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NAME OF AUTHOR:

Heather Margaret Mattson McCrady

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THE HEART-WAY OF KNOWING:
A NARRATIVE REVIEW
OF CONTEMPORARY MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

A THESIS

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THE FACULTY AND
THE MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES PROGRAM COMMITTEE
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MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES
By

Heather Mattson McCrady

Edmonton, Alberta

DEDICATION

To all mystics past, present and future.

ABSTRACT

Mystical experiences are often dismissed in the western Christian tradition, where objectivity has taken precedence over personal experience of union with the divine. This research explores the questions: “What is the experience of spiritual seekers today of the ‘heart-way of knowing’? How does mystical experience impact one’s ‘knowing’, faith, and personal expressions in the world?

Through a narrative form of inquiry, the contemporary spiritual experiences and journeys of four women and three men were explored. Key elements of their experiences and resulting impacts on their faith journey were synthesized from personal interviews. Allowing these key elements to resonate with the mystics of the past and current authors has provided a unique opportunity to witness and bring to words the contemporary nature of what I have called, ‘the heart way of knowing’.

Mystical experiences, while uniquely personal, are similar across time. They are transformative moments resulting in significant personal shifts in understanding of self, relationships, faith, commonly held beliefs and societal constructs. Faith communities are challenged to grow in their capacity to recognize and nurture the personal, communal, social and cultural nature of mystical experience. Having these experiences validated and allowed to resonate in our lives is important.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In our western Christian tradition, objectivity has taken precedence over mystical consciousness. It has caused mistrust of individual experiences of union with the divine. As a result we have lost our aptitude for and ability to recognize this way of knowing the divine. These experiences are most often dismissed and the wisdom they hold is missed or not expressed in its fullness. In many fields today (ecology, theology, feminism, social justice) we hear echoed the need for reconnecting with a deeper communion within the sacred whole in order to discover new approaches to our world's issues. Individuals are leaving organized church communities, yet we hear of their spiritual hunger. We long for new solutions to our personal and world issues yet we remain frustrated with our own personal and societal limits.

My own experience reflects these yearnings and patterns of our times. It was the wisdom of a spiritual director that caught my hesitancy to share a personal mystical experience of the divine that helped me recognize the importance of allowing this divine expression to resonate through my life and into the world. As a result my faith has taken on a whole new dimension, has deepened, and I've made subtle yet significant shifts in my approach to life. My journey has now, unexpectedly, taken me into the ministry of spiritual direction with a great respect for individual experiences of the divine relationship. Since commencing this thesis I have also found myself in work at a children's hospital that requires listening beyond a personal level, supporting and holding a collective vision for change in a hospital setting that truly incorporates the patient and family in the development of policies, programs and services. It feels like this role sought me out at this time in my life journey to support a larger movement of

social innovation. I'm more willing to enter fully into the unknown and possibility of this movement of change in large part due to my own mystical experience, and my continued faith journey. The accompaniment of a spiritual director has been a critical support along my journey, helping me to stretch beyond my own personal limits and my willingness to engage in a movement that stretches our current health care institutional boundaries.

For these reasons I believe that as spiritual directors, or as anyone in ministry who listens to another's deep spiritual movements, it is important for us to acknowledge and affirm personal mystical experiences. They hold wisdom that potentially holds new possibilities for our future. As communities of faith we need to support individuals in practices that open them to this way of union with the divine. As a community we need to encourage shifts in consciousness that invite truly new approaches to address the issues we face in our world.

Purpose

The Purpose of my project is to explore 'the heart way of knowing the divine' as experienced by individual spiritual seekers in this our post-modern era, and its implications for faith. What is the experience of people today? How does mystical experience have an impact on one's 'knowing', faith, and personal expressions in the world?

Definition of Terms

By '**experience**' I mean: a conscious felt impression. The experience may be subtle and fleeting, or caught in an instant. It has a felt quality to it. On occasion it is

felt in a particular location in the body. It may or may not express an emotion, or immediate intellectual thought. By impression I mean that it leaves an imprint on us and on our understanding.

By ‘**heart way of knowing the divine**’ I mean: A mystical and relational consciousness of and resonance with the divine that dwells in us. A receptive experience of felt truth, an intuitive experience. It often comes at times when we feel the burning and yearning of our hearts as pointed to in Romans 8:22 and 26, and this relates to our contemporary lived experience.

The philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910) (James 2003, 371-374) defines the characteristics of **mystical experience** as: *ineffable* (inability to explain or impart the experience fully with words), *noetic* (states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect – illuminations, revelations, influence beyond the immediate experience), *transient* (experience of union is fleeting, brief with lingering impact), *passivity* (we may prepare for an experience through practises of prayer or meditation, but we cannot will the experience. It is often felt as an inflow of union or understanding). It sometimes moves the individual beyond ordinary states of consciousness. It is reconciling and unifying in nature, exceeding definition, holding paradox, stimulating and intertwining moral and intellectual mystery.

The mystic and writer, Evelyn Underhill (Underhill 1986, 191) describes it as: an experience that is relational, organic, experiential and transformative.

Dorothy Soelle, a theologian, philosopher, activist, and mystic, in *The Silent Cry* describes mystical experience as: recognizing the silent cry within us that has become inaudible. “May the one who also cries in us help us all to learn to hear the cry in the

foundations of the world.”(Soelle 2001, 6) By being drawn into union with the silent cry we develop a different relationship to the world.

The theologian, ecofeminist, and mystic Ivone Gebara in *Longing for Running Water* describes ‘**knowing**’ as, “What we call ‘knowing’ is the most plausible way we have found to say something to one another about the mystery that we are and in which we have our being.”(Gebara 1999, 48)

The bible references ‘knowing’ in Romans 8:22 (NRSV), “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;” and also in Romans 8:26 (NRSV), “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

By ‘**individual spiritual seekers**’ I mean: people who are actively exploring spiritual issues beyond the traditional church community. They may still be involved in church community but describe themselves as exploring significantly beyond the parameters of the traditional church.

By ‘**post modern era**’ I mean: cultural attitudes as experienced by seekers since the new millennium (the year 2000 on) and living within the philosophical context of postmodernity.

As understood by Jean-Francois Lyotard (Aylesworth 2009), the postmodern condition is characterized by how it recognizes knowledge as partial, and thus has strategic value in relation to the questions it raises; knowledge becomes a means of human action rather than an end; there is a loss of meta or grand narratives, instead heterogeneous moments of subjectivity prevail; and judgement is reflective rather than prescriptive.

By ‘**implications on faith**’ I mean: the impact it has on their personal understanding of the divine, their expressions of faith, faith practices, resulting shifts or changes in their approach to life and expressions of this change in the world– a life of faith.

Marcus Borg (Borg 2004, 25-41) provides a helpful description of faith, highlighting four primary meanings: faith as *assensus* – belief in a specific set of propositions, a matter of the head; faith as *fiducia* – a radical trust in God, like floating in a deep ocean; faith as *fidelitas* – faithfulness to our relationship with God, a commitment of the self at its deepest level; and faith as *visio* – a way of seeing the whole. His insights help us explore faith beyond belief as commonly understood within religious institutions, moving faith from strictly a head matter to include matters of the heart.

Description of Study

This is a qualitative study using narrative inquiry. I have chosen a narrative inquiry, as it starts with experience, and takes a non-linear approach in its exploration and analysis that mirrors the nature of the heart-way of knowing.

This qualitative research, by exploring individual experiences of the heart-way of knowing, will:

- affirm the individual experience
- recognize a variety of expressions of the heart way of knowing
- aid in discerning the difference between being captured by the experience and the ‘knowing’ revealed in the experience
- explore its personal impact on the individual’s relationship with the divine

- discuss faith practises that nurture the heart way of knowing
- discover resulting impact on faith and expressions in the world

The actual experiences of the participants, in which they acknowledge an infusion of a new sense of knowing, are very personal experiences. The unique qualities and details of each person's experience and how they relate specifically to their life circumstances cannot be over emphasized. They resonate deeply in very personal ways; they are important on a spiritual level, in how the participants understand themselves in relationship with others and the world as a whole, opening them to a greater connection and purpose in life and with the divine. It is for these reasons that they hold such significance and meaning.

For the purposes of this study similar attributes of the experiences are explored, but should not overshadow the deeply personal nature and significance they hold for each individual. To maintain the voice of each participant I have used quotations from the participants throughout the thesis. I encourage every visitor to this study to read the summary of each participant's unfolding of the heart way of knowing in chapter 2, *Contemporary Experiences of the Heart Way of Knowing*.

The length of this document is largely due to including seven participants in the study. Each one has interesting experiences and reflections to provide, and in narrative inquiry six to eight interviewees provide saturated data.

2. METHODOLOGY

Narrative inquiry, a form of qualitative research, suits this study well. Jean D. Clandinin states, “Narrative inquiry begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories.”(Clandinin 2007, 5) She highlights how this method of inquiry has experience as its starting point, is informed and intertwined with theoretical literature, informs an understanding of the experiences, and is a reconstruction of a person’s experience in relationship both to the other and to the social milieu.

Through conversational interviews this study has gathered participants’ stories of their experiences of the heart way of knowing, where individual experience is the starting point. The themes, plot lines, character, settings and actions drawn from the interviews provide an overview of mystical experience as experienced by some spiritual seekers in our current day. This information is then explored and intertwined primarily with literature of Christian mystics of the past and present as well as writings of those who are not affiliated with a particular faith. My hope is to inform our understanding of personal mystical experience and its meaning in a relational manner within our own personal and social contexts.

Clandinin (Clandinin 2007, 7) also highlights four turns that researchers take in narrative inquiry that are inherent to this study. The first is recognizing that a change in relationship between the person conducting the research and the person participating as the subject will occur. It is a relational form of inquiry. Secondly, there is a move from the use of numbers towards the use of words as data in order to capture the nuances of experience and relationship. The third turn is a change in focus from the general or universal to the local and specific, recognizing the value of a personal and particular

experience in expanding understanding and meaning. And finally this form of inquiry is accepting of and encourages multiple ways of knowing and understanding human experience. All of these turns are pertinent in this study.

Although I have referenced others in refining the methodology of this study, I find the work of Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin, Jean D. 2000) very helpful in guiding my process and growth in narrative inquiry.

Participants

Participants were invited to take part in the study primarily through word of mouth via a network of Spiritual Directors in Edmonton Alberta, through peers in a peer group I participate in, students at St. Stephen's College, and personal contacts with friends and acquaintances. Those who stated an interest were provided with a letter of invitation outlining the research project (see Appendix A), a fuller verbal description of the thesis proposal either in person or by phone, and an accompanied consent form (see Appendix B). Recognizing the personal nature of this research, I was surprised by how quickly participants came forward. Participants expressed an interest in having the opportunity to share their experience, something they do not typically share with too many or any others. They were also curious and willing to participate in something that would result in being able to hear and learn from others' experiences as an outcome of this study.

Since this research depended on the willing disclosure of personal experience of the participants, it was necessary to safeguard and protect them from unintentional harm or embarrassment. For this reason this research required each participant, prior to the first interview, to provide an informed consent. The consent addressed the right of the participant to cancel their participation at any time, the recording and transcribing of the

interviews, the right to review and edit the interview transcripts for clarity and accuracy, the right to anonymity, and disclosure of how the information is to be kept and used, e.g. possible future publication. The participants were informed that they would not be named in any publications or presentations, and that any information that they specified to remain confidential would not be shared in the research text or other publications and presentations.

In the interviewing process, or time of the study, if I became aware of personal issues arising for the participants, outside of the parameters of this study, they were referred to the appropriate professional (i.e. spiritual director, counsellor, minister) to assist them in addressing their concerns. A referral was made in one instance.

To ensure confidentiality, in the transcribing of interviews and notes, all participant names have been changed to pseudonyms. The information written into the interim and final research texts was reviewed to either generalize or remove any potentially personal and identifiable information.

Recorded conversations were kept confidential, with access granted only to myself, the participant, the professional transcriber (who is bound to confidentiality by professional standards) and to my research supervisor if assistance was required for analysis of the data. Other readers who were involved in reviewing interim and final research texts to help strengthen the exploration and content of the research only viewed interim texts where all names, places, and identifying information had been removed or disguised.

Interviewing Procedures

One-on-one conversational style interviews were conducted with seven participants. The interviews were one to two hours in length.

During the first meeting one-on-one interviews were conducted, allowing the interviewee to relate their personal experiences and to allow time for them to reflect on these experiences. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner. Questions were asked in a general manner to initiate discussion around the key elements of the study (See Appendix D), with further questioning or prompts to explore the depth and richness of the participant's experience. Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. The transcribed interview was then shared with the participant via email.

During the second in-person meeting the transcribed interview was reviewed and discussed to verify and or clarify the information, and for necessary corrections. New information was revealed and explored at this time, as the participants and researcher had time to reflect on the initial interview and their experience. These conversations were recorded, but not transcribed. Key points from these conversations were incorporated into an overall summary of the participant's experience that was then shared with the participant for final review and verification.

The third meeting will be held to share the results with the participants at the conclusion of the thesis. Participants will be invited to a "retreat-like environment" to not only share the results but also to continue nurturing and growing in the heart way of knowing for all of those who were generous in participating in the study. A form will be obtained from each of the participants interested in attending to obtain their consent to

their identity being disclosed to the other participants present, to ensure confidentiality of the information shared and of the identities of the participants present, and to acknowledge for those not interested in attending this will not be considered as a withdrawal from the research. (See Appendix C)

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in an open and conversational style. An outline (See Appendix D) for the interview was developed around the key elements of the study, to initiate discussion with interviewees. The questions were open-ended in order to “understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories”(Patton 1990, 24). The outline was used in a flexible manner allowing the participants to enter into and explore their own experience and expression of it. The outline was reviewed prior to the end of the interview to ensure that each of the key elements of the study had been explored with the participant. Many of the sample questions were not used, but were part of the outline and used as prompts where necessary. Most often questions and prompts emerged naturally from the conversational manner of the study.

Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 3) recognize the unique qualities of experience in their description and approach of “the three dimensional narrative inquiry space”. They recognize experience as having three interactive dimensions, which need to be explored in order to obtain rich, deep and thorough descriptions of experience. First, experience is relational and interactive, both personally and socially. Secondly, experience has continuity – a past, present and future. Experience also has a place, it occurs in specific places.

Therefore a researcher needs to explore experience in four ways: inward, the internal conditions of feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions; outward, existential conditions and the environment; backward and forward, recognizing the past, present and future of any experience; and finally to acknowledge the place of experience. For these reasons, "... to experience an experience – that is, to do research into an experience – is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way."(Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 50) I used the three dimensions of experience and the four ways of exploration to further the questioning and prompting throughout the interview. Or as Clandinin & Connelly describe, "to play within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space."(Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 56)

Field notes were kept, including date, location and setting of interview, any sense or impressions of the interview, general nature and presentation of the participant and myself as researcher. Field notes were kept following each interview and throughout the study to capture the sense and impressions of the events, happenings, attitudes, and feelings. Notes were collected on computer and were password protected.

Clandinin and Connelly(Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 80-90) recognize field notes as critical data sources in a number of ways. They help the researcher in negotiating between being very involved with the participants and experience being researched, and being able to view the participants and experience with some distance. They help to catch the details over the duration of the study that our memories tend to blur. By referring back to them, the researcher can explore further meanings and interpretations to avoid relativism when composing research texts. They help with the

dynamic process of turning inward (recorded more in journaling) and watching outward that needs to take place throughout the study. And they help the researcher negotiate through the ambiguity of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space – remaining open to possibilities, staying connected to where we are placed (temporally, spatially, personally and socially), and all of the interplays of relations for themselves and the participants. The field notes I kept were primarily around the first interview and followup meetings with the participants.

I kept a journal throughout the time of the research and writing of the thesis, which included my own process, thoughts, and inspirations that arose throughout the project as a part of my life journey. As a researcher I worked within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space not only with the participants but also with myself. Clandinin and Connelly describe this as “becoming visible with our own lived and told stories.”(Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 62) The journal provided opportunity for me to “puzzle out experience”(Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 104); to wrestle with issues, ideas, thoughts and inspirations. Journal entries were kept in a personal journal and stored in a private place in my home.

Pseudonyms were used in the interview transcripts, field notes and journal entries when referring to the participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves continually asking the field texts (the data) what meaning and social significance they hold within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. It started by reading and re-reading the field texts (the seven interview transcripts of 41 to 75 pages each, field notes, and journal entries), listening and re-listening to the

recorded interviews, and sorting and coding them in an archival manner. Attention was given to dates, contexts, characters, topics, plots, tensions, endpoints, and tone. It was a process of “defining what there is.”(Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 130) It was a process of recording and summarizing what exists within the various field texts. I spent considerable time with each person’s interview, trying to pull out the key points without losing the personal significance, tone and nature – trying to maintain the truth of their experience while summarizing it into a more concise written version. This was a particularly rich time during the research process as I sat with each person’s voice and description and allowed it to deepen my own understanding of their experience. The more technical part was highlighting the key points of what they described on post-it notes, using direct quotes to capture the unique essence of their experience. Then sorting these into themes and an order that felt true to what they had shared in the interview ultimately resulted in the writing of a narrative summary for each participant. (See Chapter 3, “Contemporary Experiences of the Heart Way of Knowing”.)

As the field texts and each interviewee’s narrative summary was continually reviewed a more complex analysis emerged where I started “narratively coding”(Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 131) story lines and plots that interwove and interconnected, gaps or silences, tensions, and continuities and discontinuities that were discovered by holding different field texts in relation to one another. Through this continuous asking of the two key questions of meaning and social significance (“Why is it meaningful?” and “Why does it make a difference?”) I identified patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes that became part of the research text. Again, this was done by sorting the individual points in various patterns, allowing the meaning and

significance to emerge from the collective stories. It was very challenging to move from the individual stories to the collective story, as I was concerned about losing the significance of the personal experience (which I believe is very sacred and personal) in the combined narrative.

My process was one of writing and revising, discovering new thoughts and ideas, rewriting and revising yet again in various forms of interim research texts. By repeatedly returning to the field texts with new questions and ideas to explore, I had to be willing to discover new gems throughout the process. Attention was given to retelling the rich participant stories, as well as combining them to create social narrative in what eventually became a final research text.

Perhaps the most difficult transition was to figure out how best to interweave the literature into the social narrative that had emerged. Already I had enough information, how was I to most effectively, and in a true narrative fashion now intertwine this with the breadth of literature that was available? To make this manageable I decided to focus on four key authors that I had become aware of through my studies and life journey during my studies at St. Stephens. These authors span time from the medieval period through to present day, each describing personal mystical experience and bringing a different context to inform the discussion of the heart way of knowing. Key references arose while in the interviews, during the analysis, writing and revising of the material that then were investigated and became a part of the final research text.

The writing of the final research text holds a number of tensions, what Clandinin and Connelly call 'voice', 'signature' and 'audience'. (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 146-149) 'Voice' relates to the number of voices involved in the study: participants,

researcher, and the voices from the literature reviewed. It also relates to the voice of the potential audience; wanting the research text to resonate with the reader's own experiences. It requires consideration of balance of all of these voices while capturing and sincerely representing the diversity of voices represented. 'Signature' refers to how the writer is represented, or "being there", (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 147) in the text. Again this involves a balance of not having too strong or too weak a signature. It also relates to how well the writer is able to capture the essence and identity of the participants in the narrative. 'Audience' is the third important consideration, remembering for whom the study is likely to be most valuable. This consideration is often in tension with the previous two and requires careful attention in order to make the research relevant. My hope is that the results of this study will be of interest to the participants in this study, individual spiritual seekers, spiritual directors and others in the ministry of listening, ministers and those responsible for the development of programs and worship practices in faith communities. Throughout the writing of the research text these tensions were weighed and negotiated, especially in the final stages of the final research text.

Validation Procedures

Inherent to narrative inquiry and the writing of field and research texts, is the question of the factuality and truthfulness of what is written. In this study the question first arises in the participants' telling of their experience; how do we know that this experience actually happened? How much of the writing is fact or memory reconstruction is also difficult to determine. Recognizing that this is a question that cannot be completely resolved, the following steps were taken: interview transcripts and

reconstructions were shared with participants for verification and clarification of understanding of their experience; the field notes and journaling helped address the inward and outward reflection necessary to hold the experience within context; the thesis advisor was consulted throughout the study and especially at the key stages identified in the time line; I meet with a spiritual director to help discern and negotiate my own process throughout the study; and drafts of the interim and final research text were shared with two interested readers to obtain an outside perspective and input on the writing. The final step of validation will be if by telling the story of the participants and my own, interwoven with material from the literature reviewed, readers recognize and open more fully to their own story.

3. CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCES OF THE HEART WAY OF KNOWING

Summary of Adam's Experience

Adam generally doesn't speak about spiritual matters. He believes, "it is more important to be it rather than to tell everybody that I am experiencing things in the spiritual realm." However, he shares an experience that he had at 17 years of age, a dream that left him with a core belief. He felt he was the only one that had such an experience, or who held this core belief that seemed uniquely his own for over 30 years. Then in 2002, during a very difficult time of great emotional turmoil in his life, he again experienced very vivid dreams and experiences that jogged him back to life. This resulted in a tremendous journey of spiritual growth and awareness.

