

“I’ll finish it for you.”

“Really?”

“But you’ll have to take care of your sister and make her something to eat.”

My stepdaughter’s face brightens. I sit at the machine and begin to sew.


A student in my class is giving a presentation. Chalk in hand, she asks the class a question, writing responses down on the blackboard.

“What are some of the problems women encounter when they try to juggle home life and work?”

The class members shout out their answers:

“No time for family.”

“Work tends to take over your life.”

“No time for themselves.”

“Too much responsibility,” I call out, tears forming in my eyes.

I’m surprised by my sudden emotion, and pray that the tears don’t roll down my face.
Wearing down

I gave more and more of myself to everybody else. It became impossible for me to separate myself from the needs and problems of family members. The demands of my daughter were easy to interpret but the frequency of the demands was exhausting. My stepdaughters were more difficult to understand. I provided a nurturing presence and they soaked it up like a sponge, yet it never seemed to make a difference in their lives. They were entering adolescence and our relationship began to deteriorate, despite my increasing efforts to reach out.

The family was so accustomed to my role as the person who brought order to the chaos that seeking time for myself was a struggle. I entered graduate school to maintain my career aspirations, but keeping up with assignments, readings, and creating a space within my mind to integrate new academic material was taxing. Trying to fit in any activity that was not

51 The consequence of trying to live up to the ideal of the “good” mother / stepmother was that I never felt like I was doing enough. I always had this lingering feeling that I could do more for the children in my life. Like many other stepmothers, I blamed family problems on myself: “…discord and unhappiness in the family was viewed as a personal failure…” (Morinis, p. 130). As Middleton (2006) explains, “this ideology of a ‘good mother’ creates a constant tension between how a mother does feel and behave and how she is told she should feel and behave, causing feelings of blame, guilt and inadequacy” (p. 73). This ideal had an overwhelming impact on my life, making me unsure of my own strengths and value. O’Reilly (2007) offers words of encouragement: “…mothers require more support and less judgment if they are to obtain satisfaction in motherhood” (p. 795).

52 Roach (2005) writes: “all kids have issues with their parents’ remarriage, but the issues remain more or less subcutaneous until adolescence” (p. 21). At that time, issues surrounding divided loyalty and discipline start to resurface (Smith, p. 125). As Robinson and Smith (1993) state, “Because adolescence is a testing time for all parents, the strain on relations between step-parents and an adolescent stepchild is especially great; the bond is weaker before the stress begins” (p. 201). The consequence was that my relationship with my stepdaughters began to regress.

53 McElreath (2008) illuminates the tension between pursuing an academic career and mothering,

My professional life and my life as a mother continue to run side by side, parallel in that tired old metaphorical way: two roads running together, and there I am on both, jumping and dashing from one to the other, always out of breath (p. 89).

Running on these parallel roads meant that I had to make sure I was always duly organized, motivated, and committed to completing my degree. If just one thing changed, I would get sucked into the vortex of mothering / stepmothering and fall behind at school. As Weaver (2008) states in her comments on mothers in the academy, it takes “…extreme dedication to balance academic and familial life. We have to make choices, recognizing that there are costs and risks in what we do, what we postpone, and what we do not do” (p. 79). According to Duran (2008), one of the costs and risks is that both “graduate school and parenting create intense levels
related to schoolwork or family seemed impossible. On the rare occasion when I laced up my shoes to go to the gym I was easily swayed if my daughter cried or my husband protested. I convinced myself that I was needed at home at all times.

My tendency to give without taking time to replenish myself wore me down. I became anxious, had trouble sleeping, was quick to anger, lost weight, and easily snapped at my husband if he said the wrong thing. It was not fair to my family or myself. But nobody stopped me, or offered to pick up the slack. Finally, when my stress level rose so high that I was in a constant state of anger, I was forced to take action.

of stress” (p. 83). This stress was having an impact on my health and relationships as I consistently overlooked my needs.

54 My sense of agency – my determination to create and direct my own life – began to collapse. As Warner (2007) warns in her discussion of stay-at-home versus working mothers, “if a woman loses her sense of agency—of her potential ability to provide for her child—she will, very slowly, crack apart” (p. 718). Carter-Scott (2002) delivers a similar message for mothers, “In parenting, just like in a romantic relationship, a person who is whole and complete is better equipped to care for someone else” (p. 189). She describes a laundry list of symptoms that will arise if self-preservation is neglected, “You’ll feel exhausted and depleted / Your health will suffer / You may resent your children….” (p. 190). O’Reilly (2007) offers an anecdote to struggling mothers in her work on empowered mothering, “…both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity and autonomy” (p. 798).
Who is mother?
Who is child?
Our bodies rise and fall
like boats tapping a calm sea.

(Barnstone, 1980, p. 569)
Chapter Four (Char)

Reclaiming My Spirituality
To perch on a rock worn smooth
and lose all one’s senses
  to the nothing
  to the sweet nothing

(Kiwus, 1980, p. 333)

and here,
in this Love that outlives love,
my heart cracks open, spills everything,
and its colours paint a pathway to the sea of unity

(Claire, 2005, n.p.)
No matter what we encounter in life, it is faith that enables us to try again, to trust again, to love again. Even in times of immense suffering, it is faith that enables us to relate to the present moment in such a way that we can go on, we can move forward…

(Salzberg, 2002, p. xiv)
Seeing the spiritual aspect of people is the best thing you can do to live in harmony with them. When you see people as personalities, you may become annoyed, disappointed or reactive. If you see people beyond the surface personality – as their spiritual self – you have a greater view, a greater tolerance, a greater love.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009a, n.p.)
I faintly hear the voices of the satsanga[^55] as I stand outside the house. I am hesitant to enter — I haven’t been to a spiritual gathering in years and am not sure what to expect. Will the music be enjoyable? Will I like the others in the room? I take a deep breath, and go inside.

The soothing yellow walls in the room and the smell of incense help me relax. Colourful pillows are strewn on the floor in a circle; people sit on them, meditating with legs crossed, spines straight, and eyes closed. Their faces are soft and content. I take off my shoes and join them on the floor. I shift from one position to another, unable to get comfortable. When I finally settle and close my eyes, a tornado of thoughts swirls in my mind.

“How late am I going to be here?”

“It’s such a long drive home.”

“Oh no, I forgot to pick up groceries for breakfast!”

“I hope the kitchen is clean when I get home!”

Then the music starts and my thoughts lay still as I listen, enchanted by the minor key of the song. I

[^55]: See Glossary of Terms for definition of satsanga.
feel my heart opening as I listen to the guitar and the kirtan leader’s joyful voice. The drum beat keeps my attention focused and I fall into a state of calm. The room fills with joy as the satsanga sings together without inhibition. I am returned to my childhood and those special moments at the gudwara when the kirtan comforted me, a balm for my soul.

“Govinda Jaya Jaya, Gopala Jaya Jaya, Radha Ramana Hari, Govinda Jaya Jaya”
“Om Namah Shivaya, Om Namah Shivaya, Shivaya, Shivaya, Om Namah Shivaya”

I don’t understand all the words but I enjoy singing them. The repetition of the verses and the simple syllables help me learn the songs quickly and soon I am singing with the same fervour as other members of the satsanga. Suddenly, my mind intrudes again. I feel a wave of self-consciousness.

“What are you doing here?”
“You don’t do this kind of thing.”
“This is weird.”

I focus on the guitar’s chords and the steadiness of the drum, and my thoughts retreat once more. The song slows and fades out, and the room is coated with a sweet silence.

The door opens, and an elegant woman with long, dark brown hair, dressed in flowing white clothes, enters the room and sits on the pillows that have been laid out for her. She radiates joy as she smiles wholeheartedly to everyone. I’m deeply intrigued, and I wait for her to speak.
Returning to a satsanga

I was taught as a little girl that reciting the name of Waheguru<sup>58</sup> brought peace and courage. It was a regular occurrence in my childhood home to hear adults having discussions about spirituality, the Sikh Gurus and their interpretations of what the Gurus meant in a particular verse of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. I was regularly taken to the *gudwara* to hear the recitation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and be a part of the Sikh religious community. My favourite part was eating the sweet *prashad*<sup>59</sup> that was dispersed to the congregation after the service. I jumped up while it was being served to help distribute the napkins.

My parents also believed in the teachings of spiritual beings, and when a spiritual teacher came to visit from India our family paid respects to this special person. The *darshana*<sup>60</sup> took place at someone’s house, one of the devotees<sup>61</sup> of the spiritual teacher. Part of the house was emptied of furniture, and white bedsheets were neatly laid out on the floor for everyone to sit on.

The environment was always peaceful and celebratory. Shoes were taken off at the door and heads often covered in respect. People sat quietly, meditating, waiting for an opportunity to see or talk to the spiritual teacher. I remember having a feeling of awe when I caught a glimpse of him / her. Even ordinarily boisterous children sensed there was someone special in the room. When the spiritual teacher came into the room wearing flowing white clothes and a white turban the room hushed instantly. A grace and stillness pervaded the room.

As a young girl I was defined by my religious and cultural upbringing. It provided me with a blueprint of how to navigate my world. But somewhere along the way I lost my sense of faith

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<sup>58</sup> Translation: Wonderful God.

<sup>59</sup> Translation: *Prashad* is a sweet food that is offered to the Sikh congregation after it has been blessed during a religious service. *Prashad* is used by many spiritual and religious communities, not just by Sikhs.

<sup>60</sup> Translation: Sight, in the light. Auspicious audience with a sage or enlightened teacher. See Glossary of Terms for more details.

<sup>61</sup> See Glossary of Terms for more details.
and grew cynical of spirituality. I spent many years of my young adulthood in the “here and now”: partying, staying up late, philosophizing with my friends about the meaning of life for endless hours and never coming up with answers. As a university student, I became entranced by the world of the intellect. I sought answers about the world in political discussions, critical theory, feminism and social justice movements.62

I viewed Sikhism, the religion of my childhood, as a bastion of male-dominated ideology.63 I did not want to be told I had to follow certain rules and structures in order to be religious. By shunning organized religion, I also turned my back on my faith. This came with a cost. Even though I was involved in student groups – challenging oppression by participating in demonstrations against tuition increases or wrongful incarceration cases – I felt disconnected from people. I was steeped in self-centeredness and lacked true empathy and compassion for others.

Becoming a stepmother and later a mother forced me to stop thinking about myself and understand the heart of a child – a heart that was tender and in need of constant nourishment. I wish I could say I understood this right away but I did not. My sisters guided me gently by urging me to attend a satsanga with them. They had already rekindled their spiritual lives and watched me struggle in my role as a mother and stepmother.

62 I read work by Angela Davis (1981), bell hooks (1984), and Himani Bannerji (1993), took courses such as The Sociology of Race and Racism and Third World Politics and joined the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG).

63 The work of Nicky Gurinder Kaur Singh (1993), however, demonstrates how, in the actual Sikh scriptures written by the Sikh Gurus, “pride of place is given both to the female person and the female psyche” and Sikh literature is “replete with rich feminine symbols and imagery” (p. 3). She further contends that the concept of God or Ultimate Being is “sensuously addressed and cherished in the Sikh holy writ as mother and father, sister and brother—thus as both male and female (p. 3). However, the daily practice of Sikhism in my childhood home eclipsed this reverence of women because of a stronger adherence to Punjabi cultural values that deferred to male power.

64 New mothers often experience a pull towards spirituality. As Miller (2006) states, “Motherhood is a spiritual practice. It is a crash course in wisdom” (p. 6). Athan and Miller (2005) echo her words, “Motherhood is an opportunity for creative spiritual growth and transformation in women” (p. 17). They further state that this potential for change is derived from the “intense emotional experiences inherent in mothering which are designed to be fruitful and to accelerate spiritual development” (p. 17). The same also applied to my life as a stepmother, as I sought to find deeper meaning in my relationships with my stepdaughters after reacquainting
They gave me well-intentioned advice but they never really understood my life. After years of persuasion I finally opened to their suggestion that I meet their spiritual teacher – a woman who was also a mother. Meeting her changed the course of my journey.

As I sit in meditation\(^{65}\) with the satsanga, tears form in my eyes. My guard is down, and I am breathing steadily with my eyes closed. The tears stream down my cheeks. Self-consciousness disappears. I feel warmth and acceptance from my sisters’ spiritual teacher. I listen attentively as she begins to speak about embracing spirituality and becoming a mother.

“Some people have the idea that to fully embrace spirituality, you have to be a renunciate – a monk or a nun – and live a life of celibacy.”

I nod in agreement.

“But this is only one possibility. You can also explore spirituality within an ordinary family circumstance. I lived a spiritual life while raising three children.”

She looks over at me and smiles.

“In my experience, the relationship between a mother and a child is a deep spiritual bond. Being a mother is a sacred spiritual practice.”\(^{66}\)

Her words permeate my heart. I feel both inspired and understood. I make a commitment to myself to attend satsanga regularly and embrace the teachings of this spiritual teacher.

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myself with spirituality.

65 Anshumati (2009a) states,

Meditation is not a religious practice. It is a natural human ability, where you function from the core of your pure intelligence and awareness. Seated meditation is only a preparation for the practice of conscious living in every moment of your life. See Glossary of Terms for more details.

I gather my family together in the kitchen. My heart feels full and open after a weekend-long meditation retreat with my satsanga. I feel softened, and closer to my family. My daughter nuzzles my neck, her soft hair rubbing against my face. My stepdaughters stand near me curiously. I speak to them from my heart.

“At the retreat we spoke about unconditional love, and the importance of relationships – especially family relationships.”

My older stepdaughter looks at me sideways. Her younger sister twirls a strand of hair around her finger.

“Let’s try to remember that, as much as possible.”

They both nod awkwardly.

“Can I go now?” the older one asks politely.

My younger stepdaughter follows her sister’s cues.

“Yeah, me too. I have to do something in my room.”

“Of course.” I say, smiling at them affectionately.

As I approach my bedroom, I see my stepdaughter going through one of my bags.

“What are you doing?” I shout. “Do NOT go through my stuff without my permission!”

Her blue eyes look up at me, startled.

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Mangala Anshumati’s spiritual retreats are transformative events. Students gather together to experience the peace of meditation, and to participate in spontaneously inspired activities that deepen their connectedness to themselves and each other. She describes the importance of these retreats, “If you are always in the world, you lose sense of yourself. You become like the world. You have reduced perspective and you lack the clarity to separate yourself from the confusion and chaos of the world” (Anshumati, 2009b).
I grab my bag and march down the stairs. Once I make it to the bottom, I realize my mistake. I sigh heavily and force myself to turn around and go back upstairs. My stepdaughter is still sitting there, holding back tears.

“I’m sorry,” I offer. “You were probably trying to find something you need?”

She nods, not meeting my eyes.

“I’m sorry I got so mad. I’m trying my best to change.”

Finding solace

Once I decided to look for deeper meanings in my relationships and my roles as mother and stepmother, I committed to changing. I was motivated and inspired by my spiritual teacher. She was raising her youngest son – a teenager – with much more love and consciousness than I could muster. I wanted to be a source of love and understanding for my daughter and stepdaughters, but since I had spent so many years acting out particular patterns and tendencies, it was a struggle to change my behaviour. Conscious of my words and actions for a few days, I slipped right back into feeling overburdened with responsibility and resentful the next. I found solace in the satsanga, many of whom were undergoing similar struggles.

My two sisters were a valuable source of support and our discussions about mothering did not slip so fast into a litany of complaints of what was expected of us as women but, rather, explorations about how something we learned at satsanga could be applied to our lives. We often talked about the deeper meanings behind the words of our spiritual teacher and found

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68 For a long time I had lacked consciousness about my feelings and actions. Hendrix and Hunt (2005) clarify, “So universal is unconsciousness and so common are the difficulties that arise from it that we might as well call human parenting unconscious parenting” (p. 101). Thoele outlines how unconscious patterns are picked up “from our family of origin, the society in which we live, previous relationships, and as a response to unhealed wounds and insecurities left unaddressed” (p. 28). As I found out as a mother / stepmother, leaving these patterns unchecked had negative consequences. Geri Larkin (1997) contends that these patterns can lead to “…lives clouded by misunderstanding, communication breakdowns, anger and violence” (p. 39). By turning to spirituality I was giving myself a “chance to heal into greater self-awareness and self acceptance” (Hendrix & Hunt, p. 101).
inspiration in something she said during our weekly gatherings, or during a meditation retreat. Like my parents before me, and their parents before them, I followed a legacy in which the meaning of life was found within myself and the existence of a universal force or God was accepted.

I rediscovered my faith. This time it had more significance than at any other time in my life. I felt it deep within myself. My faith was not attached to a particular religion although I was still influenced by my Sikh upbringing. Even though I had made an internal shift and wanted to be a different person, this reclamation was not readily accepted in my immediate family. My husband had not been raised with religion or the idea of having faith in something outside himself. His spiritual beliefs were personal and important to him but he preferred to be private about them. He was skeptical of the satsanga and the importance it was garnering in my life. There was an unspoken fear that my attachment to the satsanga would supersede my attachments to the family.

This made me feel doubtful sometimes of the changes I was making in my life. If I really believed that God existed, and that my spirit lived on beyond this lifetime, then who was I? Who was the woman with long dark hair, a quick wit, and high energy? How did the theories I used to explain my world apply now? I was curious about spirituality yet cautious about making drastic alterations to my known ways of being in the world. Practicing meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and a mainly vegetarian lifestyle came easily to me. Fundamental alterations

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69 In her book Faith, Salzberg (2002) articulates a new understanding of the word faith. She explains, “Faith does not require a belief system, and is not necessarily connected to a deity or a God, though it doesn’t deny one… it is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience” (p. xiv). This interpretation of faith “emphasizes a foundation of love and respect…” (p. xiv).

70 Larkin (1997) writes: “change is the river of our lives, yet we fight for control with everything we got” (p. 178). Our ego tries to interfere and prevent change,

It is the nature of human ego sense to resist change because it alters our picture of who and what we are. And we like to be certain of who we are, even if the picture isn’t altogether positive. By definition then, ego sense strives to keep its view of things constant, and this means limited. It feels comfortable only with the known, and what doesn’t fit its picture will make it feel uncomfortable (Linthorst, 1993, p. 19).
to my personality were harder to accomplish.

Overall, I felt a greater acceptance of my life circumstance and of myself. My faith flourished as I opened myself up to awareness of life as a spiritual experience. Yet, I still did not fully understand why I had met my spiritual teacher. This understanding emerged as my journey as a mother and stepmother climbed towards its apex.

I step outside and feel the sun’s warmth on my face. The warm spring air is a relief after the endless snow, ice and bitter cold of a southern Ontario winter. Everything seems so alive – birds chirping, buds sprouting on tree branches – I feel like I am coming out of hibernation. My daughter skips down the street holding her father’s hand, and my new infant son is strapped to me in a shoulder sling. I start walking, but stop when I feel someone watching me. I look down and see my tiny son’s dark brown eyes peering up at me.

“Hello, sweetie.”

He continues to stare – full of innocence and love. My heart melts.

The class sits silently, waiting for my presentation to begin. Desks have been pushed against the wall and chairs form a circle in the middle of the room. The students sit close to one another, and the setting is intimate – unexpected in a university classroom.

“Good morning, everybody. Today we are going to sing kirtan, an ancient form of meditation

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71 As Chodron (1991) explains, following a spiritual practice can lead to insights, “...we find that we have a bigger perspective on our own lives. This feels almost like a blessing or a gift” (p. 27). As a mother / stepmother I had inclinations to feel overworked and underappreciated. This sentiment is often expressed in writing on mothering, with revelations such as, “pain and motherhood are thought to be virtually synonymous” (Linthorst, p. 20) or motherhood is “a great joy and a great burden” (Aishworth & Noble, p. 32). By viewing my life as a mother / stepmother as a spiritual experience, I focused more on what I had to learn about myself and about the children in my life, and less on perceiving my life as an encumbrance.
I look around and see people's faces. They are approving and open.

“It will be in the form of call and response. I’ll sing a line, and then you sing the same line after me.”

Heads are nodding. I am reluctant to begin. I have never sung in public before, or revealed my spirituality at school.

“Govinda Hare Gopala, Govinda Hare Hare…”

I am surprised by the response from the class. They sing back with zest.

My stepdaughter and I are walking home from yoga class, giddy and giggling about nothing. The crisp fall air is fresh on my cheeks.

“You’re getting pretty good at yoga,” I tell her.

“Yeah, I know most of the poses now – they aren’t so hard anymore.”

I am glad she is enjoying herself – it took me a while to convince her to come. We walk the rest of the way home in silence, but it’s not awkward and uncomfortable like it can be. The silence is satisfying, a shared moment of contentedness.

Mothering from the heart

For a while life seemed easy. I was benefiting from my new sense of peace and belonging and the deepening of my relationships with my satsanga and my family. I fell in love with my new baby – born in the middle of a freezing January night. Almost a foot of snow fell outside as I gave birth to him in my apartment, assisted by a midwife. I spent the next three months in

72 I gave birth to both of my children at home with the assistance of a midwife.
hibernation, sheltering him from the blizzards raging outside the window and sinking into my life as the mother of two young children. I cranked up the stereo and had dance parties with my three-year-old daughter in the living room. My son watched us, eyes full of wonder, as we danced to retro Sesame Street records, Brazilian samba or bhanga.

I was fulfilled. I seemed to have it all. I felt a sense of meaning in my life that went deeper than any happiness I could find in a new pair of shoes, an A+ grade in a difficult class or a decadent piece of chocolate cake. When needed, I returned to a part of me that was still and powerful, and grounded me. From that stillness came confidence. There was a purpose to my life and I found it in mothering. However, spending all my time with my kids was not an option. I wanted to continue my graduate studies and achieve my goal of obtaining a PhD. My son was eight months old when I began a Doctor of Philosophy Degree but, this time, I did not worry about balancing work and family. The children came first and my studies a close second.

Going back to school took a lot more effort because I now had two children to dress, feed, and take to daycare before I made it to class – I was often doing this on my own as my partner left for work early. Also, graduate school was losing its charm. The theoretical courses I chose

By accepting the life I had, I was charting my path to spiritual awareness. Chodron (1991) explains,

> You have a certain life, and whatever life you're in is a vehicle for waking up. If you're a mother raising children, that's the vehicle for waking up… Whatever you have, that's it. There's no better situation than the one you have. It's made for you (p. 71).

Miller (1994) uses the term “contemplation” instead of “waking up,” but he draws a similar conclusion: “From the contemplative state our work becomes sacred in that it becomes fulfilling in itself” (p. 5). Through my circumstance as a mother, I sought to cultivate this sacred space that Miller describes as “a state of consciousness where we are deeply attentive and often experience a sense of awe and wonder” (p. 4).

74 I had already experienced “parenting burnout,” a term Godwin (2004) uses to describe a “loss of pleasure or satisfaction in the parent / child relationship…” (p. 102) and I did not want to be in that position again. In my quest for balance in my life, I chose to not let the stress of my schoolwork overtake my family life like it had in the past, and I began to foster my spirituality. Godwin elaborates on how finding balance is really a search for meaning. She refers to an interview with Reverend Sandra Yarlott to explain,

> I think balance is a step in the right direction that’s going to bring us meaning, but it’s not sufficient. We do need a balance between meaningful work, relationships and time with the self. But the piece we neglect the most is cultivating our spiritual self. You have to cultivate the connection with your spiritual self to have meaning (p. 257).
seemed irrelevant to my everyday encounters as a mother and stepmother. I wanted my life and my schoolwork to overlap and my lived experiences to be recognized. I had already endured a lot of stress – at my own expense – trying to separate my personal and professional life. I made a difficult choice. I drastically changed the direction of my research from a focus on the use of free software in community media labs in India to mothering, stepmothering, and spirituality. I took courses that were related to my new perspective and found professors who supported my research topic.

My life was evolving yet I was smacked in the face daily with reminders that it was not idyllic. The greatest challenge was trying to maintain a relationship with my stepdaughters as they navigated the pain and pitfalls of adolescence. My free time was precious and I did not have the energy to break down the walls my stepdaughters were building around themselves, which they guarded with slowness and indifference. I sought to introduce them to new worldviews by taking them to yoga, teaching them pranayama, and talking with them about the pressures they were facing. But my efforts were weak compared to the influences of pop culture, peers, and unhealed wounds.

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75 This time I was committed to doing things differently. As Frye (2003) inquires,

> What are women to do with the stories that they/we have been given and the contradictory insights that we garner from our rifted lives? What are the consequences when women speak—claiming an ‘I’—and aim for an honest rendering of our own experiences? (p. 26).

My colleagues were surprised, and not sure what to make of my decision. As Frye states, in the academy, the experiences of a mother are viewed as “ordinary life, not knowledge,” putting pressure on mothers to keep that part of themselves separate (p. 24). Castle and Woloshyn (2003) commiserate, “In my early years at the university I was torn between retaining silence about my family life and seeking opportunities to share this part of me” (p. 39). By choosing the latter, I was making myself more vulnerable and open to criticism, yet I was no longer willing to do my research any other way.

76 Pranayama is a yoga practice consisting of breathing exercises that increase energy, reduce stress and bring health to the body and mind. See Glossary of Terms for more details.

77 Mangala Anshumati (2009a) writes about the needs of adolescents, “Adolescence is a crucial time for your children to experience reality in the form of love, physical affection, family time, real listening, genuine conversation and the freedom of spiritual exploration. This can protect them from many of the difficulties of the teenage years.”
I stood on a path,  
no one saw my pain,

A guru passed,  
he gave me medicine,

every pore found  
peace....

(Mira Bai, 1997, p. 34)
Chapter Five (Paanche)

“The Fires of Transformation”
When everything is burnt in its own violence, the DEW, coming like a breeze, pauses and brings the good.

(Hadewijch, 1980, p. 342)

Every waypoint has five letters. I will call this one “faith”.... Will I come to trust the course it burns through darkness... retracing that lighted path?

(Ackerman, 2002, p. 9)
By leaning into the difficult places rather than resisting them, and by holding the places of suffering, we discover our hearts softening and growing wider with compassion.

(Roy 2007, p. 102)
When our tendency to blame circumstances, people and other imaginary sources reaches its height, and we find no satisfaction, we are naturally forced to turn within. When suffering reaches its extreme, we can turn upon our inner psyche to discover that the source of our pain is self-created. Then we become a learner, an inquirer, an explorer of ourselves, capable of self-reflection and self-transcendence. We determine our destiny, and create the world we wish to live in from the inside out.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009c, n.p.)
“The Fires of Transformation” 78

My throat is parched and burning. My head throbs. I am emotionally exhausted. A tsunami of anger welled up in me and once it started I couldn’t hold it back. I look up at my stepdaughter who has stood in the same spot for over an hour, blank-faced, not even flinching. She is like a rock – hard, rigid and impossible to move.

My neighbour appears in my doorway. He looks disgusted.

“Can you please keep your voices down? I don’t like all this yelling.”

“Yeah, sure – sorry about that.”

I want to tell him that I am finished being angry, that I am not usually like this, that I was pushed to the limits of my patience and understanding. But, instead, I shut the door and head upstairs. There is nothing left for me to say to my stepdaughter.

I check on my children. They are huddled together under the blankets on my son’s bed. I hold them tightly in my arms and kiss their soft cheeks.

78 The title of this chapter is taken from Lerner (1998), The Mother Dance, p. 118
“I don’t want to grow up, Mommy.”

“I don’t want to be a teenager.”

I am speechless. I hate the person I become when I am around my stepdaughter, and I am perplexed as to how to change my behaviour. It feels impossible for me to give her my love, even though she is at a time in her life when she needs it most.79

I hold my children tighter and find solace in their responsive hugs and kisses.

Red hot anger

When I acted out as a teenager, my parents did not know what to do with me. In their hometowns, nestled in the lush green flatlands of Punjab, teenagers from respectable families did not behave in self-destructive or unpredictable ways. They were too busy studying for college entrance exams and maintaining their reputations for future marriage prospects.80 In my parents’ generation, young people relied on older family members to help them make decisions about their lives. The dreams of their parents, grandparents and extended family paved the road that they followed. Staying out late, dating, experimenting with drugs and alcohol – the defining characteristics of many North American teens – was unheard of for them. This made me an anomaly in my family – but just another kid in my peer group. I felt isolated, torn, and guilty at times but my friends swayed me away from my parents and their values with the lure of thrills and late-night adventures.81

79 My older stepdaughter moved back to Ottawa to live with her mother the year she turned sixteen. Her younger sister continued to live with us for a few more years.

80 This pressure was especially directed towards girls. As Monica Thiagarajan (2007) explains, women were bestowed “with the burden of maintaining the family honor” (p. 11). She continues, “As they grow into adulthood, young women in Indian communities face great pressure towards conformity, obedience, and support towards the family. The reputation of the family is considered to be of paramount concern” (p. 11). Growing up in Canada I was exposed to this pressure to conform and be obedient but in a different cultural context. During adolescence I found my culture oppressive – I wanted the freedom that was granted to teenagers, and especially to girls, in mainstream culture.

81 My guilt and isolation were exacerbated by the fact that I was also experiencing racism. Choudary (2007) could be speaking for me when he explains, “Like many Canadian kids of colour, I grew up ashamed of my
I thought I understood this teenage angst when my stepdaughters faced similar problems but my anger often got in the way of my understanding. Instead of having compassion, and remembering how hard that period of time was in my own life, I wanted obedience. My relationship with my husband dwindled into one long argument with no beginning or end. I wanted him to parent in a way that I knew and understood; he wanted to follow his instincts about what his daughters needed.

My husband was not afraid of the chaos associated with adolescence. He was raised in an environment where non-conformity and the questioning of authority were commonplace. The early part of his life was spent living communally in rural Saskatchewan amongst expansive wheat fields, under an enormous blue sky. His mother “dropped out” of society with a group of young, idealistic friends, creating an anti-establishment haven where free love prevailed. The experiment fell apart when he was school-aged and his mother raised him and his sister on her own – at times living communally with other women. By the time he was a teenager he had experienced generous amounts of freedom and independence. He had the life skills to tend to his own needs and the maturity to take care of his newborn daughter.

For many people, the years of adolescence are fraught with confusion, angst and struggles that accompany the defining of identity. For the second-generation South Asian girl these years are made more complicated by gender and issues of race and racism (p. 51).

This inner turmoil created distance between my parents and me. While they tried to understand and reach out to me, I withdrew from them and rejected their values.