In the early 70's, he was a teen with long hair, dressed in the style of the times, listening to music of the times, generally being seen as weird by his parents and likely most other adults. One spring he recalls going to a concert at the high school gym on a Friday night. "All my friends are there, and a rock and roll concert for free. Good deal. ... At the end of the concert there is some preaching, and they're inviting everybody to come up and get saved. And it just went on and on and on." He got sick of the preaching and said to his buddies, "let's get out of here. We've sat through this, we've paid our tally by listening to the preaching, now let's just get out of here." The others said no, but he got up to leave. No one is making a sound in the gym except for the preacher, and when Adam moves from the back of the gym towards the doors near the front to leave, "the preacher thinks I'm coming up to get myself saved." He kept heading towards the doors and was met there by "the Christian goons, and they started

lecturing me about how rude I was.” He pointed out that, “This isn’t Russia. This is Canada. I can walk out anytime I want. It’s a free country. I listened to the preacher and now I’m leaving. ... I was profoundly disturbed by them wanting me to go up so badly that they would have people there trying to bring me back.” This experience left him with, “that religion stuff, that just sucks. That can’t be right. They preach one thing, but my experience is other than what they’re preaching. ... I just can’t stand this anymore.” By 17 years of age he had eliminated church based faith as a “bunch of bunk.”

That summer Adam had a profoundly real dream about the after life. “It was too real to not be believed.” He felt like the dream was completely lucid, in that he knew where he was, and what he was doing. “It wasn’t a sort of foggy dream where things come and go. I was like right there. It was like being awakened, conscious and just sitting across the table from you talking.” He describes, “Everything was white. It wasn’t particularly tunnel-like. It was just going into white, ... a white thing, ... I don’t want to call it fog, but just through the white light rises this building with big pillars on it, and an inscription across the top in that Roman writing where they use v’s for u’s and you know, ... and across the top it said “School of Eternal Knowledge.” Then someone was there who was sort of a body, but not really a body. Like an energy with a kind of a human shape or a figure or something. Someone that I recognized. I don’t remember who, but someone that I recognized as a familiar person to me. And this person took me down some hallways, and I was very conscious of there being groups of people in the rooms off the hallways. ... We went into this one room and there was about 15 or so other spirit beings or – I don’t know exactly what to call them. They were all there and

they were all about at the same level as I was, and they were all very familiar to me. It was like a homecoming. ... Each group were varying sort of family, friends, they were just my group, they were just where I belonged. ... The reason that we were there is we always went to this place because this was our place and this is where we discussed our development and how we could help each other learn what we needed to learn for our spiritual development.” He describes the beings as, “everybody definitely had a white glow to them, but there was tinges of colour in them, and the lesser developed spirits had yellow tinges in them, more developed spirits went through the spectrum up to sort of bluish purplish.” He was left with this sense of, “I knew in the afterlife that I was going to this place and that everything was okay. It wasn’t heaven, it wasn’t hell, it wasn’t any of those things. It was just a place where my spirit would go when I was done this incarnation.” “I couldn’t not believe it because I knew it to be real. But I had no frame of reference to put this in. I had never met anybody that had ever had any sort of experience like this. There was just no point talking to anybody, because nobody understood. ... Everybody said “oh, you’re smoking too much pot.” .. So there was really nobody that I could even discuss this with, so I just put it in the back, I didn’t need to discuss it. It was just a core belief there, and I was comfortable with it.”

He felt relief that he didn’t have to worry about the religious teachings that he had learned as a child having been sent off to Sunday school to give his single parent a break, and throughout his teens culminating in the concert experience. He didn’t have to worry about heaven and hell. He also understood that “fear of death was irrelevant, because only the physicality was going to deteriorate, but the spiritual being inside was growing and getting better.” However he felt he was the only one with this “little weird

religion thing in my head.” He knew it was a spiritual or mystical experience, but he knew it wasn’t Christianity. It came as a surprise, as he hadn’t been looking for it. There were no words to frame it, no one to share it with, but he was left with a core belief, “I believe it very, very strongly. Like I just know it to be true.”

For over 30 years he lived with this core belief on his own. At times it made him think of spiritual things, especially at times when he didn’t expect it, or when he needed some guidance and there was no one to turn to. “Things would come into my mind, like if a situation came up I would have the thought of how would I handle this, what should I do, what is the kindest most loving thing I could do to alleviate this situation.” It wasn’t always easy to live with this core belief, as he took a kinder and gentler approach contrary to the male culture and “drunken boom times” that he was living in. “You know, I would be going to the bar the same as everybody else. I would just be handling things differently than other people there. So some people thought I was a saint, some people thought I was gay, some people just thought I was a weirdo. I was just trying to get along.”

Latter in his married life, one person had recognized his manner and way of living as Buddhist, so he went on the internet and looked up a Buddhist website where he discovered a link describing how Buddhism and quantum physics agreed. “So that sort of sealed it one more step further for me that science and spirituality can co-exist in harmony, not disagreement.” This fit with his core belief, started him meditating. He maintained this practice even though his wife thought he had gone “completely insane”.

Adam’s core belief took on a deeper and fuller dimension in his life resulting from a time when he was suffering from a serious depression in the winter of 2003. He knew

his marriage of many years was over, but he couldn't find a way to bow out gracefully without causing hurt or embarrassment. "So I was planning to go to Canadian Tire, to get the hoses to hook up to the truck. I was seriously – I was there. You know, tomorrow morning, that's what I'm doing." "Everything was in place to check out early". However, that night he had another very lucid dream. In the dream there was a dark haired woman talking to him about the value of life. She represented "encouragement to keep on going, because there was more coming. There was more that I had to learn, there was more that I wanted to learn, it was like a guide of some sort." Again, the dream felt very real, not something he would have fantasized. There were very specific things about this person in the dream that were very clear, real and identifiable. It was strong enough to "jog me back into still wanting to keep living". Over the next two weeks he had several more dreams with the same key female character.

Following the dreams with this woman, one night he was woken by a voice that said two words, "seek joy". It was so loud and real he sat up in bed thinking someone was in his house. He got up to check the hall, "because I thought it was so real, that voice was so real that it woke me up, and it was saying such a weird thing, "seek joy". I thought I was supposed to like seek money." He felt this message internally very deeply, "It wasn't just a sort of a ephemeral thought. It was like right there. There was no questioning it. That was my mission."

Approximately 2 months later a friend of his wife's family, whom he had never met, came to stay with them. When she walked in the door "it was her. ... It didn't just look like her; it was her" – the woman who had guided him in his dreams. This was all

quite confusing to him. At a time of great emotional turmoil in his marriage, when he wasn't looking for, or reading, or studying anything spiritual he was having what he describes as powerful spiritual experiences. It was quite confusing at first. But meeting the woman in person helped him "understand that it's okay to think of myself as a spiritual being, because there was positive reinforcement along that line, and that I wasn't weird or there wasn't something wrong with me if I understood that I was a spiritual creature having human experience rather than the other way. ... She also encouraged it and sort of held my hand as I learned to walk." She was an important guide at that time in his life, and someone he is forever grateful to for saving his life.

In the summer of 2004 he moved and rented a house. In the months following he began to meet more people with a similar spirituality. "I'm growing and getting stronger and celebrating that, hey, I'm not alone." He attended workshops, started reading and studying, and happened upon the Center for Spiritual Awareness in a way that some may call 'luck or coincidence', but "it looked to me like someone was leading me into the place where I needed to be". He continues to attend the Center on Sundays, for the "spiritually uplifting music and message – in a way that really speaks to me that I can understand and that is something I can take home with me and kind of hold in my heart."

Adam isn't sure what to call these 'dreams', perhaps they are "astral projections or – I don't know what to call those things. But there was something else there other than just a rehashing of the day's events or whatever. They're far more lucid, with colour and interactive conversation, just far more real than sort of the ephemeral normal dream

stuff that people have.” He recognizes these experiences as being deeply relational, “but also even on a deeper level than like what was deemed the interaction right then.”

These dreams and experiences, “opened my mind enough to be able to accept spiritual teachings.” As a result he now believes in reincarnation. He values the books written by psychologist Michael Newton (Newton 1994) who describes these types of dream states as “super conscious states”. Newton’s writings describe thousands of people’s experiences under hypnosis that reach states beyond the unconscious. Adam recognized, “their experience was just so exactly tied into the experience I’d had when I was a teenager.” Newton’s writings reinforce what happened in his later dreams, “the people in my dreams were actually people in my group in the afterlife, or the between lives, or whatever you want to call that space.” “In the books, as in the dream, our purpose was to develop our spirit. And the way that happens is by allowing free choice, and incarnating on earth into the human society, that we do, allows us free will to develop in a sort of a – in a solid way without interference from somebody else, we make our own decisions. So we advance at whatever speed to whatever level that we are able to. But with the guidance of our spirit guides who are sort of I guess is the equivalent of a professor in our after life groups, and we also have spirit guides that are here to help us through this incarnation rather than just having to face the big exam at the end.” His experience was acknowledged by these writings that “made everything ring even more true.” Also, twice in separate circumstances and with completely different groups of people, he has met men who have experienced the very same dream that he had when he was 17, and they described how it had so profoundly affected them. His understanding of the dreams keeps growing as a result of reading, the ongoing

spiritual learning in meeting others, attending the Center of Spiritual Awareness, and in life itself. In retrospect he realizes how important it has been to tell others of his experience. However, this wasn't possible until he had deeper friendships and people he could trust in his life, and up till now he has only told a half dozen people. The dreams are becoming more profoundly meaningful all of the time, more so than he realized at the time.

Adam's understanding of the divine has evolved as a result of his dreams and experiences. The initial dream removed the fear of death allowing him to change his preconceived ideas of and distance from the divine. He now perceives the divine as energy and oneness. Instead of feeling separate from the world, he feels he is connected to everybody and everything. "It's all part of the energy that is the universe that connects us all together and connects us to time and space and the afterlife and the before life and all of that stuff is just there. It's just that in this incarnation we're not able to receive it, because it's too much. We're here to learn these things, and if we knew all that other stuff, that would affect how we were trying to expand our spiritual growth. So it's like this life is like going to church for one hour on Sunday. That's this incarnation. But there is the whole rest of this life; the rest of the real world, the energy world, the universe is out there. But we just can't see it because we're in church right now. We're part of it, it is part of us. There isn't a division. It's all energy. Our sense of what we know as life now is just one little part of the ongoing life; it's just one part." He acknowledges that we are part of a divine energy that is interconnected and evolving.

His understanding of the divine has influenced how he lives his life. With this new understanding he no longer fears death, "not that I want to go. But it gives me a

different perspective on the world as well.” One day he had a quiet realization that the way he thought about things had changed into a gentler and more loving approach. As an example he describes how he used to drive into work “hating all those other guys. Like just get out of my way. Drive it or park it. ... And then I realized one day that I didn’t feel like that anymore. I just felt like we’re all sort of pulling the same way, we’re all doing the same thing. We’re all just trying to get to work and cooperate here on the freeway as best we can, we’re all just one going to work. So instead of feeling separate from the world, I began to feel like I was, you know, connected to everybody else.” Recognizing people as connected spiritual entities he finds very helpful and enlightening. It reduces the tendency to be judgmental, and to hold greater compassion for others. Now, everyday, he consciously tries to experience the oneness of everything. As an example he cites, “looking at the plants and understanding how wonderful it is that life just springs forth from the earth and how the energy that creates that is part of the same energy that keeps me alive.”

His new spiritual understanding influences his relationships in many ways. He is in a new partner relationship and recognizes the “seek joy” message of his one dream in his expression and experience of this relationship. His new understanding allows him to be open to and to share in one another’s experiences and spiritual journeys. It has been helpful in the challenging yearlong process of getting to know her teen and young adult children; understanding and talking with them without creating a confrontation, allowing time for a trusting relationship to develop. His relationship with his business partner and work is congruent with his ethical and spiritual values making life more seamless. He can talk with his ‘hunter son-in-law’ who would typically say, “get that

spiritual stuff away from me”. With his own adult children he sees his growth impacting their growth. Friends notice he is not the way he used to be. Even with complete strangers, such as cashiers, people he would never have talked to before, he now engages with them in conversation from a place of personal connection. He has also noticed a difference in his house plants, “I have a fern now that’s just outstanding. And so – you know, is that part of the energy? I don’t know if it is or not, but I don’t know that it isn’t.” Overall he describes himself as calmer, more patient and an easier person to get along with; generally more compassionate and recognizing a connection and oneness in relationships.

Adam now acknowledges different spiritual beliefs as all connected to the same spiritual energy. Speaking with a friend who believes in having a personal relationship with Jesus he realizes that it isn’t that he doesn’t believe in it, he just calls it something else. He believes it is the same spiritual energy, or God energy. There is something valid and powerful about all of our experiences. It is part of the spiritual energy of the universe. He uses what he feels is a more inclusive language that describes his belief; it doesn’t differentiate ‘you’ from ‘it’; ‘Jesus’ and ‘you’. And he believes this may be dependent on one’s degree of abstract tolerance, but still it is all part of the same spiritual energy.

He also experiences this interconnected energy in what might be called psychic episodes, “not like predicting the end of the world, but most of the time I know who is on the phone before I go to the phone, and quite often I know exactly what somebody is going to say to me like two minutes before they say it.” Although this can be coincidence some of the time, he has it happen too frequently to describe it away in this

manner. He recognizes this as another type of energy that is different than logical thinking. Being more connected with the world has connected him more with the people that he knows, likening it to the Huna tradition in Hawaii where they recognize ‘aka cords’ or energy cords that connect us with the people we know. What he receives is “like half an idea in the back of my head. ... Just a little thing in the back of my head, but it’s not in your conscious thinking of what you’re doing. ... And it has something in it that is knowledge. ... To me it’s sort of all energy, ... energy coming to me. ... and the filter that I use to block it out is getting thinner and thinner. More of it is being allowed to come in as I am growing and being able to understand it and process it.”

Adam continues to thirst for a growing understanding and integration of the spiritual in his life. He hits plateaus, and then there are days where new learning begins again. He believes in the Ghandi saying, ‘being the change you want to see in the world’. “To be it, to be as spiritual and as joyful as I can and let that example be what people see. ... To live in the spiritual without having to explain it to somebody.” When people recognize these changes in him and ask for advice he says, “Invent your own life. If you let society push you into stuff, then that’s where you’re gonna be stuck and you’re gonna be resentful and you’re gonna be – you know, living somebody else’s values or some corporate values. I said live your own life. Like, be who you are, be what you want to be. Invent your own life.” He recognizes a growing number of people who are framing their spiritual understanding in this sense of ‘oneness’, “they are being exposed to it so it’s happening more.” Having friends now that understand is a great gift. It is an ongoing process, “once you reach a level of spiritual awareness you just can’t stop doing things to develop it further.”

Summary of Brian's Experience

Brian describes coming out of a dark time in his life about 5 years ago at the age of 37. It was a time when he was questioning life, a time of deep uncertainty. Then a spiritual awakening occurred. Not a sudden or all at once type of an awakening, but more of a slow and at times reluctant awakening from a deep sleep. This was followed by what he describes as “periods of yawning”, leading to a greater attentiveness to a whole new paradigm of living that continues to emerge and expand in his life today.

His own life path has been filled with “lots of human things.” He was married young, had a child when he was 22 years of age, and was divorced at 25. During his first marriage he experienced times of immense depression, and came very near to ending his life. Although in hindsight he recognizes this could have been a period of possible awakening and something deeply soulful, it didn't occur that way. His life journey continued to be rather “sleepy”, caught up in what he now describes as “ego levels of awareness.”(Tolle 2005) “I went to seminary because that's where the wind was blowing even though I didn't know it. ... I probably had some sort of pragmatic reasons ... but I didn't really know why I went there.” In 2002-2003, he ended up in a rural parish where he started to wake up. During the previous 10 years he had not been clinically depressed, “but for unknown reasons to myself I just became more and more depressed. Not outwardly so much. I think it would have been a real shock to the parish.” He started to think “I just can't do this. I can't do what's going on in the church. There is something that doesn't work for me anymore, it's out of kilter.” Having spent four and a half years, thousands of dollars, and having uprooted his family numerous times to get to this place, he now felt a great weight and guilt. “I can't just

leave this. And I certainly wanted to. But I didn't know to what. I would have had to die, I think, to leave it." Unable to "see an end to this internal sense of disunity", he contemplated going camping, finding a mountain, and stepping off.

While Brian wasn't comfortable with the theology of the church or his own world view he was uncertain of what to do. A friend suggested he meet with a fellow he felt could help. "I was not open to him at all. ... I was still skeptical about some of the more --- out of the box and very heart filled and amazing understandings of our universe ... they were just a little weird to me." This friend loaned him a book, *Love Without End* (Green 1998), which he now sees as "a spectacular illumination of love", but at the time thought, "the guy is a heretic." It came to a point that "I either have to die or something has to happen here." He had reached a point he now calls an "events horizon". An events horizon is something he draws from the understanding of black holes in space, "which is like a collapsed star. There is an event horizon, which is the very edge of this thing where the gravitational pulls are tremendous, and there is a point where you can still move away from it. But at the event horizon you're right at that tipping point. You are just one molecule of yourself more, and you get sucked in."

At this point, "I don't know what's in it, and it is very frightening. ... This isn't a gentle slide into it. ... I don't want to wake up, I don't think." However he managed to ask himself, "Who do I need to see. I probably prayed some kind of conventional form of prayer, like Dear God, I desperately need to talk to a -- well, the person that keeps coming to my mind is this [fellow his friend recommend he see]. I can't talk to him he is way too weird." Unable to shake off this thought, he called this spiritual director and went out and listened to him. Two months later he met with him again, still "there isn't

any part of me I felt that was resonating with this guy.” In October of that year, he and his wife were in the city (Edmonton), walking along Whyte Avenue and they went into a book store where he picked up a book, *The Path of Prayer* (Burnham 2002), from the 80% off table. “For no particular reason I felt like I really needed to buy it. ... And that was the tipping point right there. It wasn’t [the spiritual director] that tipped me into the event horizon, it was that book.”

This book spoke of meditation, “somewhat from a Christian perspective, but more general than that.” It was the first time he had read something of this nature and it opened him to, “there’s another way to think about all this.” On the same day he and his wife caught a movie, *What the Bleep Do We Know?* (Arntz, Chasse and Vicente 2004) He became wide eyed and excited, “Oh, my God, what is this? Like, excited – like all of a sudden for the first time, this is like when you wake up, you’ve gone on a trip and you’re staying in a hotel, and you go to bed and you wake up in the morning and you could just sort of forget that you’re not at home, and it takes you a second, you open your eyes, and it takes you that moment because you don’t know what is going on.” From there on in he experienced a series of synchronistic and serendipitous events that led up to a point in January of that year, of “tremendous change in consciousness for me.” It was during this time he started to hear what the spiritual director was teaching him.

Waking up, Brian realized, “This ego world I was living in wasn’t reality, it wasn’t what had the power to identify me even though I had attachment to it, all the emotions and all these things.” Being involved with the Lutheran church since his birth he realized he was imbedded in the church structure. He was very aware of religious

experiences in the church but not aware of soulful experiences. His involvement as a pastor created huge attachments for him, identifying with specific theological ideas about God, himself, and the world. He describes having to let these ideas grow, which was also a painful time of shedding things, and trying to understand why they didn't work any longer. This all happened while he was in the "heat of religious structure" as a leader in the parish.

Over a few years, his experience with the spiritual director got him, "out of bed and walking in my soul". Once it begins it is hard to stop, "it starts to burble and grow and grow." What he knew to be true up to five years ago, is now like what Paul says, "looking through a mirror dimly." (1 Cor. 13:12 NSRV) In a process of waking up, he realizes what he knew before, "it was just so less than now, and I understand and appreciate that this is so less than further unfolding." There is a "sense of an unending unfolding for myself in this world."

Brian describes his spiritual director as an intuitive mystic enlightened in consciousness and love. He provided care, guidance and instruction, but mostly pulled out of him "that which he knew was already there, just gently carefully weaving it in front of me so I could see this is – this is soul, this is love." At first what the spiritual director would present to him seemed too rich, dense and wondrous for him to understand. When leaving his meetings, the fellow would say something like, "practice miracles today." "I'd say, well, 'what do you mean'. 'I don't mean anything. I mean go out from here and practice miracles. You are a soulful being. You are a ray of light. You're pure love incarnate.' So I'd leave, and think, what in the heck is he talking about. And I want to. But it's like telling somebody that's never walked or swam just to

go and do it. ... But if you'd never done it, your body doesn't have the memory immediately to pick it up." He would go on in his days with these thoughts in mind, and discover through conversations with others or listening to the radio, a number of strands and pieces that became a part of this new weaving. The old paradigm began to shed away and new awareness, for example that of synchronicity in the universe, started to awake in him. While his relationship with the spiritual director has changed, "what he did was created the space where I could grow in awareness of that wisdom that is mine, that's meant for me, that's connected me to all wisdom that we are all connected to, or whatever. ... Now it feels like two old friends, more peer like than student / pupil or student / teacher. ... Our connection doesn't have anything to do with necessarily the corporeal world anyway. It occurs regardless of geography or time. ... He is a gift of love, and I guess that's what he remains to me." Now his home life, with all of its demands and emotional ups and downs, is his greatest testing ground and opportunity for spiritual growth. His wife plays the role of spiritual director primarily in his life. "Her deep wisdom for herself often pulls out my own, in very genuine and pleasant ways, and sometimes in conflict."