82 Hugh and Gayle Prather (1996) explain that the assumption that children should be controlled and obedient to adults is culturally pervasive. They contend that when children reach adolescence, with parental control wavering as children desire more freedom and autonomy, society lashes out at them – sanctioning punishment to bring them back into line (p. 210-211). In seeking obedience, all I achieved was severing my relationships with my adolescent stepdaughters. The Prathers advise, “When we yearn or strive to get something from someone who isn’t willing or able to give it, we blind ourselves to that person’s goodness. You can’t help but be irritated at anyone you want something from” (p. 112). This irritation was exacerbated by the lack of authority I had as a stepmother.

83 My husband’s first daughter was born when he was 16. He was still living with his mother but he had full responsibility for the baby, sharing custody with his daughter’s mother.
When my stepdaughters entered adolescence my husband focused on maintaining his relationships with them. He worried about them, but showed them respect. Anger festered inside me when I heard him speaking calmly to them when they came home hours after their curfew or brought home a failing report card. I became really upset if their surliness was directed towards the younger children. I caused myself much anguish trying to change them, just as I had when they were younger, but this time it was so much worse. Their wills were strong and they had no interest in appeasing me.

Before long, I had a ball of anxiety firmly wedged in my gut. Home no longer provided consolation after a long day, and I dreaded the weekends because struggles over curfews were the most intense. My children suffered from my high stress levels. My husband could see embers of hostility flickering in my eyes and avoided engaging me in conversation. As circumstances grew increasingly difficult I struggled to find the inner peace and guidance I had cultivated through my spiritual practice. It seemed to come so naturally when life was less challenging. When the situation became unbearable, I sought to understand the source of my anger\textsuperscript{84} and leaned on the \textit{satsanga} to help me find meaning.\textsuperscript{85}

\begin{quote}
The sun warms my shoulders, and I watch the waves crash on the shore. The smell and sound of the water soothes me. The tension in my head eases as the wind blows off the water and brushes against
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{84} I was going through “the fires of transformation,” a term used by Harriet Lerner to describe a shift in consciousness that occurs after hitting an emotional low point (p. 122). For Lerner, this shift occurred after a long and bitter power struggle with her son. In the case of my relationship with my stepdaughters, it was only after a lot of internal and external struggles that I was finally able to come to a similar awareness. Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn (1998) explain what it means to develop this awareness as a parent. “…for awareness has to be inclusive. It has to include recognizing our own frustrations, insecurities, and shortcomings, our limits and limitations, even our darkest and most destructive feelings, and the ways we may feel overwhelmed or pulled apart” (p. 27).

\textsuperscript{85} I chose to look more deeply into what was going on with me by finding sanctuary in the wisdom of my spiritual teacher. As Chodron (1991) explains, the true purpose of a spiritual community is to encourage each other, and not allow others to “buy into their self-pity but to realize that it’s an opportunity to grow, and that everybody goes through this experience” (p. 72). According to Prather (1997), when choosing a spiritual path, “not only does life not get easier, but it seems to get harder. Of course, this is not actually occurring. It is just that the mistakes we got away with before affect us now because we have experienced a different state” (p. 177).
me. I want to enjoy this moment with my husband and children, but instead, he and I return to the same old argument about my younger stepdaughter.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” I demand to know.

“Nothing,” he says.

“What do you mean, ‘nothing’?”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“So, you’re saying that we just have to sit back and watch while she does god knows what, and forgive her every time?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because we’re parents. We’re the adults, and we have to do that for her.”

The tension in my head returns. I am so tired of being angry all the time.

I drive past the city limits into the green, rolling hills and solitude of the country, and feel a sense of peace slowly descending on me. I set up my meditation pillow on the back lawn of the ashram with the rest of the satsanga and close my eyes, sinking slowly into my surroundings. The wind blows through the trees and the smell of rain hangs in the air as my spiritual teacher begins her talk.

“The more you practice meditation, the more you are able to rise above the pain and suffering of life. This potential is not limited by any difference in your intelligence, personality or constitution, but simply depends upon your ability to learn to go beyond the mind.”

I ask her a question – hoping for a favourable answer.

86 Anshumati (2009) offers her perspective, “If we hope to guide our children in every moment, we need to steer them by love. Love is a powerful force, greater than any form of physical or psychological control.”

87 See the Glossary of Terms for more details.

88 My spiritual teacher does not begin her talk until the satsanga has gathered together, performed kirtan and meditated for some time. These preparatory activities create a feeling of stillness and receptivity, drawing people away from their minds and into the realm of their hearts.
“Can we ease the suffering of our children?”

She turns her attention to me.

“Ultimately, you cannot make your children happy, and it is not your responsibility. All you can do is gently guide them, offer unconditional love, and demonstrate your love in a way that they can understand.”  

I begin to sob heavily, feeling my body overcome with sadness.

I sit down to meditate, praying for some consolation. I want the tears to flow and give me some relief from the tension that is spreading through my body. I close my eyes and feel tears stream down my face. My body relaxes for the first time in days, and my breathing returns to an even and steady rhythm. My eyes are closed, but I see brightness in the room. My body feels warm, as though it is wrapped in a gentle embrace. I see the face of my spiritual teacher laughing with joy and I begin to laugh also. My worries seem far away.

**Understanding me**

Through a regular practice of meditation and an ongoing relationship to my *satsanga*, I uncovered some hard truths about myself. The anger that consumed me, threatening to destroy my relationship with my stepdaughters, had nothing to do with them and everything to do with me. Their behaviour merely brought my own unresolved feelings to the surface. The

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89 Anshumati (2009) expands, though we cannot completely take away our children's suffering, if we focus upon our spirituality, the benefits spill over to our children. The blessings of all our positive actions naturally extend toward our family. Living an enlightened life of truth and service is the greatest thing we can ever do to ensure our children's protection and happiness.

90 Lerner (1985) warns that anger should be heeded as an important signal. She states, …Our anger may tell us that we are not addressing important emotional issues in our lives,
harder I tried to resist these feelings, the more antagonistic I was with my stepdaughters.

My anger was so powerful that it covered up how I was really feeling, prolonging its hold on me. I discovered a huge well of sadness underneath my anger. I was sad and disappointed that my stepdaughters did not follow the path that I had imagined for them and I felt responsible for their lives. I remembered them as little girls wearing mismatched clothes or running around the house in swimming suits, carefree. I also felt sadness – and shock – at how quickly they grew up, towering over me. I never really had a chance to develop the kind of relationship I wanted to have with them. Feeling this sadness made me more appreciative of my own mother’s struggle with me, and her initial shock and sadness around my life choices.

The hardest part of my anger was acknowledging and accepting that I was envious of their freedom. I wanted to come and go as I pleased in the house without expectations from the whole family that I be dependable and responsible. I knew I could not show up five minutes before dinner and have a hot meal ready for me on the table, or hide in my room for the evening because I was feeling low. Unlike my stepdaughters, I did not have the freedom to make mistakes or be given the benefit of the doubt. I was an adult and a mother. I was expected

or that too much of our self—our beliefs, values, desires, or ambitions—is being compromised in a relationship. Our anger may be a signal that we are doing more and giving more than we can comfortably do or give…. (p. 1).

Even though I was aware of my anger, trying to understand and comprehend its origins was complex. Cheryl van Daalen-Smith (1998) states that “women generally have been convinced that being a woman means to be totally without anger” (p. 120). The expression of anger by women often leads to them being “dismissed as irrational or worse” as they are deemed to be “devoid of femininity” (Lerner, 1985, p. 2). This backlash in turn made it harder for me to validate my needs, because it had consequences for me in terms of what it meant to be a woman, and especially a mother / stepmother. As Miller (1985) claims, “From early in life women have been led to believe that their life activities should be for others and that their main task is to make and maintain relationships: relationships that serve others….” (p. 3).

Prather and Prather elucidate that “anger is always an afterthought”: that another emotion is being repressed and replaced with anger (p. 255). They further surmise that by turning to anger, a person is more likely to want to blame and attack others rather than feel the discomfort of the emotion that is being covered up (p. 255). According to Lerner, when we are angry we “become so emotionally reactive to what the other person is doing to us that we lose our ability to observe our part in the interaction” (p. 45). This lashing out at others has consequences – over time, it can weaken relationships due to an endless cycle of ineffective blaming or fighting. She claims that we can end this “dance of anger,” but only when we are ready to see the part we play in the maintaining the dance, and make real attempts to change our lives. (Lerner, 1985)
to behave in a certain way to maintain my respectability. My stepdaughters did not carry that burden. They had the freedom to make wrong turns and be guided back to a path of safety by the adults around them. The responsibilities of life were slowly encroaching on their consciousness, while I was wading thigh-high in the thicket of life.

Meanwhile my freedom was being curtailed even further. In order to maintain a relationship with the girls I needed to evolve more as a person. Although self-transformation was a step forward, I hated change and, especially, hated changing myself. But in order to fully face my anger, and to salvage my family relationships, it was necessary.

* *

I sit on my pillow in meditation class, happy and at peace. The complex emotions around my home situation fade into bliss in the company of my spiritual teacher. Her talk on emotions brings me clarity about my own life. I ask her a question.

“When I feel angry, it just washes over me, almost controls me.”

She nods.

“How can I change that?”

“You have to allow yourself to feel your anger — and feel whatever else arises within you — without resistance.”

I nod my head, trying to process her words.

“The emotion will eventually pass, but the actions you take while you are angry may have

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92 My awareness that I needed to change myself had a positive influence on my relationship with my stepdaughters. Kramer (2007) clarifies, “a huge portion of our emotions, painful and pleasant, arise in relationship to other people” (p. 27). But this interpersonal suffering can be changed through the release of “conditioned interpersonal reactions” (p. 80). Schniedewind (1989) comments on the benefit of this release for a stepmother. For her, “breaking out of accustomed patterns of communication” led to relationships with stepfamily members that were “free from self-imposed distancing behaviour and subsequent tension” (Schniedewind, p. 329).
My heart sinks. I have reacted harshly in anger too many times.

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My husband sits on the edge of my bed, waiting for me to change my mind.

“You are asking me to do the hardest thing in the world right now,” I say.

He nods his head. I sigh.

“Okay, I’ll go in there and talk to her.”

He rubs my back for a moment then leaves the room. I slowly get up off the bed and cross the hall to my stepdaughter’s room. Anxiety fills my stomach. The tension between her and me has been building for weeks. She is lying in bed, with the light off. I touch her shoulder gently.

“Are you awake?”

She rolls over to look at me. We struggle to see each other in the dark. I take a deep breath.

“I just want you to know that I love you.”

I reach over to her and give her a hug.

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My daughter’s high-pitched laughter echoes down the hall. She runs out of her bedroom and down the stairs with her brother chasing her. His screams are getting louder and louder.

“Give me back my car! Give me back my car!”

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94 According to Mangala Anshumati (2009a),

Our thoughts and feelings are temporary, but our actions are more permanent. By giving ourselves the freedom to feel our emotions fully, we allow ourselves more room to explore what is underneath them and more time to consider the actions we will take. As conscious beings, we are often able to see the consequences of our actions before they are committed.
My daughter grabs my shirt and runs behind me, continuing to laugh as she teases her brother. He keeps screaming.

“I want my car!”

My son grabs at his sister as I stand between the two of them. My head starts to feel hot as anger rises within me. I am on the verge of exploding as the familiar sensation of frustration encapsulates me. My hands reach out to grab my children’s arms to break up the fight, but I manage to stop myself. Instead, I move away from them, take a few breaths and pour myself a glass of cold water. The moment passes and my anger retreats.

Relieving my anger

The more I understood my anger the less willing I was to let it interfere with my relationships. It still reared its ugly head at inappropriate times but it did not control me. I started to see my anger as a signal that I was unhappy with something. In order to overcome it, I needed to sit with myself and understand my needs better. It was a refreshing change from always thinking that somebody else was making me angry, that it was their fault I was feeling agitated. The more I deciphered my own feelings the better I empathized with my stepdaughters, and sought moments of connection with them.

When I invited them, without judgment, to share what was happening in their lives, they readily opened up. We talked about what was happening with their friends, choices they were making, who they were dating, and the visions they had for their futures. My relationships

95 For too long I had interpreted situations in my favour, assuming that I was being wronged. According to Packer (2007), “Strong emotions are aroused not only by factual circumstances, but also by the way in which the ongoing story lines and images in the brain portray these circumstances, comment on them, and stir up increasing reaction and agitation.” (p. 52) By choosing to take ownership of my feelings, I was able to circumvent these story lines before they made me angry and critical. Packer explains that by being conscious in this way, attention is diverted from questions such as “Who is to blame” or “What did I or someone else do wrong?” and instead, toward “What is it that keeps us immersed in feelings of separation, noncaring, violence and sorrow?” (p. 54). Devi (2007) suggests that overcoming feelings of separateness, especially those caused by anger and self-righteousness, can be accomplished by “overriding the mind's indignation with the heart's desire to love everyone” (p. 79). It was through opening my heart in this way that I was able to feel close to my stepdaughters.
with them were not perfect – they still closed up at times, and so did I – but there was an upswing in our relationship. Although my ego was often pummeled, it was liberating to feel connection again – both with the girls and with myself.

My new feeling of openness trickled down to the rest of the family. The tension between my husband and me lost its edge. I found a way to communicate without spiraling into accusations, blame or criticism. Being able to express myself more often and more effectively restored a feeling of closeness between us. My children marveled at my calm and subdued reactions to their pranks or bickering. I was more aware of their emotions, and that look on their faces when my words or actions stabbed their fragile hearts.

With my anger on a tight leash, I had the freedom I longed for – to contemplate my own needs and how I wanted to live my life.

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96 Mangala Anshumati (2009a) provides guidance on communicating with children, Clear and effective communication must be calm, respectful and without undertones, or your words may have the opposite effect of what you had hoped for. To preserve the intimacy and trust of the relationship with your children, your intention must be: “I will only do and say things that will make the situation better.”
Though love appears far off, you will move into its depth.

(Hadewijch, 1980, p. 343)
Chapter Six (Che)

A Time for Renewal
It’s the fire in my eyes
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing of my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

(Angelou, 1978)

Trees pushed up through my throat,
leaves crowded my eyes and
I looked. Grateful, bursting
with shape and colour.
...I started again; where
everything starts:
at the body.

(Michaels, 1997, p. 79)
You were born with the right to be happy. You were born with the right to love, to enjoy and to share your love. You are alive, so take your life and enjoy it.

(Ruiz, 1997, p. 84)
When you are returning to the Heart, you are merely returning to freedom and happiness. There is relaxation in the body, quietness in the mind, and equanimity in the emotions. Being in the Heart is a rediscovery of your joyful feeling of existence, beyond the need to seek. It is peace and contentment. When you return to the sanctuary of your Heart, you are no longer pushing the world away: confusion and struggle are gone. You are certain of your destiny, and the song of life sings in your Heart. You are connected to everyone and everything, and are enjoying the unfolding of the mystery of life.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009a, n.p.)
A Time for Renewal

With disdain I eye the dust in the corners of the room: a reminder that the housework has piled up while my head was buried in books. I try to flip the page and read another paragraph but the dust catches my eye again. I sigh heavily and resign myself to sweeping up. I climb the stairs grudgingly. As I approach the hallway outside my children’s room I overhear them, immersed in play.

“Let’s pretend you’re a princess and you’re lost in the forest.”

“Yeah, and then you come and save me because you’re a nice fairy.”

“Then I bring you some treats from my house.”

“And then I ride home with you on your horse.”

Their door is partially open. I see toys scattered everywhere. An overturned dress-up box has become a prop in their magical kingdom. I pause and marvel at their ability to enter into fantasy. They play without inhibition – ignorant of my presence.