Being soulfully hungry he also looked to the mystics, writers, and speakers of the world, both past and present. David Hawkins' (Hawkins 2006) theory of consciousness has been very helpful in providing a way to understand "the geography of myself, God and life view. ... Hawkins would say, 'how clearly do I perceive ego and love. In other words, truth.'" While all of this exploration with the spiritual director and much reading was exciting and stirring and pulled out of him what he needed to hear, "ultimately there is no answer there, because it isn't their wisdom that I need, it's mine." He recognizes a

growing consciousness and integrity within himself, moving from an obsession with sin and fear to one of greater acceptance, love and joy.

He describes his experience of soulful awakening or growing consciousness in a number of ways. “I have no doubt that we all have the ability to know truth, and without getting into a philosophical debate about what that means, I’ll just leave it at that. We can recognize that when it’s around us, within us, when we smell it and hear it and touch it. ... In our various states, egoic states, there are times when all of a sudden our being vibrates with something. And this is a point where if you take this it will draw off the next piece of wisdom for you to know and be with out of your heart. ... There is just this sense, this tingling, ... definitely a physical sensation of this is the moment right now, and this is where I need to be, and there is something in this moment for me, and I can be attentive to that or not. ... I hadn’t sought them out. ... I was just caught off guard. Like what; this is amazing. If I was to use emotional words to describe it, I would say joyful, maybe even overwhelming sometimes, surprise, rightness, and flow.” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) In the experience of flow he recognizes how there is no resistance. “It’s like ‘woosh’ ... not only is there no resistance, it’s actually – you’re just drawn into its depth and richness because there I am in it. That’s the feeling. There I am. Here I am.” “This is our soulful experience of releasing itself into the universe.”

He recognizes how our culture is inundated with life robbing activities, so contrary to our awakening experiences. Once we recognize this, we also notice how, “It takes way too much energy to engage life-robbing experiences, ... and uses so much energy to sustain them.”

A number of unusual things have happened as part of his soulful awakening. One time while driving away from meeting his spiritual director, “all of a sudden I can hear singing. Like just unbelievable. I can’t pick out the words. Like all around me.” There were the tinkling sound of bells joined with the rich voices that continued for a little while. He phoned his spiritual director who explained that just for a moment he was open to hearing what is always around him, the sound of the universe singing. “And just for a moment for some reason or other my soul chose to hear it.”

On another occasion, while still working in the parish, he was preparing some music for an upcoming Lenten service with a few members of the church. He had placed his music on the pulpit and was playing his guitar, going over the piece of music with the others. “All of a sudden everything slowed down, like almost stopped, and there was just this immense serenity. I could hardly describe it – it was just immense. Like the whole universe was just all of a sudden there, and I was vaguely aware of me doing this, motioning with my pick and my guitar, but time wasn’t moving. ... Like I got slingshot back into time. Nobody had noticed anything about me, and it might have been a blink of an eye in terms of what we perceive as time. It seemed like forever. And the residue of that kind of clung to me for some time after that. I felt it approach again a couple times. Once when I was driving I thought I don’t think I could have this happen when I’m driving. And once when I was walking in the woods.” In reading David Hawkin’s books he discovered that this type of experience is ascribed to a cross over point of consciousness to ‘bliss’ on Hawkin’s scale. Just for a moment he experienced this level of consciousness. His spiritual director also confirmed that, “Consciousness can move all over the place, ... and you see clearly just for a moment.”

During this time, for a couple of months, he saw colors that were “ridiculously vibrant.” He remembers commenting about his son’s computer game, thinking the colors were way too bright. Driving along the road while noticing the gold fall colors of the grasses in the ditch, he thought, “Oh my gosh, this is just so delicious.” Again his spiritual director assured him that the body’s senses become highly attuned when dipping into parts of consciousness.

These types of experiences happened off and on for a couple of years. “I think the body and the mind have a hard time processing these things. And so our language is inadequate, and there are some visual images – the soul’s eye image of these things. But I don’t know how to say them. ... You know, they don’t make any sense except inside.” These experiences have a residue that lives on within him, “something is changing or growing”, and again words are inadequate to describe it.

Brian’s sense of the divine or God, and his relationship to the divine have expanded beyond what he understood previously. Even though he is not currently serving in a parish he does officiate at weddings and conduct Sunday services occasionally. In his pastoral role, “I have to take this great big huge experience – well, it’s more than experience. This great big huge beingness and translate it into a language they can only barely grasp at the edges of something that I can only barely grasp at the edges. And it gets changed. But you can speak to it.” He is discouraged by how the “church has language that it likes to use and it understands, although it never challenges itself in it.” As an example, “what do you really mean by God blesses us. They maybe wouldn’t really be able to unpack that in any kind of meaningful way for themselves.” In one sense his understanding of God and Christ in the world has never been clearer or

richer, “it doesn’t lack integrity, but it lacks tremendous fullness.” In trying to capture his current understanding and relationship with the divine he says, “I am beginning to know ‘I am’, and that is all that one can say. But that encompasses whatever it is that has created this love in the world, this creative force, the universe, God, I don’t know. Any name you want to use for it is inadequate and insubstantial. And that not only am I part of it, I’m inseparable from it. I’m not it but I am it, and I’ve never been separate from it regardless of what my mind has told me over these years. That has been a lie or an illusion. And the wonder of that unfolds if I’m really wanting to be present just moment by moment.”

Over the past four or five years of his awakening the experience in this relationship has changed. Earlier there were moments that “stood out and then I went back to the mundanity of life and consciousness, thirsty for the next unbelievable, you know, awakening. It seems now that the moments are just -- everything is an awakening, and there is moments of this sleepiness still hovering around it all, and maybe that will be the rest of this incarnation and the next one will be another unfolding. I have no idea.” The awareness has grown such that he recognizes the whole universe unfolding in each object, relationship and moment, “and I see all of that as a stream of love that I have been a part of.” “I know that soulfulness of me is just slowly stretching and it’s not forcing anything, and it’s floating on that amazing river.” “More and more there is that deep breath just breathing and knowing.” Now it is a gentle waking up to his day, regardless of what his mind and emotions might tell him. “If I just listen ... I am well ... and that’s the absolute truth of that soulful being of myself.”

He has learned to recognize his tendency, and that of our world, to work against the stream of love. We are, “thinking there is something really important for us upstream while everything is downstream that is life giving to us, and all we need to do is let go of the oars and let this boat of our being be pulled along, ... all that will ultimately bring us to awareness of our creator and self.” “It doesn’t matter what I do in life, like if I’m just picking up garbage, as I walk or just touch a tree and give thanks for it, or help somebody, it doesn’t matter. I just think love is fully entirely held in that. I think that’s my awakening now, is just being able to be – to let whatever it is that’s going on this moment is the most important and complete piece of my universe. There isn’t anything else. ... It’s just to let it do its thing and to be deeply aware of heartness or soulness.” Even though the mind might think ahead or behind in its endless babble, this awakening allows one to be present to, to tend to and to know oneself and all that one is around more truly and wonderfully, to be open to emanating love.

Brian recognizes many tendencies that take him out of this soulful expression of each moment. Getting lost in busyness and feeling like he doesn’t have time takes him out of “the awareness of that deep soulfulness, that rhythm or ebb and flow, that thrum that is just there, that vibration of Gaia or of the universe, all of that creates that vibration, and it dulls me to that.” It often leads to “a cascade of emotional experiences that will likely be sleepy experiences.” “The wonder is, though, that at any moment I can just stop and breathe in the midst of all that, and all of a sudden it just disappears, it was just fog to begin with.”

There are a number of practices he does to keep him stretching out of these sleepy states, to help him remain awake. He meditates, using classically understood methods.

Sitting and breathing and listening are frequent practices. “I walked my dog this morning, and touched trees as I went by, and listened and watched him and laughed, and smelled the air and looked at the sky, -- that’s a wonder. Have you ever walked along and all of a sudden looked at your body and said, ‘What a miracle that my joints move? I can’t believe it.’ ... the soul gets into perfect unity with form, and can experience all this stuff. Now I’ve noticed myself being aware of myself in this body.” Reminded of a movie that depicts the director’s near death experience, he describes her response when she gazes into a pool of water and sees her core star and pureness of being. “When we look at ourselves and we see what we really see, how can we not weep with joy at the awesome beauty, whether it was manifested or lived out in consciousness or not; it’s there.” Acknowledging this regularly in the activities of his day, now any moment is an opportunity for meditation or prayer.

Much has changed in Brian’s world. He acknowledges how his earlier faith was an important shell around him. It provided protection and structure according to the consciousness of that time. He needed it and is grateful for it. Now his knowledge is bigger than that shell can hold, in fact it became restrictive. He goes back to the church, “only to the point that translation is possible, and then I have no interest in it anymore.” It is unlikely that he will return to a parish or become “enmeshed in the political structure of the church”, however he is open to where the river will take him and not knowing what this may mean for him in the future.

What he does know is “the universe seems to bring opportunities to me in surprising ways, and unexpected ways, so for the most part I like to follow them and see where they lead.” Brian has met a number of people “who us religious folk would have

considered to be kind of lost souls.” Now he is recognizing how soulfully minded and aware they are. Recently he officiated a wedding for a “redneck guy in the oil patch”. Brian was delighted in hearing him share about his own awakening. “They don’t have a language for it, and nor even an openness to speak about it with each other. But if you get them in an interview or you have some reason to talk with them, and you start asking, it comes out, this really rich non-church based, non-theologically educated self awareness, I am-ness.” What he hears from these people is, “I’ve met somebody that’s helped me explore my soul – in a way that church or friends weren’t able to do. I think there are people, men and women, looking for that without them even knowing it. They come across and they go, this is really important for me.” He enjoys these opportunities where he can hear their wisdom and have it respond to and dialogue with his own.

He has also been overwhelmed by the response of people at the Sunday services he has had recent occasions to preach at. “People are absolutely delighted at hearing about love as if the church has never spoken about it. ... I’m just astounded at the incredibly joyful response of people at hearing about love. And the way that the whole room just fills up with this delightful energy, and that’s really meaningful to me as an expression of my own soul doing its work as a healer.” “The greatest surprise I get from people, observing people, is when I say to them you’re a gift of love. Because we’ve been taught that we’re not. The church taught me I wasn’t. The church taught me I was sinful. And our culture teaches us we’re inadequate, we don’t have enough. And our families teach us about attachment and all sorts of joys and sorrows. But none of it just comes up and says you are love, and that love is a gift to the entire world. ... And I

guess if I had a manifesto that would be it, we are gifts of love. And I don't think anything else is terribly important inasmuch as it does or doesn't connect with that."

Currently, he sees this role as healer playing out mostly outside of the church structural boundaries. "I can do that over coffee as I just listen to somebody tell their story and respond with some words that might draw their wisdom out." He calls this wisdom, "inside wise". "I hold that everybody has a soulful wisdom bigger than this life experience. Like, I don't know how long it goes. It's just really big. We have that wisdom to guide us to experience good life to have this soulful incarnation thing, this experiment of the soul for it to be vibrant and to be something that draws us to the creator. ... I don't need to give anything to you for you to do it. You have your own. And nor do I need anything from anybody else in order to access that wisdom. It's there. However, sometimes we don't know how to access it or we don't know – maybe we're not even aware that it's there. Nobody's ever taught us to listen to ourselves to hear that wisdom that's meant for us, that's meant to give us good life and thus our families good life and thus our communities good life on the earth. There is a soul wisdom or a heart wisdom, whichever word you want to use, that is connected directly to this whole universe and holds things together." His role as healer is to help people to connect with their "inside wise".

He sees 'inside wise' manifesting in many ways. "I think that love is an energy of the universe, love is all that really is. And the English word being entirely inadequate, but having no other English word to describe it really, that is-ness stuff finds a unique manifestation in every soul. If the creator is like a ball of light, we are a ray coming off of that perhaps, inadequately said, and it will find its own color and hue and taste and

flavor in this form world, this corporal thing. And I have become aware that at least one aspect of that color and flavor for me is healer. And I think that is an essential flavor of love maybe for everybody to a degree, but I know that in myself. If I say I am, it is I am healer. And it just takes on a tremendous number of expressions. ... And I have not really even begun hardly to explore what that is like, and the power behind it. But one piece of it certainly is just my idea of inside-wise, it's just to acknowledge that nothing I say to you will have any relevance to you, but it might draw out your wisdom and then that will have relevance to you. ... Healing for me means to remember wholeness, to remember absolute wholeness and truth of ourselves.”

Currently, a number of other explorations are part of his life. He writes children's stories and has enjoyed occasions of being in schools to do dramatic readings and to teach story craft, “just to be a presence there.” He hopes this may evolve in new ways. He is also exploring the “energetics of money”(Anielski 2007) and what this looks like when viewed with our soulful eye. As described by Mark Anielski in his book, *The Economics of Happiness*, money isn't earned, it is an exchange of Love. Quoting his spiritual director, he is exploring how “the only thing you need is the money required for the full expression of the love that you are.” Holding the premise that everything we will ever need has already been given to us, he feels free to simply be, knowing we don't have to desperately make the universe. He is excited by what is down river for him in these and many other possibilities.

Looking back, Brian recognizes how much he grew during his own times of depression, a consciousness rooted in fear and desire. He believes we have many forms of consciousness, such as relational, vocational, artistic, spiritual, etcetera. All of them

have their own dynamic. “I think we do tend to just kind of grow until we fill the space of it like growing into a shoe, and it seems to me, maybe, that we move in unconsciousness when we filled it out and our soul is ready then to let go of it, and we move to a new place. ... I filled out depression. Like that consciousness of fear and desire was delicious in its own painful way. A wondrous thing. I have great gratitude for myself and my world [of that time]. And I filled it out right to the very squeaky corners, and either had to end this incarnation and continue some other form of love, or move into another consciousness.”

He is now in a new place. “And I think I’m in a big place, stretching into it and growing and finding the corners and all the nooks and crannies, and it’s just wondrous. And perhaps I will fill it out.” “I just think with joy. I don’t know what the rivers – what bend in the river I’m going to see. Like this thing is just whooshing down there, and something wondrous, absolutely wondrous is on the bank. It’s the event horizon again. ... I don’t have words. I have some images that I can’t really describe when I think about it.” Brian continues to awake within a dynamic exploration of ‘inside-wise’.

Summary of Eve’s Experience

Eve is a woman in what she calls the “autumn” of her years. When she was 29 she had a powerful mystical experience. In recalling her journey, she recognizes how it has been a thread throughout her life that still holds significance for her, over 30 years later. She describes having other powerful experiences that also hold importance for her, each of them somehow dissolving a very personal and deeply held question that is replaced with a knowing – a knowing about mystery.

In the story of her unfolding she describes herself in her childhood, teen years, and early 20s being a good and pious young person, active in traditional Christian churches (Lutheran and Moravian) with a fundamentalist Pauline focus – salvation and Christ-centered belief. Life was on track, she had been involved as a youth leader, was engaged to a young man who was training to be a minister, with the intent on being missionaries together. Pastors and leaders in the church affirmed all of this and it seemed as though “God was preparing me for mission work.” Then, a number of personal experiences started to cause a significant break in her construct of faith and life. The certainty of God’s will as she had understood it crumbled with her experiences – breaks of trust in relationships; studies in philosophy, sociology and psychology pointed to other possibilities; working as a social worker with disenfranchised people she started to see the world in bigger ways; deep personal hurts and depression led her to question who she was, with one of the resulting realizations being that she loved women. These differences she could not reconcile within the construct she had grown up with, and in some instances the church would condemn them. “I didn’t trust any of that anymore.” She could not be what she had been, knowing what she had grown to understand both through experience and knowledge.

She felt like she was losing her faith, and really questioned her faith. “My belief that God had primed me for this ... it all sort of crumbled.” “God, I’m losing my faith, do something. If you’re really there, do something.” “I can’t hang on to this. This doesn’t make sense to me anymore.” The existentialist approach of Kierkegaard, that religion is created by us, that we develop a faith that suits us at the time, the understanding of faith as being a ‘leap of faith’ versus something that one has to be convinced of, made some sense

to her. The partner she was with at this time was not at all religious and influenced her to leave the church. All of this left her with the dilemma of “not believing anything anymore.”

However, a longing for something more lingered. The yearning and desire for something reverent to hold on to, for worship, and a connection with something that resonated with her heart remained strong. This led her to a meditation group, “which was good”. Then at a week long conference she befriended and shared her sense of not believing anything anymore with a Rabbi. Through their friendship he recommended she go to an Ashram in the Kootenays of British Columbia. From his year long experience at the Ashram, he believed she could explore a lot of her questions there.

She did go to the Ashram, for 6 months. It was a very good experience. She got a taste of Hinduism and Buddhism, and practiced mindfulness. The people affirmed her for who she was, didn’t judge her, and were accepting of her sexual orientation. She summarized the beliefs that they held as, “we live many lives and we have all kinds of experiences, and we are to live the best life we can – to be a loving honest person, that’s what matters, it doesn’t matter who you love, it matters that you love, and that you love well, and that you love with integrity.” She found this very freeing, and it made sense, “this fits with who I am, it embraces more of who I am. I want to be a person of integrity and honesty, that’s what I want to be. I don’t want to live a lie.” It was freeing to say, “yes” and to embrace more of who she was.

It was near the end of her 6 month stay at the ashram and during this time of questioning and discovering that she had the mystical experience. One night she was wakened by a voice, and the voice said very clearly, “Eve, you’re basically a good person

but you must lay a foundation.” She remembers thinking, “if this came from you God, I’ve got to hear it again.” And, “boom”, the message was immediately repeated. A feeling of calmness followed this and she returned back to sleep. It wasn’t something that startled her into wakefulness, questioning who was in her room, rather it was a peaceful feeling of acknowledging the message and its affirmation, then returning to sleep.

It was the next day that she began to think about this amazing thing that had happened. Her experience was reminiscent of the biblical passage of Samuel and Eli (1 Samuel:1-10) where Samuel kept returning to Eli asking if he had called. The voice came out of nowhere, it was something she had never experienced before, it was a surprise. The voice wasn’t a voice she would have imagined herself. It wasn’t a booming male voice that she typically would have thought was God’s voice. It was a woman’s voice with a German accent. On reflection she realizes how a woman’s voice represents trust, and how many of her spiritual mentors and trusting relationships have been women. It was a guiding voice contrary to a domineering male voice. She also recognized the voice as different in the nature of how the sound was received. It seemed to come in one ear, not two. “It was as audible as us talking, but it wasn’t out there, it was in here.” She knew within herself that this out of the ordinary experience held significance for her on many levels.

This experience touched her very deeply not only in the moment but perhaps more importantly in what followed. It was instructional in that she thought, “Yes, I must find out what I believe” instead of dabbling in things as she had been. She describes this pivotal experience as deepening her spiritual exploration and being distilling in the years following. For example, following her experience at the ashram she attended a “New

Thought Center”. It was a good experience at the time, but she recognized that there was something missing. The message of the New Thought Center “think and grow rich” did not ring true to her heart. She was not peaceful with having abandoned a whole piece of her own theological formation. The mystical experience helped her distill what was helpful from her explorations and what to let go of. It resonated with something deeper within her that encouraged her to continue to move on through all of the conflicting voices in her life to discover what was more authentically her own.

The echo of her mystical experience, along with her longing for worship and holding something bigger than herself in reverence, recognizing how she had abandoned her Christian roots without closure, remembering how the Swami at the ashram had affirmed her faith roots and encouraged her to explore the teachings of Jesus, all led her to St. Stephen’s College. She wanted to explore Christianity, not just put it aside. She knew the old paradigm of Christianity was limiting but wasn’t sure what she could embrace. St. Stephen’s offered her an opportunity to further explore her questions and to honor her longings. She was able to examine the homophobia of Christianity and understand where that had come from. She recognized her previous Christian construct, “Jesus as my personal saviour”, as a historical viewpoint and moved to a grounded place in her faith of origin from a new perspective, embracing the teachings of Jesus. This transformation in faith also resulted in deep personal transformation. It was liberating to find herself within a Christian paradigm that was accepting, and from where she could claim, “Yes, I am a good person!”

Many years have passed since studying at St. Stephen’s, and Eve continues to grow in her spiritual journey. When asked if she has laid a foundation, she responds, “it

certainly isn't solid or fixed. ... If anything in terms of foundation, I needed to really explore Christianity. ... I needed to explore it to find out what the teachings were all about and to discern what of that I could take with me still, what still had validity for me, and what I could let go of, knowing that it didn't really have any more validity. ... Looking at [the old Christian paradigm] today it is limiting and it really doesn't hold up as the truth. ... So many things that at that age we can't say today because we are dealing with different information.” So a foundation has formed over the years, but it is not a static certainty that she holds, it is more of a knowing.

Eve recognizes the heart way of knowing as a growing thing. It includes the pivotal time at the ashram, having the powerful mystical experience, and the journey that followed and continues. “As I develop and unfold I realize that this is more ... this is more expanded, more from the heart than that was. But at the time I didn't know that.” It's what feels right rather than head formulations. There is a sense of flowing, being open to a wonderful expanded space, and allowing more and new things to come in. We are a part of receiving it and offering it. She believes if we remain open to what seems like it is coming from “a higher level of well-being or vibrational level” it allows us to keep creating. It is here that we also have spiritual experiences that we don't get in our ordinary stressed out and busy lifestyles. We need to allow these experiences rather than dismiss them. By doing so she feels more connected to the source, is moved by beauty, recognizes a sense of awe in appreciating something much bigger, and is more receiving from that place that feels sacred.

Today the powerful mystical experience still resonates for her, not so much in the practical message that it held, but more so in the fact that she experienced something that

is mystery. She states, “At the time it seems like one thing is just happening and then another. One can be a catalyst for something later on, and then when we look, we see how there is actually a connection. At times this thread of connection is slightly visible and even seems to disappear when we look at it. Other times it is full because we are focusing or conscious of it. Even when we are not so aware of it, something internally occurs.” She recognizes that we are part of something more. Rather than a certainty of a particular faith construct she holds a personal ‘knowing’. This is not just head knowledge, but also experiential knowledge. From the mystical experience, and her resulting journey, she carries a real knowing of mystery that is still very much alive with her today.

Eve has had other powerful mystical experiences at other pivotal times in her life. She experienced a trance like state that resolved troubling issues in her relationship with her father while she accompanied him in his final moments on earth and into death. In a dream she received affirmation and encouragement from her great grandmother whom she has never met, or even thought of previously. During a retreat in the mountains she woke up and was drawn by the beauty of the stars in the night sky so intensely that she felt a bidding to come out and climb into the wagon of the Big Dipper. Before, she felt like a sledge hammer was needed to break through her head of conflict, anxiety and compulsive thinking. Now she feels more connected to the Divine. There is more of a heart opening that allows new experiences to enter. She receives the knowing they hold, is moved by them, and acknowledges the mystery they are a part of.

Her sense of the Divine has evolved as part of this journey. As a child, the traditional God was to be feared, he was a threatening person, “God will get you.” Now, God or the Divine is no longer a person apart from her. It is the flow, the expansion and

unfolding of everything. “Life and God are one, not out to punish me. I can be in tune with it or not.” She sees God in the continuing evolution and expansion of life; it is also the intelligence that guides it. “A divine spark is my unfolding, and it’s also guided by that expanding spark. ... I’m part of it, it’s part of me. ... If I think in terms of worship or reverence it is more of being awed by what I experience.” Eve describes everything is Spirit. It can be at a “low vibrational state” (i.e. when we experience anxiety, tension, overworking, conflict, etc.) or at a “high vibrational state” (i.e. when we experience ourselves in a state of expansion and flow.) She recognizes that we are interconnected by energy that flows more readily when our hearts are open. She notes how this is now understood not from only a mythical framework, but one that is also being explored by science in quantum physics. Eve describes how everything is unfolding and it is important for each of us to do our bit. She is encouraged by this new thinking now being expressed from what previously were very traditional institutions, such as a workshop she attended that was facilitated by a Jesuit priest and elderly nun on eco-spirituality. She recognizes a movement, where we are moving forward with everything we’ve been; everything that has shaped us, recognizing what has been useful, and moving on with it. Her desire for more connection with this unfolding is significant, and is grateful to have the time in her life to intentionally experience those things that connect her with the flow.

Eve draws on a variety of practices she has learned throughout her spiritual journey to help her connect with the flow. Many of them are body practices that help her release tension, such as: yoga, meditation, breath work, and Chi Gong. She remembers the deep experience of her six months at the Ashram and is very appreciative of the friend and mentor that she met there who continued to encourage her along her journey and taught

her many of the Buddhist principles and practices. It is very important to her to keep her heart open to new things, and to let them in and feel moved by them. By doing so she experiences a heightened level of functioning and consciousness.

A key part of her present journey is a commitment to, and continued learning in the practices of energy work. Over the past 10 years she has engaged in personal practices that increase her energy flow; “the more I practice it, the more I connect with energy flow to the point that I feel energy flowing through me.” Each morning she spends time getting her energy balanced and flowing, as a result she feels more alert and positive. She has also brought this into her psychology practice, “working with others they usually feel warmth and a more energetic flow within their body and often a reduction of pain, or a calming of agitation.” She recognizes this as “aligning myself with universal energy, which is ‘the ground of our being’, or in traditional language, opening myself up to the love of God.” Now this is an important part of her current spiritual life, daily practice, and work with others. She believes it will become even more important in the future.

When asked if her personal experience of the heart way of knowing has social implications, she quickly responds that she is more compassionate and generous. It’s not something she thinks about, that I “should” be more compassionate; rather when she is open and expanded she just is more loving. Spirit is loving. Recognizing that we are from the same source she feels a connection with others more profoundly. Judging others is foolish. This more open and expanded space influences what she does, and has become involved with groups that help others where help is needed in the world. It is currently moving her into a greater appreciation of the earth and our responsibility with the earth. She explains this movement as, “It’s not something that I think, ‘Oh I should do this’. It’s

more and more of, ‘that feels right’”. In this expanded space, this loving Spirit moves more freely through her and guides her in her actions in the world.

Eve is a psychologist, and when asked about the difference between her hearing a voice and others who have mental illnesses hearing voices, she replied, “I don’t know.” Without having their experience she is very careful about how she classifies theirs. And for this very reason she didn’t tell many others of her experience, because “if they haven’t had their own, it is out of their range of understanding”. As a teen she remembers having a jeering and mocking voice that would repeatedly say, “you are not worth a cent.” At that time she also experienced hallucinations of walls cracking and moving in on her. Her best explanation of this difference is that at the ashram she was in a relatively healthy state, in her teens she was experiencing a lot of unhealthy stress. The voice at the ashram did not upset her, or bring about physical distortions in sensations like in her teens. She felt like the experience at the ashram came from a different place, a sacred space and she was in a comparatively high vibrational state. The other came from a very low vibrational level and therefore created more of the same. At the ashram she felt an integration of energy instead of a breakdown of energy. She describes the experience as something she treasures, “It felt that at that moment something came through me or into me, ... where did it come from, I don’t know, whether it was from outside me or some projection towards me of some intelligence that was guiding. I am open to what many people believe is that there are spiritual forces around us that guide us in some way or protect us at times, you know, why not have them say something to us.” She has since read how when we are connected to a higher level we often hear tones, music or voices. The swami also did not make much of her experience other than acknowledging it, affirming the

message and recognizing it as part of the spiritual life. Eve is cautious in diagnosing or drawing conclusions from others' experiences. She holds an openness and curiosity in defining the source of the experience. What she believes is important is recognizing and affirming the nature and resulting value of the experience.

Summary of George's Experience

About three and a half years ago, George, at the age of 26 years, had a profound experience that was life changing. He likens it to, "I think it was George Orwell that wrote, 'the greatest books are the ones that tell us what we already know', which is pretty cool, because that's sort of how that feeling is, is being told something but at the same time there is this marriage between ego and whatever we want to call that which transcends the ego, there is this sort of shared understanding of there you are, I see you, I know you, but I respect this as something of which I am merely a part." This and subsequent experiences have lead him on an awakened spiritual journey.

This first experience occurred late in the evening while he was reading, preparing for teaching a math class the next day. He started reading something beyond the actual content of the lesson, something that interested him. He has always had a love for the cosmos, as a young boy he dreamed of being an astronaut, and on this particular night he was reading a book that touched on mathematical understandings of the universe. Being deeply engrossed in another's thoughts and ideas is a place he loves being. As he was reading one of the ideas it not only resonated, but "it stopped everything. ... Right after I had this sort of pause in what I was reading, it was almost as though I was experiencing what's known to be channeling. I started writing down, and in fact I knew I couldn't write as fast as I was thinking, so I phoned a friend, a confidant. ... I started this stream

of consciousness where I was rambling about what I'd read and how my world and moreover cosmic view had just changed, an understanding of space and time, I was using concepts that I didn't know at the time, or I wasn't aware of any prior knowledge. Things like discussing the nature of entropy and the universe and with respect to energy itself." After the fact he had to look back and research whether any of this information was grounded in anything, and became curious about, "what was this?"

He describes the experience of this moment, "where I suddenly ceased – it felt as though I ceased to be me." Part of it was absolutely frightening because it felt like he was having an identity crisis or a nervous breakdown, because in an instant, "anything I knew to be true or real or me about myself was suddenly an object outside of myself, and I was able to look at it in this instant and really question is this me or what is me, and almost as fast as that first instinct or thought came to be, it was followed through with something much, much more profound and that was a sense of oneness, a sense that of course that doesn't matter because that is what is. It was always that, I am experiencing life in this world through these eyes, but that's just one, that's just one experience, and there is this sense of the infinite, there is this sense that everything that I've ever done or everything that I've seen and experienced has come to shape and reveal who I am today. And in that moment all of that was – I mean as subjectively as I can say this, all of that was revealed, and it was really fascinating to kind of see, you know, again outside of myself. ... And with that awareness came the idea that that's something that I'm part of, that sort of co-creator, that co-author, which I've come to embrace that idea that as a person I get to co-author my life story, this experience."

Describing the sense of where this awareness came from, he states, “that’s the beauty of it. It wasn’t inside of me ... it was everywhere. The sense of the place – that’s where I’m okay with not understanding. ... I want to say that it was inside of me, but that would then I guess contradict the feeling of the experience, and that was of unity of something that everybody gets to participate in. ... that’s what’s so mysterious about it. It’s a moment. And what we choose to do with it is ours. ... we can dismiss it, ... or begin to believe something new.” George describes himself as someone who likes to be in his head. His curious nature leads him into wanting to know and understand what is presented to him.

It was difficult at first for George to know what to make of this experience. It occurred at a very frenetic time of life where there were a number of relational changes. He was in a new marriage of just over a month, working at a new school near the start of the new school year, had moved to a new house, and his father to whom he is very close had just moved away. Life continued to move forward while this was all part of his experience. With seasonal depression being a part of his life story, and also being a rational thinker, he had to validate his experience in a number of ways: one, “was it a psychotic break, was it delusional, was it just some mania.” Fortunately he had similar experiences at different times of the year, different times of day and different states of mind, which eased his concern about depression being the cause of his experience. The other validation he looked for was, “what within the experience was there to be sought.” The content of his thoughts turned out to be theoretically valid. What was more compelling, was seeking understanding of his experience. He had previously doubted what was considered mystical, “and then I experienced different things, and that doubt

starts to chip away.” He acknowledges how difficult it is to make sense of these experiences with words, and logic and is now, “just respecting, acknowledging and observing that thing that’s called mysticism.”

George believes we are all seekers, and as a seeker himself he wanted to cross-examine this whole experience with someone in the church. “I was going to share my new ideas and new world view with someone that I thought might have some wisdom or advice or – I don’t know – validation.” He intended on sharing it with the minister of the evangelical church where he was then a member. As life would have it, he wasn’t available, but Earle, the dean of St. Stephen’s College was. It was important for him to have his experience heard. “First of all [having it heard by his confidant] validates the existence of the moment. It keeps a type of record of the experience.” Recognizing himself as a neurotic type, he believes that if he hadn’t shared it with his friend and then further explored it with Earle, “I’m sure what would have happened would be this trend where historically I experience something or think something and I just kind of push it down ... I’ll either talk myself out of it or just stop ... I certainly won’t consciously integrate it into life thereafter, and so that was very important to share with somebody the immediate experience.” The continued seeking that arose from his first mystical experience led him to studying at St. Stephen’s college.

For much of his life George has felt out of place, like he didn’t belong. Now he recognizes that much of this feeling came from a theological disparity within him. St. Stephen’s College introduced him to the work of W. Paul Jones’, *Theological Worlds* (Jones 1989), and has helped him, “really for the first time in probably my life feel okay with what I understand my spirituality to be, and to know that yeah, for what it’s worth

I'm not even alone in that." This mystical experience "would have been the moment that took me to that World One." He was raised in what he identifies as a World Four theology, "where it was all about the justice, of right and wrong, ethical views, and I am somewhere on that totem pole of justice in God's eyes." ... "If I said and believed that Jesus died for my sins ... without any understanding of what any of those words meant, then I would be saved." Yet on a gut level he knew that didn't feel right for him. "The God of my understanding sure has changed, you know, it isn't anthropocentric, ... splitting hairs and dogmatic stuff really to me doesn't matter anymore. All of those thoughts [of my experience] wouldn't have meshed with where I was in my church life at that time. It didn't. But to be honest I always felt again out of place in that world. And it wasn't until this and then subsequently the experience with people at St. Stephen's where there was that belonging once again in that spiritual realm." "That's one of the biggest joys, is having that old belief, just do what it did. It's okay that I used to think like that, that I used to believe in something that for a lot of people works. And I'm going to assume that. I can say with more conviction that it didn't work for me. I never felt good about it – I felt as though I was compromising something; whether it was belief or pride or happiness or comfort, but I always felt as though something was compromised in the whole equation of me with my church life growing up. ... it wasn't integrated into everything else that I was doing. You know, it was just that sort of typical one-day obligation a week. But again – it wasn't something that I was fully comfortable with ever."

For George now, there isn't a face or personality to God. But there is certainly something there, best felt or understood in that moment he calls Love. It is a place "a

person is free to decide to access, it is a very transparent place where it is all about that honesty – honest with themselves and transparent in their intentions and their being I suppose. It is so much easier to get to that core of what might exist between two people or even for that person at any moment.” He recognizes a relational dynamic, “that I guess is the beauty of life, that you live to experience yourself in connection with something else and with that something else feels fulfilling and almost unspeakable – to know God.” “It isn’t monolithic, it isn’t for someone to attain – grab and hold onto.” In fact in his experience it has always been in the act of giving or sharing with somebody or in nature that he has felt this dynamic relationship.

George now relishes learning more about different religions, and different paradigms, recognizing that we are far more similar than different and that our human constructs are what hold us apart. He believes we are moving towards something more integrated, but is frustrated by how slowly it appears to be progressing in the world – yet he is still optimistic. “To avoid the existential crisis I need something to believe in. And for a while it was just the sort of scientific evidence that well, at the very least we are, you know, all bound by the same sort of rules and molecules that are all around us. ... But that wasn’t enough. I guess the next thing was embracing the mystery which seems to shroud the whole thing. ... it isn’t limited anymore to a specific religion. Now it’s shared ... Christianity is a way to God ... it isn’t about one way, there is an ability to share these beautifully profound moments, but that comes at the cost of sacrificing the ego ... taking ego out of the equation, out of institutions, and lots of biographies change. Things become radically altered.” While George is not currently a part of a church tradition, he remains open minded, and contemplates what his direction is, not only for

himself, but also as he is soon to become a father. While he recognizes how much his beliefs have changed in this unfolding process, he doesn't begrudge his earlier theology, as it is part of his story, and "it's all about the journey."

George continues to grow in this new spiritual awareness, which was again extended in one of the most recent and profound spiritual experiences he has had to date. His family was in the Dominican Republic for his brother's wedding. On the first morning after their arrival he got up early before anyone else was moving about. "I decided to abandon my own tendency to create and therefore become neurotic about an agenda. ... I was by choice removed from the old familiar climate and now I was part of something that, you know, I almost feel has been part of me from the very beginning, ... like an experience where it's so familiar you almost wonder if it's something that goes back to our experience in utero – you're part of an environment that is humid, it's about as warm as the human body is outside, and that has always helped me feel a little more connected in the first place. ... If I proceeded according to my agenda I'd finish doing the workout thing and then I would quickly go get changed and wait for everybody to start something to do. But on this day I decided just to go with what was happening, and it was just rain. It was this warm rain. So I was walking around in my shorts and T-shirt absolutely soaked, and I could smell the ocean, and that of course was the big pull. I've always known that I love that proximity to the ocean. Going back to childhood I grew up close to the ocean for several years of my life in my early years, so that's very special for me. I walk down to the beach and there it was. So, again the only thing to do was to jump in."

“So at that moment that oneness this time wasn’t just limited to this sense of connectedness with people, but this time and probably one of the most profound spiritual experiences for me to date was that morning, because it lasted for about ten minutes. It was a feeling of connection to everything in nature. ... This was something that just happened. It was this connection with nature. And I mean nothing more powerful than me stepping into something as vast and powerful as the ocean to be reminded in -- we think of that word “humility”, and sometimes, especially where I come from that has a negative connotation at times. But it was this humility. It was being humbled, and at the same time grateful that I was able to be aware, as a human being, that I was able to be aware of where I was and what all of this was, because everything around me – and I believe this now, and this helps ground me if I’m having a bad day – but everything around us is made up of exactly that which constitutes us ... and that old rivalry between science and religion, and maybe so, but I know for me there is no rivalry when it comes to understanding and learning more about that which simply is. ... And it hasn’t yet been disproven that matter and energy cannot be destroyed. And if that’s true, then everything that came before me on an elemental level can, can describe me on that level, on that plane. So it didn’t matter. It was just this awareness outside of myself -- this sense – and I think this is such a human thing, this need to feel not only part of, but to feel okay with immortality. You know, that I will die, but that hardly matters. And I’m lying if I’m sitting here saying that that’s how I walk around thinking everyday.”

On an experiential level this experience was similar to the first in that it was an amazing ecstatic state, again filled with an expanding awareness. Embracing that first

wave, he likens to a full submersion baptism and being awakened to something he has always felt is so crucial, “that sense of wonder”. The whole theme was “just allowing myself to be pulled, to be pulled out of myself. ... I don’t know if it’s a profoundly human privilege, or if it’s a human limitation that most of the time I’m inside myself.” He recognizes how when he lives according to that ‘pull’, that’s when he finds himself engaged in new activities that “introduce me to things that I’d felt before.” “It’s almost as though everything converges or collapses to this moment and you get to observe the moment and see yourself and who you are ... a real understanding of who you are in yourself in this time and place and then becoming familiar with the cycle that okay, after this, life goes on.” “Here is something that’s always been, and I’ve always been part of something, this thing all along, but here is a moment of, I guess, lucidity where you get to really bask in it, and just enjoy it.” This time there was no fear, likely indicative of where he is in life. He and his wife are expecting the birth of a child, he is experiencing success in his work doing what he loves to do, and “the joy speaks for itself” in him and in his students. He is experiencing relief from self-doubt and carries a perspective of abundance that thrives from the experiences.

As a result of his new worldview George recognizes many changes in his life. A reconciliation of mind and spirit has occurred; he loves being in the intellectual realm, but realizes at some point that can leave him empty and still wanting. “That’s not the answer alone. ... It’s getting in touch with those pulls, the things that pull us, and that aren’t so readily explained or written. Finding words for it is very difficult, so just kind of being in those moments is most rewarding.”

Out of these experiences he feels gifted and enamored with learning in a new way. Contrary to his upbringing where it was expected that a certain period of his life would be dedicated to learning and then used to exist or subsist for the rest of his life, he now appreciates life long learning. It has opened his thinking to possibilities he previously would have dismissed or overlooked, such as: Jungian collective unconscious, Richard Tarnas (Tarnas 2006, Tarnas 1996) and Richard Bucke (Bucke 1991) and the chronological evolution of philosophy, the impact of the cosmos on human consciousness and psyche. He enjoys learning of other religions and world paradigms, and exploring others' understandings and experiences of mystery. He now has a deep appreciation for the works of others, a pull towards learning, "not out of vanity, but out of grace."

He relates to his experiences, if viewed from the perspective of Hebrew Scriptures, as prophetic; changing his own understanding of reality. He describes wondering, "why is it that I'm not always on this path – it's like some sort of frequency that I'm either dialed into or not." He is passionate about this understanding of oneness and interconnectedness of all things. He enjoys developing a greater awareness, not only of himself and how he interacts with the world, but also how he is part of that world around him. He recognizes that, "I'm not alone, and I never was, and that we're all part of something that is in a sense infinite ... coming to believe that has really changed the way that a person can choose or not, to get hung up on the trivial matters."

One of the powerful integrations from his experience has been what he describes as "shedding doubt that comes around ego" and always questioning himself. Instead he is, "looking at everything around that is, the different needs and wants of people in life

... and realizing everything today is just because it can be this way. ... I don't need to dislike what I do, alternatively I can absolutely love what I do. That comes out of this looking at stuff, matters, situations, whatever, outside of myself. ... What I want is always subject to states, where it's the ego that's in control of me." Instead of compromising a situation with expectations and a certainty in himself, this new level of awareness helps him remain more centered in the moment, awakened to that sense of wonder, possibility, and gratitude that embraces everything that is.

George believes there are new possibilities for larger social and world issues from this new paradigm. He specifically speaks of ecology and expresses having a passion for world peace. He has a unique perspective having grown up in a military family, initially aspiring to be a fighter pilot in his youth, then recognizing the complexities of foreign policy and clandestine agendas and the disparity that runs very deep, of which he wanted no part. With the world starting to think about things globally, especially around environmental issues, he believes this may trigger a new paradigm of thought – a greater appreciation for the interdependence of all of life – and inspire new approaches to these critical issues. He is cautious around the use of the word hope, not wanting to project change to the future or the responsibility for these new solutions on to others, but rather to hold hope that will inspire change in the here and now, in us. Coming from his own experience he says, “it's not a mystery when I get out of myself and help other people. ... It's that idea of giving which is so counterintuitive, because I can be a very self-centered person who wants a lot. ...but I've found that once again there isn't a mystery when it happens time and again that the consistent feeling as a result of giving is joy.” He is grateful to be in the vocation of teaching, where “it's not a matter of

trying to give, you have to. It's a giving profession." He sees himself working towards this greater end of supporting a changing world paradigm, in his vocation as a teacher, inspiring students to learn and grow through the exploration of different perspectives, and in his further personal learning and explorations at St. Stephen's College, and "who knows from there."