I sweep outside their room and continue down the hallway. The broom swishes the dust along as I make my way to my stepdaughter’s room. I peek inside and see her engrossed in sketching. She has set up an easel by her bed and sits with her legs dangling off the top bunk. She is using charcoal. Tiny
specks of black dust fall off the canvas onto the floor.

“What are you drawing?”

“Nothing in particular – just what’s coming to my mind.”

“Oh.”

Her hands move deliberately. The look on her face is serene and intense. My presence feels intrusive so I leave the room.

I finish with the hall and continue down the stairs, sweeping each step before me. I bring a small mountain of dust along to the living room. The guitar rests in the corner, the gleaming red exterior sparkling as the sun shines on it. I pause for a second, eyeing it curiously. I lift it to the couch so that I can sweep the corner behind it. It twinkles as it lays there. I put down the broom and sit on the couch, guitar on my lap. It feels heavy and awkward yet kind of thrilling. I cradle it in my arms the way I see my husband and stepdaughter holding it while they sing melancholy folk songs. I summon some courage, and strum.

The joy of play

I almost forgot how it felt to lose myself in the liminal space of imagination. As a child, I spent hours playing with my sisters and cousins in my parents’ house. We ran in and out of the house, through the backyard and over to the creek, all the while concocting new games to play like “House House” and “Robber Robber.” (Nobody knew why the names were repeated twice.) Somewhere along the path to adulthood I lost that part of myself. I was too busy being a mother, tending to one crisis after another, to remember that I thrived on creative energy.

Levine (2003) refers to the space in which creativity thrives as “being in formlessness” (Levine, 2003, p. 14). She extols the importance of this space, “…creativity is a part of the healthy functioning of all individuals and of societies as well. It makes us more flexible and less rigid, more open and less defended, and provides more comfort with darkness, pain and frustration” (p. 14).

The importance of having a creative outlet for mothers was discussed in the panel “The Motherhood Movement: Creativity, Expression and Agency,” as part of The Association for Research on Mothering’s annual conference held from October 23-26, 2008 at York University in Toronto. Joy Rose, the founder of Mamapa-
I became convinced that play belonged in the realm of childhood while I made rules, assumed responsibility, and kept the children in order.

My need for control was so strong that I even sought to monitor my family’s happiness. I was more likely to ask my kids to play in their room with the door shut – to keep the noise and mess contained – than to get on the floor and play with them. If my husband starting playing harmonica in the house, I would make him put it away or play outside on the porch. I also denied myself the pleasure of exploring creative spaces. I used mothering as an excuse to deny myself, put down my own abilities, and claim that I did not have enough time or resources.

When I finally let go of my tendency to be controlling, I uncovered a new me. I recaptured my curiosity and sense of play, and became more open to artistic pursuits. After picking up the guitar impulsively I surprised myself by learning how to play – with limited instruction from my husband and stepdaughter. I enjoyed expressing my feelings on the guitar through kirtan or folk songs. I tried other forms of expressive arts such as contact dance, drama and creative writing and felt a similar satisfaction. All of these disciplines allowed me to immerse myself in the present moment.

I regretted spending so many years finding fault, blaming others, and being quick to criticize

I entered into a state of “flow.” In his talk on flow, Mihay Csikszentmihalyi (2004) relates how he developed the concept of flow while contemplating what made a life worth living. He wanted to understand when it is that we really feel happy in our normal, everyday lives. He describes flow as,

the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake. In reviewing some of the activities that consistently produce flow—such as sports, games, art and hobbies—it becomes easier to understand what makes people happy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 6).

He surmises that experiencing flow is invigorating and pushes people beyond the scope of their ordinary life. That was exactly how I felt after trying a new creative pursuit.
when it was I who needed to change my life.

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I fidget as the naturopath looks over my blood tests. The look of concern on his face betrays his composed manner. He turns to face me.

“Jasjit, have you been feeling tired or lethargic?”

“Yeah, for a long time.”

“When was the last time you saw a doctor?”

“I can’t remember – quite a while, though.”

“You’re low in iron and some other vital minerals – and you’re also borderline anemic.”

He glances at his notes.

“You’re a mother, right?”

I nod, cautiously.

“This happens a lot. Mothers tend to neglect themselves.”

I feel a pang in my heart, like all my secrets are being revealed.

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My children sleep soundly in the upstairs bedroom after spending a day running around in my parents’ house with a gaggle of cousins. I sprawl out on the couch in the living room, relieved to have a chance to rest. My mother sits across from me, and I look forward to our time alone.

“Hai!”

She winces as she combs her long silver hair. The arthritis in her shoulder makes her movements slow and painful.
“Manu touda bal kangi karn dyo.” 100

“Nay, nay, ma aapna bal aapna app kangi karna chondi ha.” 101

She continues to comb her hair, a pained expression across her face.

“She continues to comb her hair, a pained expression across her face.

“Tousi mara wargha na bunho. Aapna tyan rucko.” 102

I look at her with empathy, wishing I could take the aches away.

I look at her with empathy, wishing I could take the aches away.

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It is day two of the meditation retreat and the room is buzzing with the focused and determined voices of the satsanga. We are performing the Upasana ceremony. 103 My voice wavers as I repeat the Vedic mantra. I’m struggling with the ancient words and my throat feels dry. I take a drink of cool water and it refreshes me. I straighten my back, cross my legs snugly, and rest my hands on my thighs. I open my mouth and repeat the verse clearly and boldly. My body begins to fill with a feeling of warmth and compassion. I put my hands on my arms and stroke them gently, as if for the first time. My skin feels soft and responsive to my touch. I am overcome with love and appreciation for myself.

Replenishing myself

Despite my mother’s warnings, I had followed in her footsteps since my wedding day. She raised four children, worried too much, rarely took time out for herself, and let her health decline, all the while ensuring that her children’s flourished. She was the primary caregiver as my father left for work each morning shortly after sunrise, carrying his grey lunch box and a change of clothes. Once I became a mother she urged me to stop trying to do it all without

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100 Translation: Let me comb your hair.
101 Translation: No, no, I like to comb my own hair.
102 Translation: Don’t become like me. Take care of yourself.
103 Upasana means “to sit near.” It is synonymous with meditation. Mangala Anshumati does not perform ceremonies for religious reasons, but occasionally as a simple and beautiful way to engage the mind, senses and awareness in the practice of yogic concentration. See Glossary of Terms for more details.
caring for myself. I was often told that I looked too thin, my complexion sallow, and I needed to eat better, and get more rest. I shrugged off the advice as being inconsequential.

I seemed to be doing just fine. My life was finally calming down after years of highs and lows. Spending time thinking about my health seemed like a frivolous luxury. I took my health for granted. I had endured so much emotional upheaval that the last concern on my mind was taking care of my own body and self. I may have carried on that way indefinitely but my body protested. I became sluggish in the mornings, no matter how much I slept. By nightfall I could barely keep myself together. My nerves were frayed, and the children’s singing, laughter and request for stories before bed often pushed me over the edge. I met so many mothers who felt similarly run down that I just assumed it was a phase of life to be endured.

Just when I was getting comfortable with this way of being, my name came up on a long waiting list at a local naturopathy clinic. I was not surprised when I learned that my body was suffering because of stress and that my moods and tiredness were a direct consequence of overlooking my needs. To help my body heal and recuperate, the naturopath recommended acupuncture and herbal remedies. But, most importantly, he suggested that I make changes in my life so my needs were given the same priority as others in the family.

According to Northrup (2006) this is typical of how women have been taught to relate to themselves. She writes, “The state of a woman’s health is indeed completely tied up with the culture in which she lives and her position within it, as well as in the way she lives her life as an individual” (p. xxxiv). In this society, it is expected that women “ignore or turn away their hopes and dreams in deference to men and the demands of their families” (p. 7). It follows in turn that “the needs of mothers are assumed to come last—after everyone else’s” (Northrup, 2005, p. 10).

Northrup (2005) asserts,

When the fuel required for mothering and nurturing others is not replenished regularly, or when mothers don’t get their need for self-development met separately from their children’s or family’s needs, breakdowns and failures in the nurturing system manifest... Illness then becomes the socially acceptable way to get nurturance met (p. 9).

My body forced me to slow down and take time to nurture myself. As Northrup outlines, for a mother, “the nurturing role can be enormously fulfilling,” but it can also “deteriorate into martyrdom if a mother gives her children and spouse the love and care she doesn’t feel that she herself is worthy of receiving” (p. 13). Rather than continue on the path to martyrdom, I chose to focus on experiencing life’s joy.
I became more conscious of the moments when I put myself last, and used my mothering responsibilities as a justification for neglecting myself. I stopped skipping breakfast in the frenzy to get the children to daycare and school, allowed myself to have down time when I needed it and, most importantly, directed love towards myself. Changing my intention and giving myself lovingkindness\textsuperscript{106} enabled me to thrive and gave me the courage to make further changes in my life.

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I tiptoe to the front door with my backpack on my shoulders. I am late for meditation class – again.

I put my hand on the doorknob.

“Mommy?”

My son runs into the hallway and sees me about to leave.

“Mommy, don’t go!”

He runs to me and attaches himself to my leg, tightening his grip when I attempt to move. Tears stream down his face and his sister comes to see what the commotion is about. She joins in with her brother; both my legs are locked in their arms. They chant in unison.

“Mommy, don’t! Mommy, don’t go!”

I look at my husband in desperation. He is standing at the other end of the room, surveying the situation. He calls to them.

“Kids, your mom will be coming home soon; you have to let her go.”

He walks over and starts to pull them away from me as I open the door. I hear the kids crying and

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\textsuperscript{106} Buddhist teachings encourage the spread of lovingkindness. This is first directed at oneself, and then towards others. The understanding is that a person needs to be filled with love so they can properly direct it towards others. As Sharon Salzberg (1995) states in her book \textit{Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness}, “Through lovingkindness, everyone and everything can flower from within. When we recover knowledge of our own loveliness and that of others, self-blessing happens naturally and beautifully” (p. 18).
calling me even after the door is shut.

•

The room feels icy even though the sun streams through the windows and the children are playing. Their giggles and loud voices penetrate the tense silence between my husband and me. We are in a deadlock, sitting rigidly across from each other in the living room. My daughter runs into the room. Her dad calls out to her.

“Come and sit beside me, Princess; I haven’t seen you all day.”

She takes a look at both of us.

“No, I’m going to sit with Mommy.”

She snuggles up beside me on the couch. My son comes running into the room after her. His dad scoops him up and tries to give him a hug, but he runs away and jumps onto my lap.

“Hi, Mommy!”

I kiss his forehead – feeling a sweet satisfaction.

•

I sit on the porch, holding my husband’s hand, while the kids play in front of the house. My son calls to him.

“Daddy, you know what? I saw a ladybug.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it crawled on my finger – it was so cute.”

My husband’s eyes sparkle when I look over at him.

“Daddy, you know what? We went to the park today.”

“Which park?”
“The one around the corner, near the school.”

My son comes up on the porch and forgoes my lap for Daddy’s. I feel a stab of envy. I am not the favourite anymore.

Loosening my reins

Nothing was harder for me than to step back from my position as the family matriarch. It was the only real clout I had in the family. My husband had the prominent career and was becoming more skilled and sought after as each year passed. His power lay in his ability to support the entire household on his income alone. I only brought home another tuition bill. His needs often came first, especially if there was a choice to be made between him having to take on more paid work and me needing a break. So I hung on tightly to my role as the person who made the decisions in the home and the parent that the children adored the most.107

I had always been second best with my stepdaughters and I delighted in knowing that my children preferred to be with me over their father. They expressed their love to their father when I was not around but if I walked into the room he was snubbed. When I left the house when they were young I was greeted, on my return, by two preschoolers jumping up and down and screaming with joy. But this adoration came with a cost. It was harder for me to find time for myself, when I needed it, because the children were not able to understand my need

107 In her work “Revolutionary Parenting,” hooks (2007) asserts that the caregiving role of fathers needs to be recognized, otherwise gender imbalances will continue:

As long as women or society as a whole see the mother / child relationship as unique and special because the female carries the child in her body and gives birth, or makes the biological experience synonymous with women having a closer, more significant bond to children that the male parent, responsibility for childcare and childrearing will continue to be primarily women’s work. (p. 148).

She continues to explain why this perception is problematic for women. “By placing sole responsibility for nurturing onto women, that is to say for satisfying the emotional and material needs of children, society reinforces the notion that to mother is more important than to father” (p. 148). By perpetuating this stereotype, I was not only preventing myself from having the freedom I needed, but also preventing my husband from fully being a parent.
for space or boundaries. They wanted me all the time – whether I was happy, sad, grumpy or irritated.

I realized that I had to create some space between me and my children in order to flourish. This took the pressure off me to always be there to fulfill their needs, and also gave my husband an opportunity to bond more deeply with his own children. Once I stepped back and let their relationships develop, the children fell in love with their father and his readiness to get down on the floor with them and wrestle, play chess, or read quirky books. With him, they often ate peanut butter sandwiches for dinner and skipped showers in favour of more reading or playtime. While I did not always agree with his style of parenting I had to let him do things his way. I realized how willing and able he was to provide a nurturing presence for the children and that I had impeded his ability to get to know them better.

My thirst for power was finally quenched. I was happier when I did not try so hard as a mother. My husband stepped in more often, and my children’s demands were not always directed towards me. Yet my bond with them remained strong. By stepping back, and making space for myself to grow, I changed as a mother and began to live my life in a new way.
Love appears every day
for one who offers love.
That wisdom is enough.

(Hadewijch, 1980, p. 341)
Chapter Seven (Sat)

Finding Joyfulness
And while we talked together quietly
of so much that is old and forgotten,
My sister—the youngest—interrupts:
“The swallows are flying by us.”

(Storni, 1980, p. 287)

but I am rowing, I am rowing,
though the wind pushes me back
and I know that that island will not be perfect,
it will have the flaws of life,
the absurdities of the dinner table,
but there will be a door
and I will open it

(Sexton, 1980, p. 529)
…Kids are the best teachers of life’s most profound spiritual lessons: that pain and suffering are as much a part of life as happiness and joy; that change and impermanence are all we can count on for sure; that we don’t really run the show….  

(Lerner, 2005, p. 25)
When you live as a mother with a double-minded attitude, you will feel no satisfaction. Whatever you are doing, you will be thinking and desiring something else, and merely going through the motions. You will not be present in your own life and your true purpose will remain unknown. If you have made a choice to be a mother, then surrender to that circumstance fully, and realize that the situation you are in is the perfect one for you. When you surrender to your role, then you can go to a very deep level of spirituality.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009b, n.p.)
Finding Joyfulness

The remote cabin we are staying at is barely visible on the horizon as the motorboat glides across the lake. A refreshingly cool breeze sweeps across the water and brushes my face. I’m enchanted by the beauty around me. Billowing white clouds hang lazily in the blue sky and the rugged terrain of the Canadian Shield emerges defiantly out of the water. My husband navigates the boat carefully around an unpredictable shoreline. I breathe deeply, feeling peaceful to my core. My mind is empty and calm.

I look over at my daughter and smile. She holds a rope in her hand and whips the boat, begging it to go faster.

“Come on, Horsie! Come on, boy! Faster, faster!”

Her long hair flows in the wind as she plays her game with confidence. I marvel at her adaptability. Just two days earlier she cried if the boat went too fast or if we were too close to the open water.