George describes times when he has experienced similar ecstatic moments in different states and stages in his life. He refers to the work of Ken Wilbur (Wilbur 2006, 313) and Andrew Cohen (Cohen 2010) in their delineation between states and stages to help understand these experiences. Stages are something that we evolve through, whereas states are fleeting and can jump. "We can be in stage whatever in life, and experience different states along the way." How we integrate these states into our life is dependent on the stage we are at. As a runner he has experienced what some boil down to a 'runner's high', "there was that point of that feeling at the same time mortal and immortal; here I am, I am in motion, and I feel nothing if great. ... like it's just this sense of perpetual motion, and that's a really cool feeling." He also had drug induced experiences. When he would use drugs it was with the idea of seeking shaministic-like states. "I wanted to feel, I wanted to know more, to feel more, but the trap for someone that's got any sort of addictive tendencies is that in a very short time it just becomes a means and it just becomes a matter of getting, and finding ways and means to getting more." His exercise and drug free experiences are even more profound in his awareness, that "wow, this is for us and we don't necessarily need to go there. ... and that's where theologically it becomes an issue of grace for me. I can experience this. I don't have to will it. In the Dominican [Republic] self will had nothing to do with it [his

experience]. Everything I was doing was sort of a matter of just listening or feeling a pull.” It was also the “greatest high I’ve ever felt.”

During this journey from the time of his first mystical experience, he has come to understand the interconnectedness of his own mind-body and spirit in deeper ways. He has developed a respect for and is attuned to the interconnection of the seasons and how that affects him. In this same way he has become attuned to the many shifts that occur within from a spiritual perspective. He describes this spiritual understanding as something beyond the idea of conscience, “when I’m back in that zone or when I’m aware of my own spirituality, then it’s very easy to evaluate the milieu, of everything else that’s going on around – it allows for clarity, an adjustment of priorities. It allows me to put those things in a perspective that again to this point has been consistently successful for me. ... Without that spiritual grounding or that coming back to -- or just having that part awakened ... then I’m stuck in me, and I’m doing things my way. ... I’m doing things in whatever state I’m at, and sometimes that realm used to be pretty confused in short order.” He describes creating really complex systems that need not be so complex when centered spiritually, and how those things that come from spirit endure over time. “It’s a strange, almost – paradox, where it’s a seeking spirit while being spirit.”

Reading and learning, exercising, listening to and playing music, and helping others are all ways that George uses to help him remain centered. One of the gifts, especially of the first experience was, “I became enamoured once again with learning.” With an expanded understanding of, “I have the ability to learn much.” It nurtures that child-like wonder and exploration, and he just knows, “there needs to be time for that.”

“If I don’t play the drums or exercise for oh, say a week, then my mood is off, and it’s apparent to me, it’s apparent to my wife, it just changes everything.” He experiences the greatest joy from, “either things I do, that are shared with people, or as a result of giving something.” He feels especially blessed to be able to do this as a teacher, “especially with teaching music, it’s all about giving and opening up young minds. ... planting that seed for life long learning with kids, ... constantly challenging them as a fellow student.” All of these ways have become important “gateways to the self. ... ways of getting back to that centered and spiritual essence.”

Summary of Karen’s experience

Karen describes a journey she took together with two nursing students and two young gay men with AIDS in the early 1990s. Karen was a nursing instructor and while she was supporting the students in their learning and care of the male patients who were actively dying, she experienced a very powerful spiritual moment that has stayed with her over the years. A previous spiritual experience provided grounding for her beliefs, however this experience brought together her spiritual knowing to a different dimension.

At the time of this journey, Karen was in her mid 40s. Not a lot was known about AIDS, and the students (and our culture of that time) did not have much exposure to the gay community. As an instructor she wanted to support the students in a potentially rich learning experience in caring for a gay couple who both were hospitalized with AIDS. This would also be the first experience the students had in caring for someone into their death.

The relationships formed over a period of about 6 weeks, during the students’ clinical placement on a medical unit in an active treatment hospital. When the students

and Karen first met the couple they were being cared for in separate rooms. One of the men asked if it was possible to be together. In the students' first advocating attempt to administration this request was denied; administration did not feel it was necessary for the patients' care. As one man's health continued to decline quite significantly, the grief of his partner became more apparent. It was agonizing for him to visit his partner due to his own declining mobility and health. The students pressed their case to administration, believing the patients would be much better together and to share the last while with each other. Administration finally agreed to have the men moved to the same room.

Karen and the students spoke often of how they could provide what the patients wanted or needed to make these last days together comfortable, secure and safe. One man became qualified to move to the palliative unit in the hospital. This was the next hurdle; the students approached administration, advocating that the patients were too close to death and they needed each other. Administration agreed to keep the patients on the unit.

The students, with the coaching of Karen, spoke with the men about how they could help them through this transition time to death. In addition to having familiar items from their home brought in by family and friends to decorate their room, they requested to have some candles present. Yet another meeting with administration was required, as candles were against fire code. After a visit to the fire chief and consultations with upper management, the students got permission to have one candle under glass, with the provision that it only be lit near the end. The patients were very appreciative of the students' efforts in advocating on their behalf and were encouraged by their smiles and youthfulness.

The students and Karen felt very privileged in how generous these men were in opening themselves up to them. In addition to the dynamics of forming their relationship with the patients, the students also learned much about the other relationship dynamics in these men's lives. Friends in many ways were these men's family. However the mother of one dying man was very present. With her encouragement his father overcame his resistance and did visit frequently near the end of his son's life. It was very difficult for all of them. The mother was a religious woman, and asked her son if a priest could visit. He was resistant to this idea, but knowing it would be meaningful for his mother he agreed. An Anglican priest visited the couple a few times, and they were surprised by how personable he was, how he didn't preach God, he knew when to be silent, and when to talk. All of these people ended up being of support and comfort to the patients through this transitioning period.

As death became imminent for the one patient, the students asked the men what was important for them. They requested to have a handful of people present – the father, mother, a friend, the students and Karen. Approximately an hour prior to the one man's death, the people gathered, the candle was brought out, soft jazz music (John Coltrane and Miles Davis) was playing in the background, the beds were pushed together, and the healthier man made a point of care giving as much as he could for his dying partner. Karen stated, "It was very, very touching. What we were seeing was a married couple in love with each other, and the absolute love and affection they had for each other was so apparent, and it was just so moving for all of us to see that and to experience that."

As his death was very near, the students and Karen remained in the patients' room. The room was dark except for the candle and a bit of light from the next room. Everyone

was gathered and held hands forming a circle around the beds; touching both the dying man and his partner. Karen remembers standing there in a meditative state while focusing on openly offering the patient and his partner healing energy through thought, something she had learned at a holistic health course earlier in her life. Everyone's attention was focused in this moment. The room was completely silent except for the scheyne-stoking breath of the dying partner. It was at the time of this man's death that Karen describes, "And honest to God, I just felt this energy. It was the most incredible thing. And of course I was just feeling it, just feeling it, and I didn't know where it came from. It caught me off-guard because I never experienced it before. I --- it was like this was meant to be. We are here because we need to be here and there was this spirit with us that was warm and nurturing, and --- it's hard to describe. I just felt this glow. ... I don't think I have experienced it since then. But it really has stayed with me and always will."

Karen describes experiencing something in that room that she can't explain. She's not sure; "perhaps it was the oneness that we were experiencing with each other as we were touching and aware of the man's breath." She describes how the patient wasn't struggling; he was so comfortable and so at peace. It seemed like he was aware that he was surrounded by love, and she states how she too felt surrounded by love. She describes the feeling as being so strong that it felt like she was almost being picked up right off her feet. She was getting back something, "I was receiving back something, but it was so powerful that I just wasn't prepared for it." Her attention had been on offering something, to receive something herself in that moment was surprising and caught her off guard.

Karen describes the experience as good and meaningful in many different ways. Although the students didn't experience what she had, it was satisfying to have the students experience what death could be for people that are suffering, in fact one of the students commented on how she didn't know death could be like this; so beautiful and peaceful.

Karen states it was a coming together of her belief system in an experiential way. Philosophically and intellectually she believed that we are all connected in an energy, something beyond us that is the glue holding everything together, a type of synergy. But to actually experience the feeling of connectivity on that level was new! She had never associated it with a higher energy or power until that time. She had believed it intellectually before, even felt it somewhat at times, but never felt it in so profound a way as at that particular moment – it went beyond intellectualizing to being an embodied and experiential understanding. Because she does not consider herself a religious person it caught her off guard. “It’s absolutely a whole other knowing. And I’m no closer to understanding it, except I know it exists now. For myself.” As Karen tells this story of her experience she often holds her hand over her heart.

The power and significance of this experience is very tied to the relational and connective experience with the other people involved. The attention and awareness of someone dying, holding each other's hands and touching that person, reinforced for her in a powerful way that there is something beyond us, but something within her, that connects us. We are all connected to each other and to something greater. It is not just out there, it is inside her too – “within, without, surrounding me, inside me.” It is a comfort inside her knowing “there is a connectedness to something that’s good, that’s positive, that’s

nurturing.” The relational and personal nature of this experience provides a great comfort for her in her life, knowing this amazing connectivity. It taught her in a soulful way that there are other dimensions that connect us.

She knew it was spiritual, a God-like experience. However she is hesitant to use the word God for a number of reasons. She is suspicious of the use of ‘God’ because of the notion of male or female applied to the understanding of God. The word comes with so much baggage; all the various connotations and interpretations. The most comfortable way she could name it is a ‘creative force’, something that is life giving or in this instance, taking away. “For me, experiencing this I know that, yes, there is something beyond us that is also within us that is good and is loving and nurturing and all of that. But I think sometimes the words get in the way. ... It’s so easy to say God because God is what we’ve been conditioned to think. That’s the label.” She recognizes how difficult it is to understand our human experience of phenomena and that we grapple with it and by labeling it somehow it makes it easier for ourselves. But she sees it as something sacred, something beyond her understanding and anyone’s ability to put it into a particular framework. It is just much more complex than any of the labels and frameworks we have created, which somehow diminishes what she knows from experience.

Coming from a nursing and science background she shies away from using the word ‘God’ because it names her experience too loosely. Although she respects science she is also suspicious of the ability of mathematicians, scientists, or quantum physicists to create a formula or theory to explain this experience of oneness and connectivity. Again she thinks it reduces it too much – making it too easy and simple. “And maybe it is that simple, but I don’t think it is. The spiritual world isn’t quantifiable. At least for me it

isn't. If they do come up with the theory, they are missing a huge dimension that I don't think any scientist is able to capture." She speaks of a dimension of knowing that she doesn't believe can be captured scientifically, quantifiably, or by the religious constructs she is aware of.

Karen recalls an earlier experience she had during a holistic health course in the late 1980s when she practiced tai chi as a daily ritual. She had been practicing the intricate movements for a while, and she describes her body feeling a heaviness as she used her mind to learn and guide her movements. This particular day the group was doing tai chi outside. It was a warm lovely day as they entered the movements. To her amazement she didn't have to do a thing, "It was like somebody was – something was guiding my movements because I was just flowing." She felt so light, and she felt this connection with the energy around her, "I was just in sync and I was doing all of those movements and not even thinking about it, just feeling it." It required no effort; there was a lightness of being, and a sense of flowing with the energy around her. In this experience she especially recognized the connection of energy with nature. For the whole day after that she felt like she was a different person.

The experiential knowing of her tai chi experience in combination with the intellectual learning in the holistic course helped Karen pull out of a difficult time only a few months later, following the birth of her second child in which she and the baby were hospitalized for a viral infection. When she returned home she did not have a lot of support and felt alone. She was experiencing panic attacks, which of course terrified her, having always enjoyed, and feeling very comfortable caring for her babies before. The holistic course emphasized how we all have healing energy and we are all connected in

some way. They taught her ways to connect with energy that helped her recognize she had some control in her life. Her experience of the flow of energy in that profound moment of tai chi helped her relate to that in a bodily knowing beyond just a head knowing that greatly supported her in her healing, that is still relevant today. At that time she felt greatly comforted in knowing she was connected and not alone, and she continues to find comfort in this today.

Both of her experiences expanded her experiential knowing. However they contributed to her knowing in different ways. In the tai chi experience she became aware of her personal interconnectivity with a life giving energy, and especially her connectivity with nature. The experience with the students and patients was very relational, appreciating the interconnectivity with everyone, a sense of this connection being beyond us and within us. It drew her to associate the experience with a higher energy or power in a new and profound way.

Both experiences have resulted in her looking at people and nature in a more sacred way. She sees our human existence and experience, and all of nature around us as miraculous. She emphasizes how important it is to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness and diversity that each person and life as a whole has to offer. In her nursing she appreciates the enormous capacity of the human body to adapt. Knowing what a good death is she supports families in moving along with a dying person so this might happen for them. In caring for someone, and in their death she is able to enjoy and celebrate their life. She recognizes the value of people, and life itself and does her part in nurturing it along. These experiences have deepened her appreciation for life itself. In particular they

spoke to her hunger and longing as a spiritual seeker for a deeper connection and experience of life.

Other than the students, Karen told her experience to only one other person - a fellow nursing instructor who had similar understandings around healing energy. The woman had grown up in a Catholic family and was more religious than Karen. She understood Karen's experience as "God speaking to me." On one level Karen accepts this, but the aliveness and fullness of the experience seems more than that. "I can't always share things like that with other people. For one thing you want to hold it close, and in trying to explain it to other people that don't understand, it dilutes the experience a little bit, so I like to hold it close. ... It feels good to share it with somebody that understands." The experience provides a personal comfort that Karen has inside; knowing that there is a connectedness to something that's good, positive and nurturing. For herself and her life that is an important change that she now cherishes.

Karen describes herself as always searching, with a curiosity she can't remember ever not having. In her teens her parents introduced her to Unitarianism that supported her in exploring different religions. It helped her recognize at a young age that there is more than one way to interpret God and our experiences of God, and that there is not merely any one way that is necessarily the true way. This early experience pointed her in the direction of further personal searching. She attended church at times with friends, but never felt comfortable sitting in pews, unable to relate to what was being said. Her curiosity and searching for the age old question of 'meaning in life' drew her interest as an adult in holistic health that reinforced beliefs that were starting to gel on an energetic and spiritual level. It was out of this context that she grew in her spiritual experiences.

Karen believes we can't replicate the experiences she had in our world today due to the many distractions. In both instances she didn't have distractions, all of her attention was in the moment and on the same wavelength with those around her. Music, painting, and yoga are activities that help her connect with the energy around her, to help her move beyond thinking and into silence. She struggles to give herself permission to create opportunities to do this. She believes we have been conditioned to think it is a waste of time, and that we are not using time wisely. Unless she was living at one with nature and possibly with a few other people, she doesn't believe she could create a life conducive to such experiences. She longs for that depth in her life, and the awareness that it is there and that it is possible gives her hope.

Summary of Sarah's Experience

Sarah describes having settled into the spiritual knowing that comes from experience over the past five or six years. The intensity of her experiences range from gentle tugs to those that are "wow" experiences that completely fill her. She was attracted to participate in this research because of its focus on the experience of the sense of Spirit instead of strictly the intellectually based knowing common in theological studies. She is also curious to know "if others' hearts know the same way as her heart knows."

In a brief synopsis of her spiritual journey she describes being a kid, "you just know the divine and come from a place of spirit." Early in her life she took on the beliefs of her parents within the high Anglican tradition. Participating in youth group and teaching Sunday school was a big part of her teens, but at the same time she wanted independence from all that she had been brought up with. Some of the beliefs of her Jewish friends made sense to her, and still resonate with her today. In her 20s she married a man who

was Catholic. They raised and baptized their two children in the church. During this time she engaged in a more intellectual exploration of faith and belief with very little acknowledgment of personal experience. As a result of her divorce, and annulment of their marriage of ten years, and two children, she had an immediate and strong reaction, “like bile”, against anything church or religion-based. The incongruence she felt during this time kept her away from church and conscious spiritual exploration for twelve or more years.

However she couldn’t deny the stirrings of her heart, especially with a number of curious incidents seemingly pointing to something more. At work one day she had a sense of a beam of light coming into her office, an office without windows to direct sunlight. Her young son upon waking in the mornings, naturally filled with gratitude and accepting of spirit, would share with his mother how he was “hugging everything”. On moving into a new home she could see a church from her kitchen window that kept drawing her attention. These and other movements, and discussions with various people led her to further exploration. She started attending and participating in the church across from her home; attending retreats and frequent services. When her son was in his pre-teens and also filled with questions, frequently they went church shopping, primarily drawn by the music of the various places. Her ongoing questioning and discussions with various people led her on a meandering path visiting many denominations of the Christian tradition and to involvement in the Bahai faith. Her path continues, currently outside of any particular faith tradition.

Sarah states she has always had experiences of the heart, but always held them under the guise of religion. This was the only way she knew it to be allowed. Now she doesn’t

feel she needs to do that. The gradual laying on of experiences, one on top of the other led her to truly accept the experiences for what they were, “giving up the resistance to something bigger than I”. “You actually feel it ... feel it in your heart, it radiates from there. ... It’s almost more than a knowing ... a sense of being so sure that it is. ... so stirring and strong ... in some ways it doesn’t need validation.” There were periods of time when the experiences came so quickly she had no time to doubt, reassurance kept presenting itself.

She describes the experience of the heart in a number of ways, many of the expressions felt simultaneously. “You’re so full and just so joyous, ... you don’t know if you’re giving or --- where that feeling of love is coming from or going to. ... It sounds weird, but it’s like knowledge in your heart or sense in your heart, because you have that sense of calm and understanding after you have really experienced something of a huge magnitude. ... Then you’re left with a gentle calmness. ... You can go back and there is something very grounding about that experience and knowing about the divine through your heart as opposed to your head. ... It removes the fear, while your head is involved you can still conjure up all sorts of fear and questions.” The knowing of the heart is experiential and creates a unique sense of grounded knowing different than head knowledge.

For Sarah the knowledge of the heart isn’t a static knowledge. “It isn’t just about knowing God or the divine. It’s about knowing what you’re called upon to do ... what you are supposed to do with that knowledge of the divine.” Now she recognizes how these experiences tend to crowd themselves together and come faster when she is about to, or is going through a major change, learning or growth; a metamorphosis in her life. It’s

like a preparation that results in “Oh, okay, now I understand. ... Like a divine intervention of help and support. ... It kind of fills my soul up and allows me and pushes me through whatever is happening.” She’s uncertain if it occurs because she is open and knows that she needs it, or if it takes place outside of herself. “I don’t know. But there doesn’t seem to be a need to find out.”

These times of change happen fast for her and with intensity. She explains how “you can’t maintain that kind of intensity, but you do maintain the knowledge of having had the experience(s).” She describes the ebbs and flows like seasons, resulting in time for reflection and assimilation of this knowing into her life, her being, and her everyday.

Sarah doesn’t believe the experiences are triggered by something emotional in her life. In fact she believes the experiences are stronger when she isn’t emotional about something. They tend to occur “when I can get to that place and just be and accept, so I’m not afraid, I’m not excited, -- I’m just kind of acquiescing to my world, just kind of being one with everything that is.” The experiences bring with them emotion, but it isn’t provoked by an emotion.

They occur most often when her mind and energy is quieted, often experienced just as she is going to sleep or in that early waking up stage when she is not asleep nor quite awake. She can also reach a similar state when meditating. Its a place of “feeling a presence, feeling more than what I know, more than what I see, but just feeling such a feeling of safety, of everything being right, and a sense of almost being looked after. ... Your experience is so strong that you’re full of spirit and you’re so connected with anything divine.”

She recalls one experience, “literally it took me a minute to figure out what was happening, ... because I hadn’t really started my thought process for the day, and almost like a sense of just being full, like being an empty cup full ... just being totally full of spirit. ... I found myself crying, just weeping, ... it took me a minute to figure out okay, am I having a dream, am I awake, oh my goodness, this feels beautiful... and just deciding to go with it. ... Your head is so out of it, and your heart just feels like it’s -- It’s like all the love that is coming into your heart is going out of your heart. Like you don’t know if it’s coming in or going out.... It is so magnificent, that it doesn’t matter if you’re taking it in or giving it out, it’s the same thing.”

A number of her experiences have involved other people, possibly acting as a conduit in some way. She recounts a recent experience of being on a walk by herself on a beautiful day in a treed neighborhood of the city. On her way back home she saw an older lady, likely in her eighties who had “so much life in her, she was so happy, she was just totally full of spirit. And when I was talking to her, I mean I could feel – I couldn’t even tell the difference between what she was feeling and what I was feeling. It was just that divine connection. ... I’ll probably never see her again, but we both felt like we had to just spend a few minutes and share.” In fact they went and had a cup of tea together.

She describes how they had both been walking alone for a while, and were in a meditative prayerful state. She describes that place as being without ego, “because you’re just walking and there is no one else around. You’re just with God or the divine, so that closeness, you’re feeling it. ... really reverent about the day.” “You just allow whatever to enter you, you’re just so much at peace, you’re not censoring, you’re just allowing. And she was part of what I was receiving. And the neat thing was that it was happening

for both of us at the same time.” Acknowledging that they were very different people, she also recognized being “so connected and so light, because our heart was feeling the exact same thing.” She describes that point of connection, “it doesn’t sound particularly significant, but what drew us together was the place that we were both in at the same moment, it was so joyous, we had to respect it and honour it and discuss it.” “How often would you meet a stranger and just tell them exactly what you were feeling, and how absolutely beautiful they looked.... But it was so profound.”

Most of her experiences hold a knowing that is not new. “It’s something ancient. It’s almost like a confirmation of what I’ve always known that I’m coming back to. ... It’s familiar, it’s reassuring, some of me knows this. I’ve put it away, but some of me knows this. It’s not questionable. ... Like an old experience, it’s like an old shoe or an old friend. ... You long for it, the comfort of it.”

This ancient knowing was a part of her experience on vacation in the Dominican [Republic]. On the beach watching the sun she suddenly thought, “I’m not sure how I know, but I sure feel that this has all been fragmented, and why we’re here is very simple; we’re just supposed to put all those pieces back together to make the light brighter. It was just so simple. There was no question. It wasn’t like I heard a voice telling me this is how it is. I just knew.” This experience resonated with what she had heard from her Jewish friends in her teens, but even more so, it was like an “ancient knowing bubbling forth.”

These experiences impact her day-to-day life, “hugely!” It provides a sense of direction and purpose. She knows whether or not she is doing the right thing, “if my heart doesn’t have those sorts of feelings, then I’ve moved away from what I need to do. If I

change my course or move back and I begin to get those stirrings and feelings again, then to me that's confirmation." "Somehow I know that what we're all doing is trying to get back into that presence, into divine light and energy. We're trying to connect with each other to make that – the divine stronger and brighter and brighter." She allows the spirit to guide her like following the flow of the river instead of fighting upstream.

The experiences fill her with love. "It does fill you with love, it also allows you to come from a more loving place when you're dealing with a difficult situation, difficult person - someone who maybe on the surface seems impossible to love or to accept on a human level. You can move past that and love and accept them just on a spiritual level." "If you don't know if the love is going in or out, then when you just allow it to be, ... it is helpful when it doesn't matter what the argument is. What matters is maintaining relationship and maintaining some level of loving presence between you, ... past the human connection, to a soul connection, it allows you to strive for that more and to not get caught up in the silliness of stuff sometimes."

It helps her to let her walls down; moving out of a place of fear and striving for perfection, to one of love for self and others. She recognizes that she can't always walk this path, as soon as something triggers an emotion, fear, or insecurity "we go back to what we've been conditioned to do for years."

She holds a peace around change that she didn't have before. She has this sense that "in the grand scheme of things everything is going to be just fine." This is unusual for her as she often lived "waiting for the other shoe to drop."

There is a trust that exists that didn't before. She experiences dry times, but as she gets older she feels "the holes aren't as deep or dry." When she travels deep interiorly, the

learning she has acquired and the things that have transpired are a foundation allowing her to sink even deeper. Previously in dry times she would doubt or question, now she may still go there in her head, but “when I’m feeling it there is no question.”

The experiences have changed how she knows God or the divine, but she is still having a difficult time knowing what word(s) to use. “For me it provides a certain security, a certain something about what I’m searching for. ... I’ve been involved in different faiths and there is always someone else saying that ‘no no, what we believe is better or different, or this is the right way’. Where there is no question about what I feel in my heart is the right way, as opposed to what I felt in my head in terms of the teachings, the dogma, the spiritual practices or traditions or whatever. ... I don’t even question it, because if you feel it in your heart, it isn’t about a religion, it’s about spirituality. ... People can question your faith alliance.”

In her experience of religions, God had been personified. “It’s an intellectual way of trying to know God because God has to be like us, otherwise you can’t identify or connect. ... I mean how can you even get your head around the fact that God doesn’t have form, when all you know is a world that has form.” “What we’ve done with the prophets is found our connection to the divine through them, ... they’ve been able to share their experience of spirit and divine entering them. People try to follow the path that they’ve led to have the same experience and live in the same light.” She knows God differently now.

Her experience with energy work changed this for her, “There was no question of where the energy was coming from and what it was. It wasn’t coming from my head or anything I had conjured up in my brain, imagining an old man with a beard, or a goddess

or whatever. ... So with God you can't define it in your head because there is always an argument. ... But in your heart, because the presence is so strong, you can't doubt. ... It's like you feel it with your whole body, because it's an experience, my heart knows because my body is experiencing." She feels this presence in many ways: getting goose bumps in the back of her neck, a warmth, sometimes a real rush of presence, and other times a quickening of her stomach like when she was pregnant. "It's like [the energy] gets concentrated. ... When I'm doing energy work it's like the energy that is all around you and the loving presence that is surrounding you all the time, it's like it's magnified and it's streamlined, you can literally feel the energy running down through my arms, through my shoulders and out through my hands. At the same time, I mean my whole fourth chakra area feels like it's totally radiating. ... Like an overwhelming flood of gratitude or something that kind of pours out." She now recognizes God in us, around us, beyond us, rather than thinking God is somehow different and separate from us. Now it is part of the same energy. For her the divine has become unnamable and she no longer affiliates herself with any faith group.

Her experience has changed how she recognizes death. "I think that God is in us, around us and beyond us, you know, and so what is beyond us is the same as what's in us and around us, and that kind of sense is new for me. Like I used to almost think it was a little different ... there was a difference between God and someone passing. So I still had a sense, a separate energy being God and a separate energy being the soul that has passed. Now, for me I think it's the same energy, it's the same thing. I used to get really uncomfortable when people would talk about you being God, or God being in you. ... Now I think well, no, like it's all pieces of God, it's all pieces of the divine, it's all the

same. It's pretty much the life force, you might not be in this physical world, the life force still lives, that energy still is." Sarah discusses reincarnation, with some uncertainty with the form it takes, in terms of souls living past lives. However she does believe in life everlasting but questions how that happens or what it looks like, "I know that it's not in a physical form or anything that we would even identify, or be able to identify, but the only thing that to me seems to make sense is that it's part of the fragments going back to create more light, so the more light that we can bring on earth, the more light we're able to take back."

The heart-way of knowing affects how she interacts with the world in two key ways. First she believes when you come from the heart it influences your actions in a way that is different from your head. She believes that like attracts like, and "if people would allow themselves to feel – to have those experiences and to let those experiences settle in their heart, where the heart is doing the listening, and the acting as opposed to the head, then I think we would build stronger communities, supportive communities and there wouldn't be room for some of the ugliness that's all around us." Secondly "the heart has a way of just knowing God differently ... it changes your perspective and how you approach what you're doing or how you perceive the world." It is a personal change that alters how she interacts with and perceives the world around her.

"Living it, talking about it, and praying" are three key ways she remains open to the heart way of knowing. By living it she wants to "share that feeling with others, so instead of coming from a place of ego, being gentle with people and understanding and accepting and not judging." She frequently feels a strong presence in her work with residents and families in long term care. Noticing the presence and movement of Spirit in her day-to-

day life “is something the Bahai faith did for me. It broke me out of the conditioning of Sundays being the church fix to carry you through to the next week.”

By talking about it you “relive it, you relive that experience. You also like other people to share their experiences, so it’s like surrounding yourself with like minded people.” She recognizes a difference between the ‘group think’ that she has experienced in religious or church settings, where people talk about what they think from the religious teachings and dogma of the church, to sharing individual experiences. Relating experiences is very personal, and needs to be held in safety and trust. When this happens she experiences a deeper fellowship and community with these close and trusting relationships. It allows her to go deeper in her self-exploration and questioning, at the same time it validates it, “when you vocalize something, when you hear it, it resonates and feels true.” However she believes it is important to know how hard it is to articulate the feeling of Spirit or the knowing of your heart. “You can breath it, feel it, shape it even a little bit, but you can’t really articulate it.” Having a place to share the experiences is important to keep them present and alive in her life, to nurture the longing, and in creating close trusting relationships of fellowship.

Sarah draws on a variety of means of prayer and meditation, allowing the moment to direct her. At times she’ll just sit quietly, or repeat a Bahai prayer, other times she’ll listen to a piece of music, read poetry, yoga, energy work, or drum. Breath work is also important, “with deep breath you can go deeper spiritually. It is a gentle easing out of our ego and attachments to reach our spiritual core and essence.” She likes to have a designated place in her home to do her meditations, and uses incense and ting shahs or her Tibetan singing bowl to begin her practice, “to get me into the space, to get me to what I

need to do.” Her prayer has changed from “this is what I want, when I want – controlling how it should show up” to having faith and trust in the process. Her heart way is more integrated in her life, as she gets older, she is more trusting of her intuition and not having to always find a way to explain it.

“Being in the moment, being present and attending” is key to her living from the heart. It requires “discarding things that really don’t have meaning and aren’t important ... like the way we accumulate things ... not to say that you can’t have those things. But to clear away some of the clutter and busyness of your life so that you make time to allow that. ... We don’t allow ourselves to have the time to feel those things. And we do have to get in a space where you can be mindful. ... Sometimes it’s as simple as noticing how pretty that tree is, or the way the sun’s on the leaves and the tree is alive.” She also recognizes how worrying is a big distracter from attending. “I don’t know if the experiences have helped the worry because it takes away the fear, or if stopping the worrying and being mindful and present allows the experience.” She also notices how “we attend to other people, we’ll listen to them and talk with them but we don’t fully attend to ourselves, so we’re not going inside ourself and allowing ourself those experiences.” Quieting our lives and attending to our own interior is key to tending the heart way.

Sarah notices how her conditioned responses to triggers, those situations that cause her to be uneasy, take her away from the journey she should be on. One of her conditioned responses was to fold up into herself to try to nurture and analyze the hurt she felt. Recognizing that by doing so she is paying greater attention to this response, she now tries to be aware of her conditioned responses, recognizing them for what they are,

that there is no core reason for her reaction, and letting it go. “They bring you back to earth harshly, but they aren’t based on reality. Letting go of the smaller ones, allows you to get to the bigger things. They get in the way of the heart connection.”

Recently she decided to create a work of art as a gift for someone she loves. At first she found herself very driven and focused on the end result. She even chose a medium to work with, stained glass, which requires attention to detail and precision. She found herself after a busy day at work approaching the art in a similar state as she does in the mornings, lying in bed resisting getting up to do her meditation. She had to push herself in the same way with creating this piece of art, to get to that same space, that heart space, in order to create, to be in the process, to be in the heart space. In this space she describes going into herself and out of herself at the same time, so she can connect. She has been away from her regular morning meditations, this creative expression reminded her of the need to get to that place, “because of all the gifts and blessings you get when you are in this place.” “When you get to that place you transcend your normal thought process. It becomes all heart and connection.” She describes needing this space for her soul to survive, “not just survive but to thrive.” There is a common thread, when she connects with spirit she is in a space where there isn’t a lot of immediate stress, and by being in creation, or creating beauty, or creating space or creating energy, she is in touch with the creative source.

Sarah recognizes a great difference between faith coming from the head and from the heart. “If I’m coming from my head then there is a need for me to create understanding with you or with somebody else about why I know this in my head. When it’s the heart way of knowing, there is no need – I mean you can share the experience or

not, but there is no need to convince someone, because it comes from your heart.” The individual stirrings of the heart-way of knowing are part of being an individual, the intimacy of personal experience. She sees the heart-way as covering the full spectrum of our lives, it is some of the “first memories we have as a child, as we get older and with maturity it becomes part of a wiseness of knowing.” Without having to convince anyone, the heart-way of knowing is a part of the unraveling of Sarah’s life events, a trust and peace in the process, and provides underlying purpose in her life.

Summary of Sophie’s Experience

Sophie experiences a knowing of something greater than herself that she has been drawn to right from childhood. This knowing and yearning has taken her on a spiritual journey that she describes as, “a rocky road and it’s not been a straight road either.” During some very difficult personal times on this road she encountered some strange experiences, out of her realm of previous experience, that first were startling and now she recognizes as grace.

Growing up in the country in a beautiful wooded area on the banks of a river she spent a great deal of time outdoors with her brothers. “You grew up with a sense that you were at home in the world, ... in creation and in nature. ... So I always had that sense of being supported by the world around.” Living in a home where there was no formal religious affiliation, and it was in fact quite actively discouraged, she never had a place to go with this sense of something that was responsible for creating the world.

When she left home to go to University she started attending a church. She recalls the only thing that she knew about Christianity until that time was what she had learned from Christmas carols on the radio. Her roommate introduced her to formalized religion

at a very evangelical church with a strong message of, “believe in Jesus and you’ll be saved”. Tired of being converted every Sunday, and intuiting that this wasn’t her final stop, she left this church.

Having children was what drew her back to church. Her husband was never much of a churchgoer, but she felt she had to raise her children in the church, which she hadn’t been doing. They attended a local more “liberal-minded church” that was going through an exciting period of tremendous growth. During this time she attended a two year bible study that was foundational in her understanding of the scriptures; Old and New Testament, something she hadn’t gotten from the evangelical church. As a family they moved from one location to another and she stayed with this denomination for approximately twenty-five years, but again did not join the church.

In those years she remembers being caught up in the structure of the church, being active in church life, and yet always having this sense that there was more. “I felt that I should be accessing it through the church but that wasn’t happening.”

It was in 1987 when she was going through a particularly rough patch in her life that she went to hospital for some fairly invasive tests. She was put to sleep during this test and when she came to she was all by herself “in this little room, except for the fact that Jesus was sitting on the end of the bed dangling his feet and just kind of – you know – just being there with me, and I was so astonished.” She had never had an experience like this before, and her immediate conclusion was that it was drug induced. In the days following she kept wondering, was it a hallucinatory event caused by drugs, or was the stress she was under causing her to “lose my marbles”. She was alarmed by it, but never told a soul

that it had happened. “I never quite knew what to make of it, I guess, because you couldn’t share it with anyone, or there wasn’t anyone that I felt I could share it with.”

This was the first time she experienced a real strong presence, rather than a sense of general presence. She had nothing to tie it to, and no one to help her interpret it. Instead she just left it, explaining it away as, “Oh, well, its just one of those things.” Now, remembering back on that time she states, “because we live in such a secularized world we have lost our connection with mystery to a large degree, and of course this is all mystery at the end of the day on how this has happened, why this has happened, you know, we have no explanations for any of that. ... And in fact you get to the point where you really don’t care. ... Because you just accept it for what it is and you don’t need to know why it’s happening or the origins, I mean it just doesn’t seem to matter that much anymore.”

Approximately five years later, about six months after her husband was killed in a very tragic accident, a driving feeling came over her. “This very very strong sense came over me that I had to know more about God; there had to be more of God than I knew, and there had to be a way to get at that. But I had no idea how to do that.” For a year and a half this feeling would not go away. She just knew that if she was ever going to understand her husband’s death and “maybe a kind of an intuition that if I didn’t come to some sort of understanding I wasn’t going to recover.” She felt this need on many different levels, yet “how are you to find what you don’t know.”

One day, while attending a management meeting with her work at the Providence Renewal Center she happened upon a pamphlet on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. (Fleming,1996) Her approach had always been to study about God through in-depth Bible

studies or courses. She was interested enough to attend the information night, and signed up, but left the evening not really knowing what they were about. Due to poor registration the course was cancelled, which left her with a sense of, “Well, I guess that wasn’t what I was looking for.” About a month later she received a call indicating that a nun would offer the course on a one-to-one basis, and was she interested. She was a bit flabbergasted, “as I don’t suppose I’d ever spoken two words to a nun in my entire life.” Although the thought of working with a nun startled her, they met, hit it off quite well, and launched into the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius “without really having the faintest understanding of what kind of thing I was getting involved in.”

The exercises, an intense prayer experience, occurred over the next 10 months during the years of 1995-96. During this time she had numerous experiences of “this Jesus who had sat at the end of my bed.” These experiences were often so startling, with such a strong sense of presence, “that you couldn’t have just sat down to imagine them.”

While praying the scripture about the birth of Jesus, “somehow or other when I was praying this I really, really got into [helping with the birth], and there was blood everywhere ... afterbirth, ... which was totally startling to me because I wasn’t expecting all this kind of muckiness about it.” She remembers, “rushing around trying to get this innkeeper to cough up some rags and some water so that I could do something about getting this baby cleaned up.” “And then there was just this very incredible sense of peace when you finally got to hold this baby.” The muckiness, the pain, the struggle were all real, and in some way affirmed the experience for her. “That was kind of a turning point for me, ... there is something really quite authentic going on here, because that wasn’t just

something that I would have normally gone on to, ... you had the feeling that there was something outside yourself involved in it.”

Another time she was praying the scriptures of the crucifixion and being present with Jesus as he suffered on the cross. “Up to that time when I had been in this prayer experience and actually present in my mind with Jesus in his suffering, I really had never taken in the hideousness of the suffering. But in this particular instance I became so upset, I actually went and threw up, ... when it dawned on me how awful this suffering that Jesus was enduring was, and being present in that way, I was with this awful, awful suffering. ... It was an experience that was really very profound and really did make me stop and think about what Jesus had gone through. I mean it’s very easy to have that become kind of sterile.” It took approximately a couple of weeks, accompanied by her spiritual director and in prayer to calm down from this experience of horror. Her spiritual director encouraged her to view it as grace and to express her gratitude for this suffering. It was during this period of prayer that she suddenly found herself inside a rainbow like light. “I was just surrounded by – I can’t describe this to you very well. By light that was all colours, ... I was absolutely bathed in that. After that experience I kind of – the awfulness of the crucifixion kind of came into balance for me.” After this remarkable experience of being bathed in this light in Jesus’ presence she found a calm and has come to recognize the whole experience as a form of grace.

Now, at Easter, she finds herself each year looking forward to this time with a certain degree of dread. She knows, “I’m going to have to sit at this cross again for a while. ... But I just feel like that’s kind of what I can do, is just be present with that suffering, ... that too is I think for whatever reason, a little thing that I’ve been asked to

do. I don't know why. There are surely more pleasant things to do with one's time."

This knowing of suffering has taken her beyond what she knew of suffering before. She describes it now as a "place of knowing about the depths of God's love for us." It was quite shocking to her as she always had difficulty with the idea of a loving God sacrificing his child. In some ways she still doesn't completely understand it, however, the experience holds a strong sense of "how much we are loved and how much we are cared for and supported in this world."

The St. Ignatius experience was filled with many graced moments that profoundly changed the direction of her life in many ways. It was a pivotal time in her spiritual life. It was a time when she realized that, "what I had yearned for, yes indeed is accessible to us. I really believe it's accessible to every individual, and that everyone has the innate ability to commune with God, however you perceive God to be, and whatever avenue you use. For me as a Christian, Jesus was my avenue, but I don't believe that's the only avenue. I think everybody, though, has the ability to commune in that way, if we have some guidance and help and know how to access the divine." This was a grace that came into her life at a time when she was really searching for it. A time that spoke to her own personal and significant suffering that had sent her on a deep search.

A big change that happened was the location of the divine for her. "Now I really do have a much broader understanding of God as not out there, but that God is within, and is probably out there at the same time." It is a more "organic way of approaching the divine. I mean you're not just seeing the divine as something removed from us, something transcendent, but as something that is just a whole part of us, and is always going to be

part of us, always has been, always will be if we allow ourselves the opportunity to access that.” “Although the divine is out there, the divine is also here.”

The whole experience significantly shifted her sense of individual worthiness. “I think too we can all in some way or other, get some small sense of the enormous value that God places in each of us, and the enormous love in which we are held I think having that move from – I mean we read our scriptures, ‘God is love’. ... But to move that to an experiential sense where you actually feel the emotion that you are loved, that you return that love in some measure is a wholly different experience, and one that I think if I had to go to the root of the matter, that would be it. ... the most profound shift for me, was to come into this sense of my own individual worthiness, I guess, of that love, and I think that that’s something that we always struggle with, is the sense of worthiness; how worthy are we. And for a good portion of my life I think that I really was dominated by a sense of unworthiness, and this whole prayer experience really gave me a very profound shift in that way as well.”

Her sense of home in the world has grown. “We are supported and held, and this world is created as our home, and we are at home here, and when we’re at home we’re at home in a place of safety and we’re in a place of love. ... It is quite a remarkable place to be, ... and I’m so deeply grateful for that.”

It was a healing time that provided her a purpose in life. After the traumatic loss of her partner, “there are days when you wonder, is there any reason to keep going.” It was a very grounding thing to go through, “because I had come through a period of profound suffering myself, and I think that was really very important for me ... to understand that even though I had endured this suffering ... there was still purpose to life, like there was a

reason to care, to keep your feet on the ground and keep going forward one step at a time.” She now recognizes her purpose, “to in some small way be a mirror for a love that God has for us for others, and primarily I see that being acted out in my family, my friends to a perhaps lesser degree but certainly there as well, and indeed with whoever I’m in contact with.”