My son scoots down to sit beside my husband and take a turn steering the boat. They wear matching wide-rimmed hats and cargo shorts. He puts his little hand on the throttle and revs the engine.
“Careful, honey, not too fast.”

“I know.”

The pleasure on his face says it all. He is having the time of his life. The breeze brings me back to my surroundings. I look around at trees struggling to survive in the most adverse conditions. Roots cling to the rocks beneath them, burrowing into the cracks to find nourishment. A tree is pulled off to one side by its windswept branches, and it teeters over a cliff. But it perseveres, continuing to grow and live. I am humbled by its strength. I look over at my husband.

“We are so lucky to be here.”

He nods his head rigorously and smiles broadly.

“This is awesome.”

The present moment

It has taken me many years and much heartbreak to understand what it means to live in the present moment. I was often affected by lingering negative feelings about a past event, or worried about what the future might bring. Through meditation I began to experience the joy of stillness, but it took some time before I could feel that in everyday life – not only in a quiet room, sitting in meditation posture. Now, I try to experience that stillness while doing ordinary activities.

I first came across this simple understanding through the teachings of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (2001), who explains that happiness can only be found in the present moment. Hanh (1997) refers to this experience as mindfulness. He states,

The real miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk on the earth, to be alive in the present moment. If we live in mindfulness, it is possible to encounter God right in the present moment while we are washing dishes, looking at a flower, looking in the eyes of a child (p. 158).

Moore (2008) also writes about finding time in everyday life, in our regular mundane activities, to find peace. He writes, “Serious meditators understand that life offers opportunities all day long for seizing the moment and withdrawing from busyness, if only for a short time. You can do this intentionally and turn ordinary moments into miniature meditations” (p. 167). I consciously choose to practice mindfulness and feel my heart connected with my children and my surroundings. It can be challenging, especially during times such as the morning rush to get out the door and to school, but there is always a moment to just breathe and tune into the present moment.
When I brush my daughter's hair, I notice the texture, the colour, and the sun-streaks from hours of outdoor play. I do not rush to finish the task; she does not complain when I slowly take the tangles out and I treasure my time with her. If I try to complete my daily tasks with this consciousness, I notice a different outcome. I may lose track of time watching tomatoes and onions sauté in preparation for the curry I am making. But when I cook this way, I am peaceful and content.

There are times when I falter, when my mind races and my heart pounds, when the present moment passes me by. But, more often than not, I can return to that sweet spot. As my spiritual practice has deepened I have come to see life for what it is – a series of events that are strung together by the people I love and interact with. These events can be harsh, intolerable, sad or incredibly joyous. But they will continue to flow, one into the other, as long as I am alive. It is up to me how I choose to live, and how I choose to view my circumstance.109

Years of my children's lives went by while I was stressed out, burned out, and living in self-pity. By choosing to live differently, similar circumstances have become times for me to learn and grow.

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I talk to my daughter about her behaviour, reinforcing how important it is for her to listen to me in

109 Bolen (1997) reflects on what it means to view life as a spiritual journey,

Pain and joy both come with life. I believe that how we respond to what happens to us and around us shapes who we become and has to do with the psyche or the soul's growth… the hardest and darkest times in my life led me deeper and farther along my spiritual path… (p. 35)

For me, this realization meant that anger and anxiety was replaced with personal growth and transformation and a renewed outlook on life and relationships. Murphet (1997) describes his turn to spirituality after meeting his spiritual teacher:

Baba had shattered the shell of my arid heart, and the broken pieces took some time to clear away. Gradually I was led to a new set of values in life and a new understanding of life's meaning, purpose and destiny (p. 41).

Discovering my spiritual teacher had a similar influence on me. My heart started to shine through as the walls I had built around it started to crumble.
public situations.

“I just want to make sure you don’t ignore me next time.”

“I know, Mommy, but can you please stop talking about it?”

“I can, but I just don’t want it to happen again.”

“Mommy, nobody cares about the past, and nobody cares about the future either.”

I am stunned. She continues.

“The past is history, the future is a mystery, and today is a gift — that’s why they call it the present.” 110

“Where did you hear that?”

“Kung Fu Panda.”

I can’t help but smile. She’s right.

I wake up in the morning to the sound of my son’s voice. He is lying close to me with his ear pressed against my breast.

“Mommy, your heart isn’t beating very fast.”

I open my eyes briefly, my body feeling heavy against the bed. I just want to sleep. He continues to monitor my heartbeat.

“Mommy, your heart is beating faster now.”

He changes positions and starts to kiss me on the cheeks, one at a time. His kisses tickle my face.

“I love you, Mommy.”

Finally, I open my eyes and grab him in a big cuddle. He squirms out of my arms and runs off to play.

My husband is on the phone with one of my stepdaughters. He asks her about her new apartment and I eavesdrop on their conversation.

“She wants to know if she can ask you something about cooking,”

“Really? Yeah, of course.”

I’m pleased. My husband passes me the phone.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Good, but I’m having trouble making dinner – I can’t remember how to cook rice.”

I pause, surprised.

“You don’t know how to cook rice?”

“No.”

We both burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation.

Seeing the children as my teachers

Whoever said that children should be seen but not heard was missing out on life. I know I was. When I felt a lack of control over my own life the children often took the brunt of my self-frustration. I was less willing to appreciate them for who they were, and more likely to be irritated by one of their personality quirks – especially if it clashed with one of mine. By seeing my children as my teachers, as spiritual beings who have come into my life to help me learn, my attitude towards them has changed.111 I spend more time observing and getting to

111 De Angelis (1994) writes,

Your children are not your children. They are your teachers, your guides, your challengers, your lesson-bringers, your truth-tellers, your heart-healers, your spirit-polishers. They are connected to a source of wisdom and love that most of us have lost in the process of getting older (p. 225).
know them better rather than assuming that I always know best – just because I am an adult and their mother.

They amaze me by waking up each morning with clean slates. They do not hold regrets or bear grudges. In the morning, one of the first things I might hear from either of them is directed toward the other: “Do you want to play?” It doesn’t seem to matter that they fought just the day before – one crying in frustration, the other in sadness. I also benefit from this openness of heart when they climb into my bed in the morning to snuggle for a few moments. I am greeted with hugs and kisses even if I was grouchy or impatient with them the day before. They express their love unconditionally.

I was also taught these lessons by my stepdaughters. They were 7 and 9 years of age when I first met them – not much older than my children are now – and they allowed me into their lives. Despite the tension and stress that marked part of our time as a family, they have emerged as adults who value their relationship with me. They have taught me the enduring nature of love and the resiliency of the human spirit. Most importantly, they have taught me about the fragility of a child’s heart. My experience with them has made me a better mother.

Now, I look forward to their visits so I can get a peek into their lives. We can speak to each other more freely now. I appreciate them for who they are, without expectations from them. Both my children and stepchildren have become my teachers and I am flourishing from their guidance.

It was not until I looked more deeply at myself that I could begin to understand them. As Mangala Anshumati (2009a) explains, in spiritual mothering, “Your child is the mirror you must face to see all that lies hidden within you. Embrace that mirror, and you will know acceptance, humility and compassion. Above all, you will grow in love for yourself and your child” (n.p). As the Kabat-Zinn’s (1998) comment, “The challenge is to see if we really can embody, fully, the life that is ours to live, with the children that are ours to nurture, right here, right now...” (p. 339).

112 Both of my stepdaughters eventually moved back to Ottawa. Due to distance and busy work schedules, visits are infrequent – limited to long weekends and holidays.
My husband and I watch excitedly as the children play in front of our new house. My daughter walks up and down the sidewalk, arms linked with the neighbour’s daughter, spilling secrets into her ear. My son plays with his cars, launching them off the little hill with his buddies. Other children from the street scramble around, playing tag in the golden light of the sunset. Parents cluster together, chatting about their children, house renovations and the latest neighbourhood news. I look over at my husband.

“I never imagined the kids having so much fun here. This sense of community – no amount of money can buy this.”

He nods – looking as surprised as I am.

“It’s pretty special,” he agrees.

We cause quite a stir at the restaurant. My three sisters, our husbands, our seven children and my parents seat ourselves at the long table specially readied for us. The children squirm and giggle on one side and the adults all squeeze on to the other. The mood is festive and lively as we celebrate one of the few times that we are all gathered together in the same place. Feeling silly, I lean over to sing my rendition of a Bollywood song, badly, in my sister’s ear.

“Oooooooh, Ik ladki ko dahka to aussa laga / Jasa chandi di rhat…”

My sister cringes. “Help, someone save me from her singing!”

I’m laughing at myself, too. My daughter overhears and requests a song, as her cousins continue to chatter.

“Mommy, can you sing ‘Who Let the Dogs Out?'”

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113 My oldest sister has been living in Vancouver for almost a decade.
114 Translation: “I saw a girl and this is how she made me feel / Like a moon-lit night.” Sanu, K. (1993).
“Ummm… maybe later, okay?”

After a long absence, I arrive at the ashram for satsanga. I feel as though I am coming home. The residents have decorated: inspirational quotes from spiritual teachers are framed and hung on the wall near the stairs and ornate wall hangings brighten the meditation space. My body instinctively relaxes at the scent of burning incense. I adjust my pillow and sit. The familiarity of the space, the people and the music lull me into a silent repose. One of the members begins to play the harmonium and the room fills with joyous music.

“Door of my heart, open wide I keep for thee;
Wilt thou come? Wilt thou come? Just for once, come to me;
Will my days fly away without seeing thee, my Lord?
Night and day, night and day, I look for thee night and day.”

The devotional music fills my heart and I feel a wash of immense gratitude.

Cultivating a sense of belonging

One of the biggest changes I have made in my life is fostering a sense of community. When stress fogged my vision I often kept to myself. I did not want to burden other people with my problems. When I did talk to others it never resolved anything. In fact, I usually felt worse after reliving painful events – talking unconsciously made the problem morph into something big and hopeless. It was not until I was happier with my life that I saw the value of connecting with other people – and finding commonalities. When I actively sought connection with other mothers I found it everywhere I turned.

In my children’s schoolyard I met mothers who sought flexibility in their work schedules

115 Parmahansa, Y. (1938).
while their children were young, mothers who spoke openly about their spiritual practice, and mothers who shared my values about raising children who are spiritually, emotionally, and environmentally conscious. In my neighbourhood I met mothers who were raised by immigrant parents and share my attachment to family values and cultural traditions. These mothers and I set up impromptu playdates and trips to the park, keeping each other company while our children play freeze tag and climb the monkeybars.

I now have a community of mothers I can lean on to care for my children if a meeting runs late, if I am due for a haircut, or if I need to visit a sick relative in the hospital. Once in a while we will get together and take over a local restaurant, catching up over breakfast. During these marathon visits, conversations revolve around our varying mothering practices, how we can take care of ourselves, the latest news about our children’s school, and community happenings. My relationships with these women enrich my journey as a mother.

I also foster community within my own family – visiting my parents, sisters, and relatives to ensure my ties with them are strong. I want my children to grow up with memories of Nani\textsuperscript{116} and Nanu\textsuperscript{117}, their aunts and uncles and a herd of cousins. My children straddle two cultures and I am cultivating a sense of belonging for them, in mine. My daughter shares my love of dancing to \textit{bhangra},\textsuperscript{118} and my son pleads for a second helping of \textit{prashad}\textsuperscript{119} at the \textit{gudwara},\textsuperscript{120} just like I once did. I sing them \textit{shabads}\textsuperscript{121} as they fall asleep at night, and read them stories about Sikh Gurus and spiritual beings. I want them to grow up like I did – with an awareness of the mystical elements of life. I hope it never leaves them, and that they receive guidance as I did in my time of need.

\textsuperscript{116} Translation: maternal grandmother
\textsuperscript{117} Translation: maternal grandfather
\textsuperscript{118} Translation: Punjabi folk music
\textsuperscript{119} Translation: sweet offering received at the \textit{gudwara}
\textsuperscript{120} Translation: Sikh place of worship
\textsuperscript{121} Translation: religious hymns
The sun shines brightly and reflects off the small pond in front of the ashram. My daughter runs around on the grass, playing tag with her cousin, and my son throws small stones into the water. I see my stepdaughter dozing contentedly on a blanket. The children’s kirtan has come to a close and the adults help out by doing karma yoga. We gather twigs and branches from the lawn of the ashram. Bursts of laughter are heard frequently as people gently poke fun at each other and joke amidst the work. My spiritual teacher moves fluidly amongst us — her long braids brushing the ground as she bends to gather branches. Somebody taps me on the shoulder.

“Is that your husband over there?”

“Yeah. He’s mowing the lawn — with a pushmower?”

“Look over there; look at what’s he’s made.”

I look to my right. He’s mowed a heart into the lawn of the ashram.

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122 The children’s kirtan is a special event when children and families are invited to the satsanga. We still sing and meditate, but for shorter periods of time.

123 See the Glossary of Terms for more details.
I learn
that breathing in
is a kind of birth into
the body
and breathing out
is a birth
into the uni/verse
the one verse
a continuous rhythm
in and out
(McKim, 2003, p. 90)
It is arrogant to think that we always know better than our children. The purity of their innocence can be rich and full of wisdom, while our intellect may veil the truth. A child is just as capable of the enlightened perspective as an adult, and perhaps more so because they are so close to the joy of the Self. Take their little hands and enter the depth of your being through the doorway of your heart, where everything that is rigid about you is left behind, and you become as open, vulnerable and full of wonder as a little child.

(Mangala Anshumati, 2009a, n.p.)
Methodology that Matters
We carry with us every story we have ever heard and every story we have ever lived, filed away at some deep place in our memory… It is almost as if we have been collecting pieces of a greater wisdom, sometimes over many years without knowing.

(Remen, 1994, p. xxix)
I am 10 years old. I run from the backyard into the house for a drink. Sweat dampens my forehead and trickles down my cheek. I wipe it off my face with the back of my hand and grab a glass from the cupboard. As I fill the glass with juice, I hear the familiar sound of adult voices in the living room, engaged in animated and boisterous discussion. Part of me wants to rush to re-join my sisters and cousins playing in the backyard but I am intrigued by the stories I hear. I sit on the floor near the sofa and listen.

“Ma nockri lan walla daftar bich gya si. Ona kya koy nockri nahi ha.”

My uncle’s voice is tense with repressed anger.

“Jado ik gora bunda nockri lan aya, onu pucha tu kado nockri shuru karni ha.”

His voice escalates as he tells his story of injustice.

“Manu bott gusa lagya!”

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124 Translation: I went to the employment centre. They told me there was no work.
125 Translation: Then a white guy comes in and they ask him when he can start working.
126 Translation: I was so mad!
The other adults in the room jump into the conversation, validating his story with their experiences – hands flying in the air to emphasize a point. Talking is interrupted only to take a sip of chai, a bite of a samosa or an Indian sweet. I soak up the passion, the sense of community and longing in the room.

The back door creaks as it opens.

“Jasyyyyy!” My sister looks perplexed. “You’re sitting here with the grown-ups? We’ve been waiting for you outside to play!”

I look out the window and see my cousins in the backyard. Reluctantly I get up from the floor and head back outside. The voices of the adults trail after me, their recants replaced by more soothing tones as they contemplate God.

“Minu rab nay aytay kyo pajyah ha?”127

“Rab nu sada nol jada pahta ha.”128

“Ee toudi ardas nal simran karka man nu shanty mildi ha.”129

Telling stories: finding “truth”

I grew up around stories. They were the glue that held together members of my extended family as they meandered through feelings of displacement, longing for home, and injustice in their newly-adopted country. Listening to these stories shaped the way I made meaning of my world. When my parents and family members spoke to each other about topics such as the latest immigration laws, they did not cite articles from the Globe and Mail newspaper or refer to political debates. They shared personal stories about how they were being affected. Their joint experiences were a trusted source of knowledge for each other and were passed on to other relatives. This kind of understanding – that people’s lived experiences were a source of

127 Translation: Why did God bring us here?
128 Translation: God knows more than us.
129 Translation: Do your prayers, repeating God’s name brings peace to the mind.
meaning-making – was imprinted upon my consciousness.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992, p. 14) asserts, “stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities about life.” The stories I heard growing up may have centered around obstacles that new immigrants faced, but there was always a sense of hope. When writing stories for this project I was guided by this knowledge. Like Teresa Luciani (2004, p. 39), I write stories that show both sides of life – “a story that both cuts and heals.” Yet because I am conscious of what I share about my life, and seek to protect my family members, “I can’t tell the whole story, the complete story, all the story, but I have a story to tell” (brown, 2000, p. 3). I tell “a true story with lies” (Knowles, 2001, p. 230). While everything in my story is true, some of the events and timelines have been modified and altered. This was necessary in order “to protect the innocent and the guilty, as it were, those whose lives may be hurt or elevated in the process of revelation” (p. 231).

The fragments of my life that I do reveal focus on experiences that altered the path of my life in both subtle and dramatic ways. Cole and Knowles (2001) explain the significance of these turning points, epiphanies or critical incidences:

> Individuals have profound experiences of many kinds – events that turn lives around or, less dramatically, mark the passage of the years and tone, tenor, and influence of a life. These are the events and circumstances to which we return when reconstructing the past and making sense of our lives. These are epiphanies (p. 120).

According to Norman Denzin (1989, p. 70) these epiphanies “alter the fundamental meaning structure in a person’s life. Their effects may be positive or negative.” The stories I tell about these significant moments in my life reveal how hope and adversity are intertwined in the context of my life as a mother / stepmother.

Carolyn Ellis (2007, p. 26) describes the process of writing arduous stories as “a gift to the self, a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in our lives and heal or grow from pain.” My sense
of meaning was ruptured as I traversed the path of mothering / stepmothering, and it was through writing these stories that I delved into all the crevices of my internal world. Through this exploration, I came to deeper understandings about my life and relationships. As Plummer (2001, p. 185) states, through the use of narrative, “the multitude of fragmenting experiences that constitute our lives come to be patterned into some seeming sense of order.” Writing becomes “an ally and potential tool for furthering self-knowledge” (Hauser, 2009, p. 5). For me, this sense of order became the platform for transformative change.

**Arts-informed auto-ethnography**

My choice of methodology was rooted in the belief that research could be a transformational tool. As Reason and Marshall (1987, p. 112) claim, “the motivation to do research is personal and often expresses needs for personal development, change and learning.” This is reiterated by Gary Knowles (2001, p. 231) who writes, “researchers research what it is we need to know, both personally and professionally.” I wanted to incorporate this philosophy into my doctoral work. I felt a disconnect with traditional forms of research that impose distance between the researcher, the research, and the intended audience. Arts-informed auto-ethnography moves away from this disembodied academic paradigm in which research is a quest to know, evaluate, and label through “documenting pathology and suggesting remedies” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 141). Rather it is a search for goodness, a term Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (p. 142) describes as “a complex, holistic, dynamic concept that embraces imperfection and vulnerability.”

I was drawn to arts-informed auto-ethnography because it values accessibility, authenticity, and promotes the creation of research that is evocative, provocative and meaningful. Arts-informed research achieves this by acknowledging “the myriad ways of engaging with the world—oral, literal, visual, embodied” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 60). Incorporating arts into
research allows forms such as poetry, photography, or playwriting to contribute to the creation of knowledge. But as Cole and Knowles (p. 62) assert,

> The use of arts in research is not for art’s sake. It is explicitly tied to moral purposes of social responsibility and epistemological equity. Thus, the research text is intended to involve the reader/audience in an active process of meaning making that is likely to have transformative potential.

It is through the use of art that research activates and stimulates emotions, thoughts and ways of knowing.

When choosing a form for this work, I experimented with visual arts and drama, but I felt most competent and able to express myself with the written word. I gravitated towards the genre of creative non-fiction, interspersed with narrative, as a form in which to express an auto-ethnographic account of my life. Although auto-ethnography does not place an emphasis on aesthetic quality or form (Ellis & Boschner, 1996, p. 26), these qualities are a vital component of arts-informed research. When writing, I asked myself questions similar to those posed by Laurel Richardson (2000, p. 924), “How do we create texts that are vital? That are attended to? That make a difference?” How does writing shift from being used as a mode of “telling” to a mode of “knowing”? (p. 923). When trying to answer these questions I was influenced by the creative energy of Carl Leggo (2001, p. 185) who recants, “I want to seek and fire and grow the heart in my writing. Knowing is always there, I want to reveal it as there, pumping and bloody and life-giving.”

In arts-informed, auto-ethnographic research this knowing occurs through the text itself as the writer reveals a part of her life to the reader. This revelation is intentional and purposeful, with the goal of shifting a perception in the consciousness of the reader of the text. As Andrew C. Sparkes (2002, p. 221) asserts, “This focus on reader response encourages connection, empathy, and solidarity, as well as emancipatory moments in which powerful insights into the lived experiences of others are generated.” The strength of arts-informed auto-ethnography
lies in the vulnerability of the researcher and the intimacy this creates between the researcher, research, and audience.

**Vulnerability and ethics**

As Ellis and Boschner (1996, p. 25) explain, auto-ethnographies “make it possible to converse about previously silenced and unspeakable topics and prepare us to appreciate and deal more humanely with the diversity of human experience.” Auto-ethnography can be discomforting, as it can give voice to experiences that have historically been hidden, such as abuse or living with illness. This discomfort shows that readers are engaging with a text and are questioning their values and behaviour. It is an indicator of valuable social science research – “auto-ethnographers don’t want you to sit back as spectators; they want [you] to feel and care and desire” (p. 24).

While I can attest that unease and resistance to conflicting values can be a catalyst for change, my approach to vulnerability as a researcher is tempered by my ways of knowing in the world. I am telling a story about my life, but this story also includes other people. Even though I am writing from my perspective, and only my perspective, it is essential for me to retain the dignity of every person mentioned in my story. For instance, my willingness to be vulnerable should not impinge on the vulnerability of family members. The vulnerability of the auto-ethnographer is tied to ethical considerations of how people are portrayed in the research.

Carolyn Ellis (2007) refers to this as relational ethics: a standard of ethics that is not captured by institutional review boards, yet needs to be practiced by auto-ethnographers. She states that “relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations” (2007, p. 4). As a methodology, auto-ethnographic inquiry does not require that you share your work with the people you write about, although it is encouraged (p. 25).
Christine Kiesinger (2002, p. 111) struggles with this dilemma in an auto-ethnographic account of being physically abused as a child. She writes, “Although I feel that sharing this manuscript will help others understand and reframe their own abusive pasts, I fear that sharing it with my father will damage our current relationship in irreparable ways.” For Kiesinger, the benefit she derived from writing auto-ethnography outweighed the risks involved. By giving a voice to her past experience she was able to shift narratives that had governed her life and move away from her identification with a narrative of victimization. This was more significant than sharing her work with her father.

The apprehension of sharing auto-ethnographic work occurs because researchers may represent themselves and their relationships more truthfully in their written work than in their actual lives. As Ellis (2007) explains,

> Seldom are we completely open with people in our lives about how we see them or how we see ourselves relative to them. We often fear that those in our stories will be hurt by what we’ve revealed, how we’ve interpreted events or people, or how we ourselves feel (p. 17).

I have felt unease about my own work for these very reasons. To reconcile my own conflicting emotions I have chosen to write about those parts of my experience I am comfortable sharing with family members. I intend to share this account with them and facilitate dialogue about the themes and concerns that I address. It is my hope that by revealing myself I will encourage others to reveal themselves – cultivating a sense of connection and closeness.

By choosing auto-ethnography, and revealing parts of my life to readers, I open myself to criticism about how I lived my life, the choices and decisions I made, and how I performed my role as a mother / stepmother. While writing this account I became intimately aware of my own vulnerability as a researcher. I was so concerned about how I portrayed my family members, and potential discontent they might have with my work, that I forgot that I had a responsibility to protect myself as well. I opened up emotions and feelings that had been
carefully sealed in my consciousness. As Ruth Behar (1996, p. 13) asserts, “Writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly. I would say it takes greater skill.”

**Critiques, rigor and the search for goodness**

Discussions amongst scholars who practice auto-ethnography show that there is an awareness that, “autoethnographies and narratives of self (like any other form of representation)...can become self-indulgent rather than self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing or self-luminous” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 214). While writing auto-ethnographically can have therapeutic value for the writer, what moves it from a piece of writing for the self to a piece of research that generates or challenges existing knowledge is the value it brings to the reader, the interpreter of the text. This hinges on the ability of the researcher to “capture, probe, and render understandable problematic experience” (Denzin, 1989, p. 69). It has to go further than just telling the story of a life, and “transact” with the reader (Flemens & Green, 2002, p. 116), “they must be more than good stories…” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 66).

As Cole and Knowles (2008, p. 65) outline, “like all research, studies following arts-informed methodology must be subjected to scrutiny to assess, and perhaps help to explain, their worth or value as research.” Confusion arises when this research is judged by the same criteria as traditional academic research which values disembodied writing and more theoretical knowledge. According to Sparkes (2002, p. 224) it is imperative “to recognize differences and judge various genres accordingly, using appropriate criteria.” For arts-informed auto-ethnography this requires a shift from a rigid understanding of rigor – one that applies universal standards to all research – to a more fluid assessment of the goodness of individual research projects. Norman Denzin (2000, p. 24) explains, “we are in a new age where messy, uncertain, multivoiced texts, cultural criticisms, and new experimental works will become more common.”
Cole and Knowles (2001, pp. 126-127) provide guidance on how to judge alternative genres by outlining qualities of goodness in arts-informed research. They use the following eight criteria to critique this kind of work: (a) Intentionality – “an intellectual purpose and moral purpose”; (b) Research presence – how this presence is “implied and felt”; (c) Methodological commitment – “evidence of a principled process and procedural harmony”; (d) Holistic Quality – “an internal consistency and coherence” and a “high level of authenticity”; (e) Communicability – the “accessibility of the research account, usually through the form and language in which it is written”; (f) Aesthetic form – “aesthetic quality of the research project and its aesthetic appeal”; (g) Knowledge claims – “must reflect the multidimensional, complex, dynamic, intersubjective, and contextual nature of the human experience”; and (h) Contributions – the research must have “theoretical potential and transformative potential.”

Creating new ways of knowing

Arts-informed auto-ethnographies have the potential to make valuable contributions to knowledge production because they open up new ways of knowing for the reader, as well as the writer. The self-reflexivity, honesty and authenticity of the writer are crucial components in creating meaningful auto-ethnography. Atkinson (1995, p. 14) outlines, “self-reflection enhances and expands our experience. It can add greater meaning to the experience we have already had…the more we reflect on what has happened, or how we feel, the clearer it all becomes.” I found this clarity through writing an arts-informed auto-ethnography because it released me from emotional blockages I associated with past memories of family experiences. The dissolution of these blockages enabled me to examine my life in a much wider context, and feel greater empathy and compassion for my family members.

As Kiesinger (2002, p. 108) notes, in this process of narrative reframing, “we look for the ways in which our life problems and dissatisfactions are linked to a story that may not be serving
us well. We look analytically at the narratives that shape our lives and ponder their power and value.” Auto-ethnography cultivates a space for narrative reframing as the researcher delves into their memory of past events to make meaning of confusing, harmful or traumatic experiences. Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 119) point out, “the stories we remember and tell about our lives reflect who we are, how we see ourselves, and perhaps, how we wish to be seen.” Through the process of writing auto-ethnographic research I had to assess how I wanted to be seen and how I wanted to represent the story of my life. I came to new ways of knowing through the process of writing.

The depth and breadth of the storied texts associated with auto-ethnographic research underscores its usefulness by bringing forth greater meaning and understanding about the complexity of the human condition. This is expressed in Karen V. Lee’s (2008) work “White Whispers,” an auto-ethnographic work which reveals the confusion and pain associated with racism and the contradictions present in Canada – a country that embraces multiculturalism yet also breeds intolerance. Claudio Moreira’s (2008) research “Fragments and Life in So Many Acts” depicts the struggle inherent in establishing values and perspectives that will define his identity and reputation in his academic career. Christopher N. Poulos (2008) uses auto-ethnography to disclose how family secrets can be debilitating for the collective consciousness of a family.

Arts-informed research is not necessarily auto-ethnographic but through the use of creative expression, the researcher draws the reader into their work, evoking feelings and a sense of connection with the reader. This is shown in research such as Teresa Luciani’s (2006) On Women’s Domestic Work and Knowledge: Growing Up In An Italian Kitchen, which reveals how the kitchen is a site of both knowledge and contention for a mother and her daughter. Sharon Sbrocchi’s (2005) research Remembering Place: Domicide and a Childhood Home uses an arts-informed approach to tell a story about displacement, injustice, and losing a sense of home. Lois Kunkel (2000) and Brenda Brown (2000) delve into the arts to reveal often silenced stories about childhood sexual abuse. All of these theses, and many others, use an artful approach to
create texts that are aesthetically pleasing, intellectually appropriate, and accessible.

Arts-informed, auto-ethnographic research is a transformative methodological tool because it fosters an epistemological shift for the researcher as well as the reader. By sharing experiences that expose vulnerability and evoke feeling, both researcher and reader are infused with a wider perspective on that experience.
Theory and Literature
The theories that we individually hold are not happenstance. They develop from the meanings we have derived from ordered and casual experience and theories of others that we hear and see articulated…Such theories as these that we come to hold as our own are, invariably, personal.

(Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 46)
I link arms with my friend as we walk through the crowd. A cool breeze comes off the lake and brushes our bare shoulders. I feel intoxicated with the freedom of summer. We meander around the harbourfront, lazily, taking in the sights and smells of the summer marketplace. The many booths entice me to try on silver jewellery, cotton print Indian shirts and wrap dresses. My phone vibrates in my purse. I check to see a call coming in from home.

“Hello?”

My daughter’s angelic voice.

“Hi, Mommy. When are you coming home?”

“Honey, I just left the house a little while ago.”

“I know, but I want you to give me a back scratch before bed,” she says, hopefully.

“You want me to come home to give you a back scratch?”

“Yes.”

Her reply is sheepish and we both laugh.

“Honey, I’m not coming back until after bedtime.” My voice is soothing but firm.
“Please come home soon, okay?”
“Sure, but go to bed.”
“Okay, I love you, Mommy.”
“I love you too, sweetie.”

We hang up and I feel a pang of longing in my heart. I look over at my friend and she responds with a knowing smile.

Suddenly, cheering erupts from the outdoor stage.

“The band must have come on!”

She talks excitedly as she leads me towards the stage.

“I saw this band perform in Brazil and they were amazing!”

Her enthusiasm envelops me, and I start to cheer along with her. The lead singer of the band addresses the crowd.

“How are you, Toronto!”