The experience certainly helped her come to terms with her husband’s death. She came to understand that even though her husband wasn’t an espoused believer, God didn’t love him any less. This was a comforting point to come to. Certainly she always carries the grief with her. Like the image of grief being a grain of sand in an oyster, she recognizes how she too eventually folds herself around the grain of sand and discomfort, and how something quite unusual and lovely has been created. “Grief does something for humanity like nothing else does. It connects you with your humanness. It doesn’t come empty handed, even though it takes work to get to the point where it is a gift.” The gift to her has been “a path of a spiritual journey in a deeper way. It wouldn’t have happened otherwise.”

It altered the direction of her life. “It certainly isn’t a finger that comes out of the heavens and says well, this is what you should do in your life. It isn’t that kind of a thing. ... But it does – you understand that whatever it is you choose to do, at the end of the day doesn’t matter so much as what it is you choose to be.” This was a surprising shift in her life, both for her and her family, as she had always been “a person that had to be doing, doing, doing, and I was always one of those type ‘A’ types that had twenty-seven different irons in the fire at any given time, and took a great deal of pride in keeping them all going.” She had also completed a career in volunteer management and had expected to be

a very involved volunteer in her retired life. However, “this whole experience of the divine in my life really made me understand that ... what I was becoming was more important, or what I was being was more important.” Something had shifted her attention from her doing to her being and becoming.

This is not to say that she isn’t still involved in her community, however the experiences certainly have informed the activities that she has chosen in her life. “I think we can often miss the point of trying to live out our Christian life, and we think we have to be rushing about accomplishing great deeds, but I don’t think that’s always the case. ... If we can just be who we are to people.” She acknowledges how we don’t have to seek out these opportunities, “it’s funny how life circumstances just put you in a place every once in a while where you just have to be for somebody all that you can be.”

She is a mirror for this love in the world in a number of ways, most directly with her children and grandchild, making time for them in meaningful ways. Her neighbor, whom she hadn’t really known previously, lost her husband in a recent stabbing, and now “I’ve just had to try and be what I can be for her.” It took a number of years to find a cause she felt comfortable with, and now she is actively involved with the Steven Lewis Foundation’s local Grandmothers group. Again she feels she is able to offer what she has gained from experience, going with the stream rather than pushing up river. She acknowledges the biblical passage, ‘to those to whom much is given, much is required’ at the same time as holding the paradoxical tension of how much she just needs to be and acknowledge her own becoming. She sees Jesus’ life as an example of this, coming from that place of being deeply loved and loving; “at some point we have to step up and try to accomplish justice in whatever small corner we choose, and we’re not all going to choose

the same thing, and it's probably just as well we don't." She tries to live out her faith in non-obtrusive but helpful ways.

It also caused her to really examine what she needed from church. Although she believes we are not encouraged or taught to say what we need; "It got to be a bit of a crisis for me." She felt her experience at church was lacking, and after a five or six year process of discernment, she left the denomination she had been a part of for twenty-five years. This was a very painful time as she left a lot of people she was connected to through her involvement. She had always had the view that "when I go to church I should contribute this, that or the other. But I finally decided that that was backwards. What I had to ask myself was what did I need. And so when I came to answer that question I realized that what I didn't need was necessarily preaching. What I needed was a communion service. ... And that is a very nourishing thing for me, and that is very directly connected to the experiences that I've had." The communion table brings her into a deep point of focus and it's a way of experiencing presence. In the past three years she has been baptized in another denomination and joined this church that offers her access to the Eucharist on a weekly basis.

Reading a book of Evelyn Underhill's, *Practical Mysticism*, (Underhill 1986, 191) was a turning point for her. "She made the interesting point that church is not there to nurture your spiritual life. That's your own responsibility. Church is there for worship, it's there for community, it's there for a place of service, but it's not there to nourish your own spiritual growth. And because I was maybe unconsciously looking for a place to feed my spiritual growth, I was really – I mean I was doomed to disappointment." It made her look at church in a different way. Even so she still struggles with not having a sense of

rootedness in the church. “I think the key is always to try to keep yourself open to where the Holy Spirit wants you or where, if you keep yourself open, the Holy Spirit will lead you to what you need, and to what feeds you. ... The other thing I’ve given up is trying to predict where it’s going to go. You just can’t.” The deeply personal experiences of Jesus’ presence, and her experience of God’s love is what keeps her going to church despite her ongoing struggles.

Her own spiritual practices have also changed. She is far more intentional about prayer, and in particular prayer for others. For her the Ignatian prayer is a way that she feels she can pray most effectively, that helps her reach that deeper place. There are periods of aridity, but she recognizes these as part of a natural rhythm of the whole journey.

Reading and studying theological and spiritual topics continues to be very important to her. “Just because we have this experience of the divine in a more personalized sense, I don’t think that’s call to park our brains. ... I can just go to another zone when I’m [studying].” She becomes very focused and absorbed, often carrying a curiosity about the subject while she continues in her daily activities of walking, working in the kitchen, interacting with others, etc.. She feels fortunate to have the personal experience of presence, which is very grounding as she explores intellectually. She feels the need to withdraw back to her experience to ensure the “head-stuff” isn’t overbalanced. Although at times she finds it easy to justify, she realizes it is important to not replace prayer with study. “One is not a substitute for the other.”

In addition to prayer and study she has incorporated a number of things that she recognizes as nurturing her “heart-way of knowing”. She has a strong need to be outside

everyday, to be totally surrounded by the trees, unaware of the houses near by. “It is important to get that outside connection. I really need it.” She is fortunate to have people in her life she can discuss spiritual matters with. In the last 10 years she has been a part of groups that meet regularly with the intention to share their spiritual journeys and to share in their spiritual questions. She attends retreat houses and particularly appreciates silent retreats. She recognizes being increasingly needful of silence in her life – sometimes structured opportunities and most often it is just part of her lifestyle of living alone. As expressed earlier the communion table is also a place of deep focus and connection with presence. Spiritual direction has also been very helpful, having a relationship with someone who knows her well, and who accompanies her through intense prayer experiences and her journey. She notes, “It’s always a journey. It is key to give ourselves the permission to stay in that mystery, then we’ll be drawn further into it. It takes courage of course. And sometimes you wonder just how far you should go ... once in a while you just say, oh, that’s enough for now ... that’s as far as I can go right now and we’ll just come on back to this, or not.”

When she reflects on her powerful experiences of presence, she recognizes how they come in very surprising ways. She believes they can’t be understood in a rational kind of way. “We live in a world of cause and effect, we’re taught silence at a very primitive level ... these things don’t fit in our logical world.” She struggled with this herself in the early stages of the Ignatius exercises. It was “quite a march for me. It was very hard for me to understand that this was a legitimate experience that I was having, and that it wasn’t an extraordinary experience, there really wasn’t anything very out of the ordinary about it, it was just what it was.” She believes these experiences are to be valued and treasured at

the same time they need to be balanced with the knowledge that we are not ‘more spiritual’ or that we are not on a high step up the spiritual ladder from anyone else. “I think that longing is in each person articulated in different ways or not articulated, I think, which is a problem for a lot of people. ... It is just an ordinary experience that has embodied spiritual beings, is accessible to all of us in different ways.” The experiences hold knowledge differently than head knowledge, it is an experience based on knowing that she believes many people have, but just don’t have an avenue or place to articulate them.

Having witnesses to these experiences she believes is very important. They are very easily discounted in our secular society. She recognizes how the efforts of some scientific studies try to explain these experiences as misfiring of electrical stimuli “going amuck in the brain” thereby leaving us with the notion that these are not to be considered as reality in any form. Therefore it is important to have a place to have these experiences validated. Otherwise, like she did in her early experience, we put it aside. We don’t know how to deal with it, what to do with it, have no place to take it, unless we have someone to speak with. “Being able to incorporate the experience into our own psyche and our own being as reality depends on the presence of a witness.”

She recognizes and is intrigued by the paradox that she experiences in her journey of the spirit. She recognizes how she is always holding things in tension, e.g. hope and disbelief, experience and knowledge, light and dark, her experience of enduring suffering but on the other hand she was granted peace. Logically there isn’t an explanation for paradox, yet, “there is something that keeps bubbling up and keeps moving us forward and keeps churning us along.”

She is intrigued by the notion put forth by Wolfhart Pannenberg (Pannenberg 2008) and his emphasis on eschatology as understanding the future as breaking in on the present. She sees how this is happening through mystical experience on an individual level, and believes it is likely happening on a bigger scale, “it is just we have our eyes closed to it, and we are not aware of it.” It seems that at this time we are being asked to hold paradox, these disparate notions, “that is all we can do.”

She feels this tension of paradox especially within the church and church teachings. She is surprised to find in her studies that “indeed there are theologians who are basing more of their teachings on experience. And who knew?” She feels that the church, in a global sense of the word ‘church’, has separated itself from its spiritual roots in a lot of ways. Yet there is a huge longing in the church for it. “It seems they don’t know where to find it. Some individuals recognize the importance of this connection and we are lucky for that.”

Resonating with a presentation she attended recently with Diarmud O’Murchu (O’Murchu 2000) she was intrigued by his visual explanation of “pouring new wine into old skins”. Our new knowing of experience is trying to be poured into a religious framework that hasn’t made room for it, and that is where much of the paradox in church life / structure arises. Our experiences break these structures open. O’Murchu points out that Christianity has been so focused on being ‘the way, the light’ that we have overlooked the fact that we have only been around 2,000 years in a 7 million year history. And not only do we have a tiny portion of “knowing”, often what we have is wrong or way too narrow. Therefore we need to reclaim what we have lost and as we go forward we need to drop barriers between ourselves, humanity and all of creation. She recognizes

how this helps us question our faith and how we make sense of these mystical experiences within the Christian belief.

At this same presentation she was struck by an older nun who spoke up and stated how fortunate we are to be alive in these times. This woman feels the spirit is moving and working and alive in such interesting ways at a time when we can share it with others. Sophie appreciated, given the nun's age, that she had many years where she couldn't likely share her spiritual experiences openly. "Perhaps we take this for granted, and instead should recognize how fortunate we are to have opportunities and communities, although often communities that are meeting outside of formal church structures, to share in how the Spirit is moving in our lives individually and collectively." She notes how important it is to hold and to share in the paradoxes of our experience and hold the knowing as possible breakthroughs to the future.

Sophie relates to how a friend describes coming into the experience with the divine – "like a snowball running down a hill, you can't really do anything about it, you can't control it." She likes to think she is a "reformed Type 'A' person", loosening the grips of control to rest in God's love. She recognizes the living paradox of this, in that we need to rest and at the same time we have to make decisions and move forward. "To make a decision to live this spiritual journey is not easy. We are being led in directions we can't imagine. ... It is difficult when we don't see where it is leading us, or into anything in particular." She is learning to rest in the assurance of God's love, to recognize the encounters that draw her forward that seem to affirm and give purpose to her experiences and knowledge.

4. A SUMMARY OF CONTEMPORARY MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Participants' Backgrounds

Four women and three men participated in this study, all of western European heritage. One immigrated to Canada in her childhood years; all the others were born in Canada and grew up in a variety of rural and urban locations across the country. They range in age from their late twenties to early seventies.

Coming from a variety of backgrounds their encounters with church or faith traditions are unique. All of them name a different denominational influence from childhood or their early adult years: Lutheran, Baptist, United, Moravian, Unitarian, Anglican, and Catholic. However, the extent of their involvement with the denomination varies. For four of the participants church life has been an important part of their family upbringing. Each of these remained actively involved in the church into their early adulthood: one became a pastor in his denomination; another moved from the denomination of his upbringing but continued to attend a similar church into his adult years; two describe being involved with youth groups and teaching Sunday school in their teens and early adulthood— one was preparing to do mission work overseas, the other was raising her children within her husband's denomination.

Those who did not have a strong church affiliation in their family life describe some encounter with the Christian tradition. One had no formal religious affiliation; in fact her family quite actively discouraged it. She describes having a sense of something greater than herself that developed from important childhood experiences in nature. She knew some of the basic tenets of the Christian faith just by hearing Christmas Carols on the radio, and reciting the Lord's Prayer at school. One describes being sent to Sunday

school in order for his single parent mother to have a break, but it was never an integrated part of family life. The other was introduced by her parents to Unitarianism in her teens. This exploration of different religions helped her recognize that there is more than one way to experience and interpret God. Regardless of the degree to which each participant was involved in the Christian tradition, it is important to recognize that they grew up in a country that is historically and culturally influenced by Christianity and were by that very fact influenced by it.

At some time in their teen or early adult lives, they all felt a disconnection with Christianity as they knew it from their early years. It did not resonate as true for them any longer. It was lacking or in some instances seemed outright wrong. Some felt this very powerfully, while others more subtly.

Each participant, in their own unique circumstances, was experiencing uncertainty or a break in their faith and spiritual understanding, and was certainly questioning the Christian constructs they were familiar with. The participants describe a lingering curiosity, yearning, or intuition within themselves that kept them searching during these uncertain times, again some powerfully, others more subtly.

Leading up to the experience(s)

The conditions in the lives of the participants just prior to experiencing an infusion of new spiritual knowing are varied but have some similarities. Most frequently the participants describe being in very difficult or rough patches in their lives. Varying degrees of depression are a part of a number of their personal stories. Sophie was grieving and working through the tragic death of her husband. Karen, in the one instance, had been hospitalized with her newborn son and was dealing with post-partum

depression. Both Adam and Brian were at points in their lives where they were seriously considering suicide. Many of them speak of significant breaks of trust in relationships. These are particularly difficult and lonely times, filled with deeply important life questions, personal uncertainty and disunity.

A number of the participants describe a series of decisions or choices that in hindsight seem to have led them to the unexpected point of their experience. Brian describes this journey as a “waking up” over a period of a number of months. Initially it was arduous; in fact he wasn’t sure he wanted to wake up. He had reached an “event horizon”, a term he draws from the understanding of black holes in space. “There is an event horizon which is the very edge of this [black hole] where the gravitational pulls are tremendous, and there is a point where you can still move away from it. But at the event horizon you’re right at that tipping point. You are just one molecule of yourself more, and you get sucked in.” He had sought out support but nothing was encouraging him out of his depression. Until one day, he was walking along a street with his wife, they casually went into a bookstore and he was drawn to a book “for no particular reason”, and that was the tipping point. The book awoke him to another way of understanding. This was followed by a ‘chance’ viewing of a movie and a series of other exciting synchronistic and serendipitous events that led him through a tremendous change in consciousness. In hindsight participants recognize coincidences leading up to the time where they experience a shift in knowing, yet the experience itself is unexpected.

Another frequently mentioned condition is one where one’s mind is deeply focused. George experienced this focus while being deeply engrossed in thought,

exploring another's understanding and writing of a concept he found particularly intriguing, a place he enjoys being in. During this concentrated period of focus all of a sudden everything stopped; "it was almost as though I was experiencing what's known to be channeling. ... I started this stream of consciousness where I was rambling about what I'd read and how my world and moreover cosmic view had just changed, an understanding of space and time, I was using concepts that I didn't know at the time, or I wasn't aware of any prior knowledge." Karen in one instance was focusing on the movements of tai chi, a practice she had been participating in daily for over a period of a few weeks. All in a moment, to her amazement she didn't have to do a thing, "It was like somebody was – something was guiding my movements because I was just flowing." On another occasion she was with a small group of people at the bedside of a dying man in hospital, focusing on openly offering the patient and his partner healing energy through thought. She remembers it as a deeply touching time, everyone's attention focused in that moment. At the moment of the man's death Karen describes, "And honest to God, I just felt this energy. It was the most incredible thing. And of course I was just feeling it, just feeling it, and I didn't know where it came from. It caught me off-guard because I never experienced it before." Sophie recalls experiences during a number of intense prayer times over a ten-month period while completing the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. These times were often so startling, such a strong sense of presence, "that you couldn't have just sat down to imagine them." Each of these times of deep focus, whether intellectually in thought, bodily in movement, or spiritually in prayer; the participants were broken open to a new sense of knowing.

Other participants mention their experiences coming out of a place of “being and acceptance”. Sarah describes that time of reverie, of just going to sleep or early waking up when her mind is quiet and not yet fully aware or awake. She is filled with a sense of joy, “you don’t know if you’re giving or --- where that feeling of love is coming from or going to.” She describes it as a place of “feeling a presence, feeling more than what I know, more than what I see, but just feeling such a feeling of safety, of everything being right, and a sense of almost being looked after. ... Your experience is so strong that you’re full of spirit and you’re so connected with anything divine.” She has also experienced this similar state during quiet walks, and silent meditations. Eve had also been participating in many forms of meditation and prayer during a six month stay at an Ashram. One night she was woken by a voice that relayed very clearly a specific message to her. She remembers thinking, “if this came from you God I’ve got to hear it again.” And immediately the message was repeated. A feeling of calmness followed and she returned to sleep. Adam, too, recalls a time of being woken by a voice saying something very specifically to him. In both of these instances upon waking the messages continued to resound with something deeply meaningful for them. Adam also had very lucid dreams that were too real to not be believed. The felt nature of the dreams was of a different quality than most dreams, “It wasn’t a sort of foggy dream where things come and go. I was like right there.” The characters were identifiable, some very specifically in human form, others more of a familiar essence rather than of any particular form. For Adam the felt nature and significance of the dream was strong enough to “jog me back into still wanting to keep living.” All of these situations, whether in quiet meditation, or the sleepy place of near waking, or during sleep, are

periods during which our conscious minds are not fully engaged. They are generally considered to be places of greater openness and receptivity.

Their Experiences

Each participant describes having two or more significant experiences of this nature in their lives. Although they each have their own unique experience, there are strong similarities in how they describe the felt sense of the phenomenon.

Most consistent is the sense of surprise of an immediate and unexpected occurrence. This wasn't something they had sought out; it was something offered to them in a powerful, new, unexpected and unfamiliar manner. Eve describes it as this "amazing thing that happened. This had not happened to me before. ... It felt like it came from a sacred space or a sacred place." They describe being caught off guard, amazed, surprised, and filled with awe and wonder, all of which is accompanied by a sense of rightness.

For some they initially found the experience startling, alarming and somewhat disturbing. Sophie describes her first experience as a really strong rather than a general sense of presence; "it was sort of alarming, because I thought, well, am I totally losing my marbles, is this stress that I'm under causing me to have hallucinatory events? Like, what exactly was going on?" At a later time in her life she describes the experiences as, "they were so startling that you couldn't have just sat down to imagine them." George too describes his first experience as absolutely frightening; it felt like he was having an identity crisis or nervous breakdown, because in an instant, "it felt as though I ceased to be me." "Anything I knew to be true or real or me about myself was suddenly an object outside of myself, and I was able to look at it in this instant and really question is this

me or what is me, and almost as fast as that first instinct or thought came to be, it was followed through with something much, much more profound and that was a sense of oneness, a sense that of course that doesn't matter because that is what is." Although their first reaction was one of alarm and uncertainty of its validity, there was something within the experience that held true for them.

For others the sense of surprise and intensity of the experience was gentler. Brian describes it, "Like, excited – like all of a sudden for the first time, this is like when you wake up, you've gone on a trip and you're staying in a hotel, and you go to bed and you wake up in the morning and you could just sort of forget that you're not at home, and it takes you a second, you open your eyes, and it takes you that moment because you don't know what is going on." Sarah too states, "I hadn't really started my thought process for the day, and almost like a sense of just being full, like being an empty cup full ... just being like totally full of spirit, ... I found myself crying, weeping, ... it took me a minute to figure out okay, am I having a dream, am I awake, am I – oh my goodness, this feels beautiful." Although a gentler initial reaction, they recognized that something had changed; they were in a new place, filled with something they previously hadn't experienced or been aware of.

Many of the participants describe the experiences as all happening in a moment. George describes this as, "It's almost as though everything converges or collapses to this moment and you get to observe the moment and see yourself and who you are." "And in that moment all of that was – I mean as subjectively as I can say this, all of that was revealed." Sarah describes feeling many expressions of the heart simultaneously, "feeling like a cup full." Even though Brian had been previously engaged in his own

thoughts and discussions with others in his journey of seeking, he remembers a moment of new realization, a “turning point”. There is something powerful, unexpected, mysterious, or graced that happens within an instant. They describe these felt moments as requiring no effort on their part; moments of no resistance, flow, flowing with the energy or going with the river. Brian describes, “Not only is there no resistance, it’s actually – you’re just drawn into its depth and richness because there I am in it.”

Whether they describe having gentle tugs or overwhelming “wow” moments, these are embodied experiences of something touching them in new and meaningful ways. They are richly felt experiences not just deep thoughts or imaginative play. They include experiences of light, color, and voices or sounds. Sophie found herself at one point, “surrounded by – I can’t describe this to you very well. By light that was all colors, ... I was absolutely bathed in that.” She describes her experiences as being beyond what she could have imagined. Adam describes, “that voice was so real that it woke me up. ... It wasn’t just a sort of an ephemeral thought. It was like right there.” Eve describes recognizing the voice as different in the nature of how the sound was received. It seemed to come in one ear, not two. “It was as audible as us talking, but it wasn’t out there, it was in here.” Physical sensations of tingling or a felt sense of presence are common. Brian in describing his experiences of ‘truth’ states, “We can recognize that when it’s around us, within us, when we smell it and hear it and touch it. ... There are times when all of a sudden our being vibrates with something. ... There is just this sense, this tingling, ... definitely a physical sensation, of this is the moment right now, and this is where I need to be.” The physical embodiment of the experience somehow fills the moment and highlights its deep significance and resonance.