The crowd roars back with delight. The music gathers momentum – responding to the energy of the audience. I start to dance, feeling the joy of movement in my body. My friend gives me a nudge.

“How do you still miss your kids?”

I laugh heartily and shake my head as I clap my hands and stomp my feet.

Mothering, agency and empowerment

This research account is constructed upon a theoretical foundation that draws extensively from a personal experience and understanding that hope and adversity are intertwined. My lived experience as a mother and stepmother demonstrates how these two opposing forces are intricately linked to one another. The presence of both hope and adversity in my life propelled
spiritual growth, personal transformation, and the strengthening of personal agency. Drawing on research relating to women’s power and agency, empowered mothering, and maternal theory, I outline how mothering can be a site of transformative change and empowerment even though it is encapsulated in societal norms and perspectives that devalue women’s work and experiences.

Jean Baker Miller (1992, p. 241) defines power as “the capacity to produce a change.” This change can involve “acting to create movement in an interpersonal field as well as acting in larger realms such as economic, social or political arenas.” In this way, the expression of power takes place internally through shifts in emotions or thoughts, or is demonstrated in public settings such as the workplace. However, as Baker explains, not all power is recognized or granted legitimacy. Women have historically held roles as caretakers and nurturers yet were deemed to have little or no power. She states that nurturing holds significant power because it involves fostering the “growth of another on many levels – emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually” (p. 242).

Marie Porter draws on the work of Miller and applies it to the context of mothering. She uses the term “transformative power” to describe the power held by a mother who “must nurture in a way that grows the child into an independent and responsible adult with full power over her or his life” (Porter, 2005, p. 183). Transformative power captures this evolution in the relationship between the mother and her child,

The complexity is expressed in the aim that is to eventually make the power relationship redundant; in the constant fluidity of the power relationship that is present in daily life, and even more so over the years; and in the effects it has on both the mother and the child (p. 183).

This capacity to exert power manifests despite obstacles and hardships that a mother may face. In Porter’s study of Australian women who mothered children in the 1950s and 1960s, women were subjected to societal and religious pressures to conform to certain roles and depictions
of motherhood. These included: not using birth control, being financially dependent on their husbands, and being stay-at-home mothers.

Porter (2005) found that mothers “used power, in the form of resistance or creativity, to cope with the constraints that limited their choices and circumscribed their lives” (p. 184). They exerted their power through their enactment of agency during “significant shifts” and “persistent processes.” She describes significant shifts as “events that resulted in rapid change” and required a “rapid growth in agency,” such as childbirth, the death of a child, or the illness of a loved one (p. 186). Persistent processes refers to “changes that were more gradual because the processes were recurring tasks that developed and honed agency over time,” such as learning to care for a new baby (pp. 188-189). This access to agency led to the mothers in Porter’s study viewing themselves as having some measure of will and determination over their lives despite facing heavy pressure about how they should live.

Significant shifts and persistent processes informed the development of my own agency. Entering into a cross-cultural marriage, becoming a stepmother, becoming a birth mother, and meeting a spiritual teacher were significant shifts, producing epiphanies that challenged my sense of agency and propelled me to make important changes in my life. Yet it was the more subtle and persistent processes – such as learning to nurture and care for children and stepchildren, finding balance between work and family, and incorporating a spiritual practice into my daily life – that strengthened my sense of agency. This strengthening occurred because I became more cognizant of the values I wanted to implement in my life, the relationships that were important to me, and the need to take care of myself.

Like the women in Porter’s (2005) study, I cultivated this sense of agency despite being in a circumstance some may interpret as oppressive. I was the mother and stepmother of four children, had almost complete financial dependence on my husband, and held responsibility for the majority of caregiving and nurturing. Yet, because I expressed my agency, instead
of continuing a pattern in which I felt victimized, mothering became a site of personal transformation and growth rather than a site of domestic oppression. I made a shift from being constrained by pressure to fulfill the role of the “good mother” or “good stepmother,” and started making decisions about my life that contributed to my own and my family’s well-being. I became empowered.

Andrea O’Reilly (2004) emphasizes the importance of empowered mothering for retaining a mother’s sense of self. She states that patriarchal motherhood pressures women to practice intensive mothering in order to be a “good mother.” This intensive mothering makes strident demands on mothers, expecting them to always put the needs of the family before their own, be the primary caregivers for their children, and find complete fulfillment in mothering. As O’Reilly states,

> Each demand is predicated on the eradication or, at the very least, sublimination of mother’s own selfhood; in particular her agency, autonomy, authenticity and authority. The discourse of intensive mothering becomes oppressive not because children have needs, but because we, as a culture, dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them” (p. 11).

Through undermining a mother’s sense of self, patriarchal motherhood creates a circumstance in which a mother loses her own sense of agency, “it assigns mothers all the responsibility for mothering but gives them no real power from which to mother” (p. 11).

Empowered mothering counters the dominant ideology about how women should mother by putting the emphasis on mothering from a point of agency, autonomy, authenticity and authority (O’Reilly, 2004). As O’Reilly contends, “empowered mothers see the development of a mother’s selfhood as beneficial to mothering and not antithetical to it as is assumed in patriarchal motherhood” (p. 14). Empowered mothers have a consciousness about how the pressure to be a “good mother” hinders the development of meaningful relationships with their children, and affects the fulfillment and joy that can be attained from the mothering experience. By resisting the pressure to be a “good mother,” mothers still provide nurturing and caregiving
but do so from a place which acknowledges selfhood instead of denying or belittling it. In this way the power Jean Baker Miller (1992) and Marie Porter (2005, 2008) describe as being embedded in nurturing and caregiving cultivates a mother’s agency, autonomy, authenticity and authority.

It is only with a strong sense of self that a mother can even be aware of her needs and wants. Through cultivating a consciousness about mothering / stepmothering, I shifted circumstances and made changes that transformed my experience of mothering from repressing my own needs and denying myself care into a situation in which I found empowerment. Although my circumstances did not change very much – I was still dependent on my husband financially and did a larger share of nurturing and caregiving – my sense of self was stronger. I pulled away from subscribing to the pressure to be a good mother or good stepmother, and valued myself and the attributes I could offer as a mother. In becoming attuned to my own needs and wants, I have been brought closer to my children and the rest of the family. I do not view mothering / stepmothering as a circumstance that is distressing – although it may be challenging and difficult at times. Rather, I see the potential it holds for personal growth and transformation, and the cultivation of a deeper spiritual knowing about life.

**Literature that informed my work**

The literature I chose to include in this research project contributed in some way to the central theme: that hope and adversity are woven into the experience of mothering and stepmothering, and that this experience can lead to personal insights and spiritual understanding. I accessed literature that highlighted or contrasted points made in the auto-ethnographic account (Chapters One through Seven) and thereby bridged my experience as a mother and stepmother with the work of other mothers, academics, and spiritual practitioners. Due to the nature of the topic, I wanted to bring the voices of mothers and stepmothers to the forefront. As much
as possible, I chose works composed by women.

I dipped into many different disciplines in order to find appropriate and relevant literature. I drew from diverse research on topics such as second-generation South Asian women and identity (Handa, 2003; Thiagarajan, 2007), psychology (Hendrix & Hunt, 2005; Lerner, 1995, 1998, 2005), women's health (Northrup, 2005, 2006) and Sikh studies (Singh, 1993), with the majority of citations from literature about mothering, stepmothering, and spiritual practice. Initially I was overwhelmed by the plethora of scholarship that was related to my research topic, especially in the field of mothering. I read about mothering from many different vantage points and voices – memoir (Erdrich, 2005; Fox, 2003), self-help (Aishworth & Noble, 2007; Roy, 2007), maternal theory (O’Reilly, 2007), and poetry (Dunlop, 2007) in forms such as journals, books, articles, online zines, print magazines and blogs. I soon became savvy to the literature and where to find it.

I read many books on mothering that I have not cited earlier, such as Slacker Mom (Mead-Farro, 2005), or The Three Martini Playdate (Mellor, 2004). Both books speak frankly and openly about mothering, and offer alternative perspectives on mothering, but they did not resonate with me. I wanted literature that deeply examined the mothering experience as a point of contestation between the mother and her way of knowing, and how this serves as a catalyst for deeper introspection. In my circumstance, it was the fuel that propelled me onto a spiritual path. I found this in maternal theory largely published in edited works by Andrea O’Reilly and the Association for Research on Mothering at York University (De Marneffe, 2007; Middleton, 2006; O’Reilly, 2004, 2006, 2007), and in books written on spiritual mothering (Kramer, 2003; Linthorst, 1993).

The literature on stepmothering was more elusive because there was significantly less written on stepmothering than mothering. Despite this the literature was invaluable for me because it validated my experience as a stepmother. I resonated with the struggles faced by other
stepmothers and their isolation, frustration, and anger. This literature showed me that my experience was not entirely unique, and that stepmothering is a hard and arduous journey for many women. This was demonstrated by some of the references I came across that were almost 20 years old (Morinis, 1986; Papernow, 1988; McGoldrick & Carter, 1989). Despite the age of the texts the experience of the stepmothers was still very similar to mine. The work of Sue Patton Thoele (1999) *The Courage to be a Stepmother*, and Hugh and Gayle Prather’s *Spiritual Parenting* (1996) stood out for me because they wrote about consciously turning to spiritual guidance for support while trying to understand the stepmothering experience.

Regarding spiritual mothering and stepmothering, I often cite work written by mothers who embraced Buddhism or Christianity. This was not intentional. These two faith groups have published the most work in this area that fit my criteria. It was important to me that the writing was not dogmatic or alluding to the superiority of one religion over another. I did not want to perpetuate a concept of faith that was tied to a religion. I wanted to highlight faith as an inner guidance that gave direction on how to accept and overcome obstacles in life, and live in harmony and connection with others. The books I cite on spiritual mothering such as *Momma Zen* (Miller, 2006) and *Your Children Will Raise You* (Steinberg, 2005) do just that.

The literature I reference on spiritual practice draws significantly from Buddhist teachings and Eastern spirituality. This was more intentional because the literature on spirituality is so expansive, and could have taken me in many different directions. In this sphere, as well, I chose literature that highlighted spirituality versus dogma in order to illustrate how a spiritual practice can be transformative. Books such as *The Handbook of the Spirit* (Carlson & Shield, 1997) and *Faith* (Salzberg, 2002) were very useful and relevant sources. The literature has played a valuable role in linking my experience with a greater body of work written about similar experiences.
**Contribution to literature**

This research project is a unique and valuable contribution to literature on mothering and stepmothering because it brings together a wide range of research on this topic. By merging together work on stepmothering, empowered mothering, and unconscious mothering with work on spirituality, mindfulness, and creative expression it is hoped that this research project will generate discussion on new ways to approach and understand the hardship and struggle that is embedded within the mothering and stepmothering experience. This project will further this discussion by enhancing the literature in the following distinct areas:

**A. Empowered Mothering**

This auto-ethnographic account provides a real-life example of how empowered mothering can be practiced within the context of a cross-cultural stepfamily. My use of narrative and short stories allows the reader to catch a glimpse of my life, and most importantly follow my process as I struggle to regain and rebuild my selfhood. This work complements maternal theory (O’Reilly, 2004, 2006, 2007), because it demystifies how theory is translated into real life action.

**B. StepMothering**

While certain themes in my research validate earlier claims made by stepmothers on themes such as guilt, confusion, anger, and divided loyalties, my work provides an account of the complexity of raising adolescent stepchildren in a cross-cultural home environment. This builds upon the small body of research on cross-cultural stepmothering (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989; Stewart, 2007) by showing what struggles may arise within a cross-cultural stepfamily, and how difficult it can be to truly respect and understand differing cultural norms and values.
c. South Asian Mothering

This work is pivotal in bringing the experiences of South Asian mothers living in the diaspora to the forefront. There is a small body of research on South Asian mothers, but much of the research has been conducted in Britain and the United States with South Asian women who have South Asian husbands (Bhopal, 1998; Katbamna, 2000). Similarly, research with South Asian stepmothers in the diaspora is also conducted with women who have married within the same culture. This research account is one of the first that delves into the experiences of a South Asian mother and stepmother living in cross-cultural family environment.

d. Spiritual Mothering and Stepmothering

This research contributes to the literature by showing how spiritual understandings can be incorporated into the daily life of a mother/stepmother. This work will enrich the literature already written on this topic by sharing my experience of personal growth and transformation as a stepmother (Hathaway, 2005; Huber & Guyol, 2004). It also highlights the spiritual teachings of Mangala Anshumati, a mystic, mother and stepfamily member, who has demonstrated a sincere commitment to spiritual exploration and teaching since 1970. This account is the first publication that draws upon her teachings, which integrate Eastern spiritual philosophies into contemporary Western life.

e. Women’s Health and Healing

This research project shows how mothers can easily neglect their needs in pursuance of societal and family expectations to perform as the “good mother.” It illuminates how mothers justify this neglect and why they continue to subscribe to roles and expectations that harm themselves. This work demonstrates how healing can only occur when women regain and strengthen their sense of self. This perspective may be useful to researchers looking for further insight on women’s health and healing.
F. ARTS-INFORMED AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

This project adds to the body of work that employs arts-informed research and auto-ethnographic perspectives. It will provide another example of how knowledge production can occur in alternative forms to mainstream academic discourse. It is hoped that this work will inspire and motivate academic researchers to produce work that is meaningful to them, while offering deeper insight on human relationships and interactions in the world.

Future research projects

My ideas for future research are varied and stem from my experiences as a mother and the process of developing this research account. They are as follows:

a. South Asian mothering

I am interested in exploring how the ideologies, patterns and perspectives of South Asian mothers change over generations. I am curious about how the immigrant experience has influenced second-generation mothers but, also, on how it has changed my mother’s generation and their values. I seek to answer questions on what “South Asian” means to mothers, how they are affected by Western interpretations of the “good mother,” and their perceptions of agency and selfhood.

b. Empowered Mothering

The quest for agency is a central theme in maternal theory and research on empowered mothering, and is also represented in this research project. Yet I am aware that the concept of what agency means, and how it is represented, is elusive. Agency shifts according to factors such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, with this shift being more pronounced when we change geographic location. I am curious to know how this shift of agency occurs for South Asian mothers when they migrate but also when they do not. A future research project will examine what agency
means for South Asian mothers here in Canada but also in their countries of birth.

**C. Women’s Health and Healing:**

Another idea is to explore the linkages between women’s health, healing, and the cultivation of agency. I am interested in the experiences of mothers – especially mothers who are juggling mothering and stepmothering – who neglect themselves while they care for and nurture their families. I want to look more deeply at how women have been socialized to put the needs of others before them – with disregard for their own care – by probing into the following questions: (a) how women develop ideas about nurturing and caregiving; (b) what are the consequences faced by mothers who engage in self-neglect; (c) is there a consciousness among mothers about the consequences of self-neglect; (d) what are the circumstances that propel mothers to regain their selfhood; (e) how do mothers strive to heal themselves.

**D. Spirituality and Mothering:**

Linked to the research question on women’s health and healing is the role that spirituality plays with mothers in recapturing a sense of selfhood. I am interested in conversing with mothers for whom spirituality has been a source of empowerment and inquiring into the circumstances that made them turn to spirituality, how this new insight was perceived by their family and themselves, and how they have implemented spiritual understandings into their lives.

**E. Mothers and the Public Education System:**

In my experience, mothers are the backbone of the public education system through volunteer labour – assisting in the classroom, setting up fundraisers, and contributing to extra-curricular activities. I would like to probe into why mothers extend nurturing and caregiving to their children’s school, how the impetus to be the “good mother” extends into public settings, and the consequences of this practice on mothers.
A Reflection on Process
A good story allows us to wrestle with our demons, dance with our angels, make plans with our inner guide, and ultimately connect with our soul. Through this kind of soulful expression we come to terms with our own experience, our own life, in relation to others.

(Atkinson, 1995, p. 5)
A Reflection on Process

Her hands are shaking and her fingers clench the paper she is reading. She speaks haltingly, taking a heavy breath after the distressing sentences. I wish I had her courage. She reads her last sentence and looks up timidly at the other women in the memoir writing class. We respond with gentle smiles and reassuring nods. Reading her story aloud seems to have purged her of guilt and shame. After a few silent moments, the facilitator brings closure to her reading.

“Thank you so much for that reading.”

The facilitator introduces the next exercise.

“This is going to be another timed write. We will write for ten minutes this time. Finish the sentence ‘I would like to write about…’”

I prepare my book on my lap, pick up my pen, and sit there absently trying to find a way to finish the sentence. I start to write a sentence, then scratch it out. I write another and scratch that out too. I make excuses to myself.

“Too personal.”
“You want to tell other people THAT?!”

“No, no, no.”

I need courage to surpass my internal censor. The emotions of the last reading linger in the air: a sense of vulnerability and openness pervades the room. A memory floods into my consciousness and I start to write, pushing past a wall of insecurity. The feelings associated with the memory – humiliation, loneliness, isolation – gather intensity, and my hand writes faster and faster. I hear the facilitator make a gentle suggestion.

“Time to start wrapping up your last thoughts.”

I finish up my final sentence, filled with a sense of relief. The facilitator scans the room and smiles.

“Does anybody want to read their work?”

Nobody responds. My mouth starts to open but I shut it. She looks right at me.

“Jasjit?”

I reluctantly nod my head. I hold my paper up, trying to decipher my frenzied handwriting. My face starts to flush as I utter the first few words, and my voice shakes. I pause, take a deep breath, and continue.

“I want to write about the time I was made to feel small in my own home…”

Tears stream down my cheeks as I share this hurtful memory with the class. I am surprised at my own vulnerability, but thankful to release the story.

**Why mothering / stepmothering**

I did not fall into this field of research naturally. I started a Doctoral degree fully intent on doing fieldwork in India, researching the use of free software in community media labs that were set up in marginalized areas of New Delhi. It would be an extension of my Master’s degree and a predictable path on a linear trajectory of scholarship. I visited India for research purposes the
summer after my first year of doctoral studies and established contacts and research partners in New Delhi. That summer, my work received praise and encouragement from colleagues in both India and Toronto. When I returned to school in the Fall I was brimming with pride and enthusiasm for my research.

Then I took a course that shifted my perceptions of what I could do as an academic: it opened up possibilities for research never considered before. The course, taught by Dr. Ardra Cole, was an introduction to art-informed research methods, exploring how the arts can be integrated into academic research. I watched with awe as students gave presentations using forms that touched me more deeply than conventional academic research. One student showed a quilt she made that depicted the guilt, sadness and love intertwined with caregiving of the elderly. Another student read a story that shared her heartache upon discovering that she was unable to conceive. I was drawn into the emotions and struggles of the presentations and often found my eyes welling up with tears. There was a safety and openness in the classroom that made the institutional space in which it was situated more humane, more real.

At the same time that I was altering my perceptions of academic research I was diving deeper into my spiritual practice. I had more of an intentionality surrounding my practice – I wanted to shift patterns that were causing unhappiness and strained relationships in the family. As I have expressed in my auto-ethnography, in the earlier chapters of this text, this was a time of turmoil in my personal life. By attending satsanga and retreats, and developing a closer relationship with my spiritual teacher, I attained the courage to make real changes in my life. Initially, I kept this part of my life separated from my academic work. But over time, this separation between personal and academic life became impossible to uphold. I had a story to tell about my experiences as a mother and stepmother and that story overshadowed everything else in my life. By opening the door to possibilities for personal growth I was greeted with life circumstances that pushed me along an arc of transformative change.
It became harder and harder for me to sit in stoic academic environments in which emotions, life experiences, and vulnerability were unwelcome. My research project, which I had lovingly crafted and coddled, lost its relevancy in the midst of more profound changes that were occurring in my life. I began to seek new ways to approach educational inquiry and challenge embedded notions of how knowledge is constructed. I knew my life experiences were altering my perceptions of the world, and I wanted to find a way to validate these experiences in academia. Trips to the library became a scavenger hunt as I sought out arts-informed dissertations and books on alternative methodologies. When the stack of books became too heavy, I sat down on the carpeted floor of the library and leafed through them, captivated.

These courses and readings exposed me to a community of scholars – both in my department and in other universities – who brought lived experiences into their academic research. A similar community was fostered in my own department among graduate students who were choosing arts-informed research methods. Finding supportive peers was crucial in sustaining my new outlook towards academic research. Just like in my personal life, once I made a decision, there was no turning back – I decided to change the topic of my research.

My choice to do so had consequences. In the process of reinventing myself as a scholar I felt distanced from colleagues I had worked with for many years. Our research interests were so varied that there was little room for collaboration. Although this shifted over time, it was a lonely period for me as I left behind familiar academic traditions, approaches, and methodologies and traversed a new path. In the midst of this confusion, I faced a new obstacle. My writing was too constrained. I was so used to quoting, reciting and integrating the words of other scholars that I did not know my own voice.
Lorri Neilsen (1998) clarifies why women struggle to find their voice. She writes, “Because male, public discourse has traditionally been valued more highly in academia, women who choose to speak, and speak intimately, have learned to be self-conscious about their desire to be authors of their own words and their own lives” (p. 9). This self-consciousness has consequences for women, “when we speak, when our voice – finally – rises above the malestream, we, ourselves, tend not to hear it” (p. 9). This translated into me doubting my abilities and struggling to find a creative flow within myself. In the first class I took on creative writing, coming up with a story to tell was torturous. The teacher gave the class a writing prompt using a line from a poem or book, or showed a photograph to the class and asked them to write their reaction to the image. I quickly ran out of things to write about and shriveled in my seat so I would not be asked to share my work.

But I persisted. I read books on how to write that guided me to “show, not tell,” practice writing everyday, and be patient. I found inspiration in the words of Natalie Goldberg (2000, p. 44) who described writing as a form of meditation. She wrote, “A writer’s path includes concentration, slowing down, commitment, awareness, loneliness and faith, a breakdown of ordinary perceptions—the same qualities attributed to monks or Zen masters.” So, I took more writing classes with different teachers – finding my niche in a memoir writing class for women. It was a space in which it was okay – in fact, even expected – that students would write about the harsher aspects of life as they uprooted old storylines. In this space, my creative process flourished. The stories I wrote and shared became more personal, more eloquent, more telling of my life as a woman, a mother and a stepmother.

Renfro (n.d.) ponders the possibility of being a mother and a writer in her essay “Mother Muteness: Writing My Way Out of Silence”:
To be a woman and to write: this is one thing. To be a mother and to write: this is another. To be a woman and a mother and to write and to faithfully express not just human experience but specifically a woman's/mother's experience: could it be done?

How I personally experienced my story as a mother, and how I expressed this story publicly, was a constant consideration in my mind. I resolved this confusion by following a writer's teaching suggestion that writing had two components: closed-door writing that was strictly for personal consumption, and open-door writing: to be shared with others. Following this process enabled me to hash out messy or thorny aspects of mothering and stepmothering without worrying about representation or accountability. This enabled me to write without censoring myself because I had no intention of sharing it with others. Most importantly, it helped me to find my voice.

Whenever I reached an impasse in my writing, or felt discouraged, I heard a familiar mantra from my supervisor and peers who were engaged in arts-informed research. I had to let go and “trust the process.”

**Trusting the process**

Trusting the process meant accepting ambiguity and uncertainty as I toiled on developing my writing style and my voice while also deciphering the themes and storyline of my work. As Cole outlines (2001, p. 299), “honouring the creative process is an essential element of writing inquiry.” Integral to this is cultivating a creative space that includes “physical space, temporal space, and mental space” (p. 297). I tried to do this by finding time to write, regularly, even though I was not sure where it would lead. One summer, in the early stages of thesis writing, I spent hours in the air-conditioned comfort of the library. I wrote about anything and everything that was on my mind – mainly short stories and reflections on my life as a mother and stepmother. In the fall, when the crisp autumn air signaled a return to classes, I presented
colleagues and advisor with my stack of writing.

That stack of writing came to define the themes of my chapters and served as the backbone of my storyline. It was a serendipitous moment. The fog that had been clouding my understanding of how to proceed with my research cleared up to reveal a pristine blue sky. Prior to that summer, I had spent months and months writing and re-writing more formal thesis proposals – yet I was never able to capture the essence of my research vision. By giving myself space to write, without expectations or attachments to deadlines and grades, I was freed intellectually and able to unveil a deeper part of my experience.

Through trusting the process, I embarked on a life-changing journey, one that influenced my perceptions as an academic and my life as a woman and a mother. I have a greater understanding of how struggles in my life influenced my behaviour, perceptions of others, and care for myself. This awareness of my emotions, actions and needs has made me more forgiving of my mistakes and the mistakes of others. This in turn has been beneficial for all my relationships. For me, engaging in arts-informed research has been “transformational in process and possibilities” (Sameshina & Knowles, 2008, p. 108).
APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS


Mangala Anshumati is my spiritual teacher and a powerful source of inspiration on my mothering journey. Since 1970, Mangala Anshumati has given thousands of spontaneous, inspirational talks. In 1986, during a year-long, solitary meditation retreat, she experienced a powerful awakening which she refers to as the Samadhi of the Heart, an experience of higher consciousness that connected her to all of Life. This event ultimately led her to the presence of the enlightened philosopher, author and humanist, Srinivas Arka. With gratitude for his guidance and inspiration, Mangala Anshumati continues to expand her teaching by meeting with people and publishing her written and recorded talks.

ASHRAM

Shram – hard work or austerity
Ashraya – protection, refuge, retreat
Literal Translation: house of God.

An ashram is a community formed for the intention of spiritual practice and mutual support which is often headed by a spiritual leader or mystic. In an ashram we live under the roof of the idea that this space is where we live as spiritual beings, and everyone is here to be our teacher and reflect us back to ourselves.
**Darshana**

*Literal Translation:* Sight, in the light. Auspicious audience with a sage or enlightened teacher.

When we look at the sun, we not only see the light of the sun, but also experience that light and are affected by it. Beholding the “Light” of *darshana* means we are influenced by the sight or presence of a liberated being who inspires us by their living example of positive, loving energy. Their eyes, touch, voice and smile convey this message of Love. Their image, words and deeds provide a lasting impression of their spiritual transformation.

**Devotee**

A devotee is one who loves a particular person or philosophy that resonates with their own unique consciousness. This source of inspiration lifts the devotee beyond their ordinary expression to lead a life of greater love, service and joy.

**Guru**

*Gu* – dispeller  
*Ru* – of darkness  
*Literal Translation:* bringing light to darkness. A spiritual teacher or preceptor.

A Guru is one who is a living example of Self-Realization, and who has dedicated their life to giving personal instruction to others on how to attain Liberation. By their example they inspire all people to live in peace, love and freedom.

**Karma Yoga**

*Karma* – action  
*Yoga* – from *yuj* meaning to unite, join or connect.

Karma Yoga is the spiritual path of union with the Higher Self, brought about by performing selfless actions or service dedicated to God. In true Karma Yoga, every action is performed
with a deep commitment to being conscious of the Spiritual Self within one’s own self, and in others, in every moment. This yoga can be practiced continuously in the midst of ordinary daily life. As we work and serve others, the exaggerated sense of ego is washed away and our natural humility is revealed beneath.

**Kirtan**

Kirtan was first performed in India as a way to make sacred scriptures and knowledge accessible to illiterate masses during the *Bhakti* movement – a religious movement that took place in India between 800 A.D. and 1700 A.D. and embodied a practice of “attachment or fervent adoration to God” (Sikhnet, 2009). *Kirtan* can be sung in a call and response manner: the kirtan-leader sings a phrase and the *satsanga* repeats the phrase. However, a call-and-response pattern is not common in Sikh *kirtan*. The *satsanga* often sings along with the *kirtan*-leader (Sangha, 2009).

Since ancient times, people have gathered around a fire to sing together in celebration of community and to elevate the human spirit to the Divine. In singing *kirtan*, we imitate this natural way by focusing our active minds upon the rhythmic sounds and beautiful melodies until we are effortlessly drawn into a deep state of meditation.

**Meditation**

Meditation is a natural, progressive spiritual practice in which one’s attention is focused upon one object, action or idea for the purpose of attaining peace and knowledge.

There are no English words that exactly represent what real meditation is. It begins with concentration (*Dharana*), moves towards steadily flowing intuitive contemplation (*Dhyana*), and culminates in the Higher Conscious State (*Samadhi*) which leads to Super Consciousness.
Meditation begins with an attempt to sit in quiet stillness, which paradoxically informs us of the incessant activity of our minds. Everything which is unknown about oneself gradually becomes known, and finally leads to the experience of Self-Realization and Mastery. The Self that we Realize as our own is, in Reality, the Self of All Life. This journey moves us from the mind, to the body, to the heart, and then to Consciousness. The power of our realization sends waves of love through our own being, to our family, to our community, and out into the world.

**Pranayama**

*Prana* – vital life energy  
*Ayama* – expansion

When the breath moves, the mind also moves. When we calm the breath, the mind becomes concentrated. A regular practice of *pranayama* lengthens and slows the breath, resulting in an accumulation of vital *prana*, which prepares the mind to dive deeply into meditation.

Children ages 3 -12 can practice *pranayama* regularly, provided they make the choice to do so freely, and are taught by a trained and experienced instructor. Learning these techniques only from a book is not recommended.

**Satsanga**

*Sat* – truth  
*Sangha* – community  
*Literal Translation*: good company; association with the real.

When we gather together for *satsanga*, we are consciously choosing to live from the highest truth with each other. It is ultimately a commitment to live with respect, humility and cooperation, and to love others as we love ourselves.
SELF

In spiritual philosophies, the lower conditional self or ego is differentiated from the higher Spiritual Self. That Self has the nature of Satchitananda (Sat: Existence; Chit: Consciousness; and Ananda: Bliss). The small self is what we accumulate, and the greater Self is our pristine original state.

Self-knowledge is true, indispensable, core knowledge that will affect every level of your being, and every aspect of your life.

UPASANA CEREMONY

Literal Translation: to sit near. It is synonymous with meditation.

This ceremony is a form of worship or contemplation upon a deity or an aspect of nature, for the purpose of becoming close to or conscious of the presence of God.

Mangala Anshumati does not perform ceremonies for religious reasons, but occasionally as a simple and beautiful way to engage the mind, senses and awareness in the practice of yogic concentration.

YOGINI

A Yogini is a female who practices Yoga or has realized unity with the Self. (Yogi is the masculine term).

An initiate vows to live a spiritual life that consists of constant Dhyana (meditation), Asteya (honesty, non-stealing), Satya (truthfulness), Aparigraha (abstinence from gambling and drugs), Bramacharya (integrity and restraint in intimate relationships), Abimsa (non-violence, harmlessness) and Ishvarapranidhana (serviceful surrender to God or higher Consciousness).
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