Rich emotions of joy, ecstasy, serenity, humility, suffering, love, etc. are felt deeply within, with a much expanded awareness of their greater potential. At times it is overwhelming, seemingly stretching one's capacity to hold such emotion. Sarah describes many emotions felt simultaneously, "You're so full and just so joyous, ... you don't know if you're giving or – where that feeling of love is coming from or going to. After you have really experienced something of a huge magnitude ... you're left with a gentle calmness." Sophie describes, "I was with this awful, awful suffering. ... It was an experience that was really very profound and really did make me stop and think about what Jesus had gone through. I mean it's very easy to have that become kind of sterile." George describes the immense sense of joy and oneness he felt as he stepped into the vast and powerful ocean, this was accompanied by a tremendous sense of humility. But it was an experience different than the negative connotation this word had previously relayed. It was an experience of being humbled by being a part of something so immense, but at the same time so grateful for this awareness. These emotions felt within the experience take on a new texture or substance, a greater and more meaningful resonance for the individual.

These internally profound and moving instances, at the same time as being expanding and in some instances unsettling, hold a sense of rightness, calmness and groundedness that didn't exist before. Sarah describes, "it sounds weird, but it's like knowledge in your heart or sense in your heart, because you have that sense of calm and understanding after you have really experienced something of a huge magnitude. ... Then you're left with a gentle calmness. ... You can go back and there is something very grounding about that experience and knowing. ... It removes the fear, while your

head is involved you can still conjure up all sorts of fear and questions.” After the unusual experience of being woken by a voice and the message being repeated for her, Eve felt a calmness that allowed her to return to sleep immediately. The message was affirming and the voice guiding; she knew it held significance for her on many levels. Although Sophie felt the awfulness of suffering to a point of physically throwing up, this experience was followed a couple of weeks later, of being bathed in light. “After I had experienced being bathed in this light in Jesus’ presence --- which was a really remarkable experience when I stop to think back on it, I just calmed down about it all, -- - it was what it was.” “This was just simply a grace that came into my life at a time when I was really searching for it, and at the time when I look back I had absolutely no idea of what could transpire.” Adam describes feeling the messages of his dreams with such certainty, “I couldn’t not believe it because I knew it to be real.” “There was no questioning it. That was my mission.” “It was strong enough to jog me back into still wanting to keep living.” “I believe it very, very strongly. Like I just know it to be true.” George describes the new understanding from one of his experiences as, “a moment of, I guess, lucidity, where you get to really bask in it, and just enjoy it.” Brian recalls one experience where, “all of a sudden everything slowed down, like almost stopped, and there was just this immense serenity. I could hardly describe it – it was just immense. Like the whole universe was just all of a sudden there. ... Nobody had noticed anything about me, and it might have been a blink of an eye in terms of what we perceive as time. It seemed like forever. And the residue of that kind of clung to me for some time after that.” The rightness and calmness seem to help ground the participants

in the expanded awareness or consciousness resulting from their experiences even while they are not fully ‘understood’.

The experiences hold a deep resonance of knowing. Initial incidents are sometimes met with some uncertainty and suspicion, but they are still recognized as significant. Some of that uncertainty comes from the fact that the experience doesn’t fit within any of their currently known constructs. Or as Adam states, “I couldn’t not believe it because I knew it to be real. But I had no frame of reference to put this in. I had never met anybody that ever had any sort of experience like this. ... So there was really nobody that I could even discuss this with, so I just put it in the back, I didn’t need to discuss it. It was just a core belief there, and I was comfortable with it.” They affirm and ring true with something deep within that is of greater integrity. Both Sarah and George describe it as a previous knowing coming into greater consciousness, Sarah even describes it as “ancient knowing”. Brian has coined the phrase, “inside wise”, emphasizing how “it isn’t [others’] wisdom that I need, it’s mine.” They know they are experiencing something authentic, the experiences stay with them, lingering and resonating in their lives, becoming more than what they experienced just in that moment. There is an inherent recognition of the significance of the experience and what it holds. These experiences seem to open participants to a greater capacity or awareness; a “soulful awakening” or “growing consciousness”, to a deep inner wisdom.

This soulful wisdom, however, is not solely internal. As Sophie describes, “you had the feeling that there was something outside yourself involved in it.” George in describing the sense of where this awareness came from states, “that’s the beauty of it. It wasn’t inside of me ... it was everywhere. The sense of the place – that’s where I’m

okay with not understanding. ... I want to say that it was inside of me, but that would then I guess contradict the feeling of the experience, and that was of unity of something that everybody gets to participate in.” Karen describes experiencing something in the room that she can’t explain; “perhaps it was the oneness that we were experiencing with each other as we were touching and aware of the man’s breath.” She describes the feeling as being so strong that it felt like she was almost being picked up right off her feet. “I was receiving back something, but it was so powerful that I just wasn’t prepared for it.” She describes feeling connected to each other, nature, “within, without, surrounding me, inside me.” It is a dynamic interaction of connectedness, relational in nature.

Participants frequently state they can’t fully explain their experience, the knowing of the experience, or exactly where it came from. Karen states, “It’s absolutely a whole other knowing. And I’m no closer to understanding it, except I know it exists now.” Sophie states, “because we live in such a secularized world we have lost our connection with mystery to a large degree, and of course this is all mystery at the end of the day on how this has happened, why this has happened, you know, we have no explanations for any of that. ... And in fact you get to the point where you really don’t care. ... Because you just accept it for what it is and you don’t need to know why it’s happening or the origins, I mean it just doesn’t seem to matter that much anymore.” Eve describes it as a “knowing of mystery,” Sarah describes it as a “knowing of the heart” in that it is heart opening. She’s uncertain if it happens because she is open and knows that she needs it, or if it happens outside of herself. “I don’t know. But there doesn’t seem to be a need to find out.” Brian describes it as an awakening, “I think the body and the mind have a

hard time processing these things. And so our language is inadequate, and there are some visual images – the soul’s eye image of these things. But I don’t know how to say them. ... You know, they don’t make any sense except inside.” George acknowledges how difficult it is to make sense of these experiences with words and logic, and is now, “just respecting, acknowledging and observing that thing that’s called mysticism.” The knowing isn’t acquired intellectually, it is an infused experiential and dynamic knowing that is beyond our ability to articulate in its fullness.

The embodied nature, immediacy, and unique experiential qualities, whether subtle or magnificent, bring recognition to, as George describes, “there is something significant and authentic happening in this moment.”

Participants’ Understandings from their own Experience

Self –awareness and Consciousness:

Participants describe a growth in self-awareness, or a change in consciousness as a part of this opening to the expansiveness of mystery. Eve describes how the experience encouraged her to continue through conflicting messages and paradigms of understanding to discover what was more authentically her. Understanding her deeper self freed her to embrace more of “who I am” resulting in a shift in paradigm and consciousness that is in greater integrity with, and more honest in who she is.

George describes one of the powerful integrations from his experience as, “shedding doubt that comes around ego” and always questioning himself. Instead he is “looking at everything around that is, the different needs and wants of people in life and realizing everything today is just because it can be this way. ... I don’t need to dislike what I do, alternatively I can absolutely love what I do. That comes out of this looking

at stuff, matters, situations, whatever, outside of myself. ... What I want is always subject to states, where it's the ego that's in control of me." Instead of compromising a situation with expectations and prejudgment, this new level of awareness helps him remain more centered in the moment, awakened to that sense of wonder, possibility, and gratitude that embraces everything that is.

Brian too describes realizing, "this ego world I was living in wasn't reality, it wasn't what had the power to identify me even though I had attachment to it, all the emotions and all these things." Seeing himself as part of something that transcends ego allows him to live in "a more soulful place".

Sarah describes moving from a place of fear and striving for perfection to one of love for self and others. She holds a peace around change that she didn't before. A new sense of trust has emerged. She is more aware of her own triggered responses, and how they get in the way of her intuitive and heart way of knowing.

Sophie describes a significant shift in her own sense of individual worthiness, "I think too we can all in some way or other, get some small sense of the enormous value that God places in each of us, and the enormous love in which we are held in support of. I think having that move from – I mean we read our scriptures, "God is love". ... But to move that to an experiential sense where you actually feel the emotion that you are loved, that you return that love in some measure is a wholly different experience, and one that I think if I had to go to the root of the matter, that would be it. ... the most profound shift for me, was to come into this sense of my own individual worthiness, I guess of that love..." .

Each of them experienced a growth in self awareness resulting in an expanded consciousness, greater than they had previously understood as within themselves.

Love:

Participants recognize a strong dynamic and vibrational interconnectedness within their experience as love. As previously described from Sophie's experience, to have that sense of love move to an experiential knowing where you actually feel the emotion that you are loved in the same moment as returning that love in some measure, is a whole different experience. Sarah tries to capture it this way, "Your heart just feels like – how can I describe it? It's like all the love that is coming into your heart is going out of your heart. Like you don't know if it's coming in or going out. ... That experience is so magnificent, that it doesn't matter if you're taking it in or giving it out, it's the same thing." She goes on to explain how this then impacts her expressions of love, "[the experiences] fill you with love, it also allows you to come from a more loving place when you're dealing with a difficult situation, difficult person – someone who maybe on the surface seems impossible to love or to accept on a human level. You can move past that and love and accept them just on a spiritual level." "If you don't know if the love is going in or out, then when you just allow it to be, ... it is helpful when it doesn't matter what the argument is. What matters is maintaining relationship and maintaining some level of loving presence between you, ... past the human connection, to a soul connection, it allows you to strive for that more and to not get caught up in the silliness of stuff sometimes."

George describes this relational dynamic of love, "It is a place a person is free to decide to access, it is a very transparent place where it is all about that honesty – honest

with themselves and transparent in their intentions and their being I suppose. It is so much easier to get to that core of what might exist between two people or even for that person at any moment.” “That I guess is the beauty of life, that you are alive to experience yourself in connection with something else and with that something else feels fulfilling almost unspeakable – to know God.” “It isn’t monolithic, it isn’t for someone to attain – grab and hold onto.” In fact in his experience it has always been in the act of giving or sharing with somebody or with nature that he has felt this dynamic relationship of love.

Brian now recognizes himself as part of a stream of Love. He is astounded by how delighted people are in hearing the important message of “we are gifts of love”.

“Because we have been taught that we’re not. The church taught me I wasn’t. The church taught me I was sinful. And our culture teaches us we’re inadequate or we don’t have enough. And our families teach us about attachment and all sorts of joys and sorrows. But none of it just comes up and says you are love, and that love is a gift to the entire world. ... And I guess if I had a manifesto that would be it, we are gifts of love.”

Each of the participants describes a felt interactive dynamic of Love within a greater awareness of interconnectedness to that which many of us refer to as God. The relational sense felt in these experiences is not static, or only received. It continues to resound within, and in their relationships of giving and sharing; being in relationship with other human beings and with nature.

The Divine and Our Relationship:

Overwhelmingly, the participants refer to a divine oneness and interconnectedness. As George describes, “The God of my understanding sure has changed, you know it

isn't anthropocentric, ... splitting hairs and dogmatic stuff really to me doesn't matter anymore." The Divine is no longer recognized as separate, anthropocentric, judgmental or something to be feared.

Sophie describes a more "organic way of approaching the divine. I mean you're not just seeing the divine as something removed from us, something transcended, but as something that is just a whole part of us, and is always going to be part of us, always has been, always will be if we allow ourselves the opportunity to access that."

Brian refers to the limitations of language to describe this enormous and all encompassing experience of beingness; of which we are all a part yet can only barely grasp at the edges, which is at the same time constant and changing. He is discouraged by how the "church has language that it likes to use and it understands, although it never challenges itself in it." In one sense he can say that his understanding of God and Christ in the world has never been clearer or richer. This Christian wording "doesn't lack integrity, but it lacks the tremendous fullness" of his current understanding and relationship with the divine. He now states, "I am beginning to know 'I am', and that is all that one can say. But that encompasses whatever it is that has created this love in the world, this creative force, the universe, God, I don't know. Any name you want to use for it is inadequate and insubstantial. And that not only am I part of it, I'm inseparable from it. I'm not it but I am it, and I've never been separate from it regardless of what my mind has told me over these years. That has been a lie or an illusion. And the wonder of that unfolds if I'm really wanting to be present just moment by moment."

Most participants refer to the divine oneness as energy. Eve believes that we are interconnected by energy that flows more readily when our hearts are open, "Life and

God are one, not out to punish me. I can be in tune with it or not. ... A divine spark is my unfolding, and it's also guided by that expanding spark. I'm part of it, it's part of me. ... If I think in terms of worship or reverence it is more of being awed by what I experience." She believes everything is spirit. It can be at a low vibrational state, for example when we experience anxiety, tension, overworking, conflict, etc.; or at high vibrational states, when we experience ourselves in a state of expansion and flow. She believes everything is unfolding and it is important for each of us to do our bit.

Adam describes, "We're part of it, it is part of us. There isn't a division. It's all energy. Our sense of what we know as life now is just one little part of the ongoing life, it's just one part." God is no longer a static entity; it is evolving, relational and dynamic.

George states, "And with that awareness came the idea that that's something that I'm part of, that sort of co-creator, that co-author, which I've come to embrace, that idea that as a person I get to co-author my life story, this experience." He also recognizes, "what we choose to do with it is ours. ... we can dismiss it ... or begin to believe something new."

Their belief is no longer intellectual assent to some theory or set of facts, but a deep trust in the Other. They recognize the divine and themselves as one; enveloped in the eternal creative energy and unfolding of the universe.

A New Construct of Life and Death:

Accompanying this sense of divine oneness and interconnectedness, most participants have expressed a new relationship with death; how the fear of death has either disappeared or shifted significantly.

Sophie recognizes how the suffering and grief she experienced as a result of her husband's sudden death, "doesn't come empty handed, even though it takes work to get to the point where it [the suffering and grief] is a gift." The gift has been "a path of a spiritual journey in a deeper way." She doesn't believe it would have happened otherwise. The fullness of her understanding of God's love as a result of this journey helped her understand that even though her husband wasn't an espoused believer, God didn't love him any less. The experience holds a strong personal knowing of "how much we are loved and how much we are cared for and supported in this world" even amidst great suffering and death.

Sarah describes how her understanding of death has changed. "I think that God is in us, around us and beyond us, you know, and so what is beyond us is the same as what's in us and around us, and that kind of sense is new for me. Like I used to almost think it was a little different ... there was a difference between God and someone passing. So I still had a sense, a separate energy being God and a separate energy being the soul that has passed. Now, for me I think it's the same energy, it's the same thing. I used to get really uncomfortable when people would talk about you being God, or God being in you. ... Now I think well, no, like it's all pieces of God, it's all pieces of the divine, it's all the same. It's pretty much the life force, you might not be in this physical world, the life force still lives, that energy still is." "I know that it's not in a physical

form or anything that we would even identify, or be able to identify, but the only thing that to me seems to make sense is that it's part of the fragments going back to create more light, so the more light that we can bring on earth, the more light we're able to take back."

Karen's powerful experience while accompanying a dying man, along with his friends and family, was filled with love, and intensely good and meaningful in many different ways. She experienced a powerful interconnectedness that not only influenced her own experience of life and death, but it was also satisfying to have the nursing students whom she had been mentoring, experience what death could be for people who are suffering. One of the students commented on how she didn't know death could be like this; so beautiful and peaceful.

George describes his one experience of feeling the interconnectedness of all life, to everything in nature, so profoundly that it made him become aware of being a part of immortality. "It hasn't been yet disproven that matter and energy cannot be destroyed. And if that's true, then everything that came before me on an elemental level can, can describe me on that level. So it didn't matter. It was just this awareness outside of myself – and I think this is such a human thing, this need to feel not only part of, but to feel okay with immortality. You know, that I will die, but that hardly matters. And I'm lying if I'm sitting here saying that that's how I walk around thinking everyday." This personal awareness of everything that came before is connected to what is and what will be, has resulted in a new freedom on an inner level.

For Adam, his profoundly real dream at seventeen years of age left him with this sense of, "I knew in the after life that I was going to this place and that everything was

okay. It wasn't heaven, it wasn't hell, it wasn't any of those things. It was just a place where my spirit would go when I was done this incarnation." He now holds life and death within a bigger context, "It's all part of the energy that is the universe that connects us all together and connects us to time and space and the after life and the before life and all of that stuff is just there. It's just that in this incarnation we're not able to receive it, because it's too much. We're here to learn these things, and if we knew all that other stuff, that would affect how we were trying to expand our spiritual growth. So it's like this life is like going to church for one hour on Sunday. That's this incarnation. But there is the whole rest of this life; the rest of the real world, the energy world, the universe is out there. But we just can't see it because we're in church right now. We're part of it, it is part of us. There isn't a division. It's all energy. Our sense of what we know as life now is just one little part of the ongoing life; it's just one part." He now understands that, "fear of death was irrelevant, because only the physicality was going to deteriorate, but the spiritual being inside was growing and getting better." He now believes in reincarnation.

Three of the participants refer to the after life and reincarnation, or as Adam describes it, "inbetween lives and other incarnations." Adam's dream experiences, the first at seventeen years of age and the others in his midlife years, opened up his understanding of inbetween lives and reincarnation. Recognizing himself as a spiritual being having human experience, he believes the inbetween lives and other incarnations are all part of a connected journey, with its purpose to develop spiritually. Brian briefly touches on this and future incarnations when he describes his awakening, "It seems now that the moments are just – everything is an awakening, and there are moments of this

sleepiness still hovering around it all, and maybe that will be the rest of this incarnation and the next one will be another unfolding. I have no idea.” He recognizes it all as a stream of love of which his soulful being is a part. Sarah discusses reincarnation, with some uncertainty with the form it takes, in terms of souls living past lives. While perhaps not the same thing as reincarnation, she does believe in life everlasting but questions how that happens or what it looks like, “I know that it’s not in a physical form or anything that we would even identify, or be able to identify, but the only thing that to me seems to make sense is that it’s part of the fragments going back to create more light, so the more light that we can bring on earth, the more light we’re able to take back. ... I’m not sure it fits into any faith, ... it’s just kind of a knowing that I’m comfortable with right now.”

Awakened to the Heart Way of Knowing:

While each of the participants’ powerful experience was significant in and of itself, they all recognize it as part of an ongoing spiritual journey. They frequently mention how the experiences are grounding, and how they go back to the felt knowing of that experience for its inherent wisdom. The experiences have a resonance and discerning dynamic that continues to guide or pull their lives in various ways, often in more meaningful ways than they realized at the time.

Eve describes her experience as being instructional at that period in her life, and distilling in the years following as she deepened her spiritual exploration. It was instructional in that following being awakened and hearing the voice say, “Eve, you’re basically a good person but you must lay a foundation,” she thought, “Yes, I must find out what I believe.” It helped her along her journey to address her longings, identify

when something was missing or didn't resonate with her heart. It helped her distill what was helpful from her explorations and what to let go of; what to embrace from her Christian upbringing, and what was limiting and needed to be released. As she recalls the changes in her spiritual understanding over time, "As I develop and unfold I realize that this is more ... this is more expanded, more from the heart than that was. But at the time I didn't know that." She identifies this recognition as coming more from the heart, or what feels right rather than a head formulation. There is a sense of flowing, being open to a wonderful expanded space, and allowing more and new things to come in.

She differentiates between hearing voices and having hallucinations, as she did as a young person, from the voice that woke her from sleep, in that it felt like an integration of energy instead of a breakdown of energy. One can discern the difference from the results, either a sense of disorientation and confusion over a long period of time, or a sense of integration and integrity. She believes that if we remain open to what seems like it is coming from a higher level of well-being or vibrational level it allows us to keep creating.

Karen describes a great comfort inside her now, knowing "there is a connectedness to something that's good, that's positive, that's nurturing." She understood this previously to some degree intellectually. Having felt it in so profound a way, now she doesn't feel alone. This provides comfort and hope for herself and her life. It is an important change that she now holds close.

Sophie recognizes her powerful prayer experiences as a very grounding thing to go through, "because I had come through a period of profound suffering myself, and I think that was really very important for me ... to understand that even though I had endured

this suffering ... there was still purpose to life, like there was a reason to care, to keep your feet on the ground and keep going forward one step at a time.” She now recognizes her purpose in life, “to in some small way be a mirror for the love that God has for us for others.”

She describes how the experience altered the direction of her life. “It certainly isn’t a finger that comes out of the heavens and says well, this is what you should do in your life. It isn’t that kind of a thing. ... But it does – you understand that whatever it is you choose to do, at the end of the day doesn’t matter so much as what it is you choose to be.” “This whole experience of the divine in my life really made me understand that what I was becoming was more important, or what I was being was more important. Her experiences shifted her attention from her doing to her being and becoming.

She recognizes and is intrigued by the paradox that she experiences in her journey of the spirit. She recognizes how she is always holding things in tension, e.g. hope and disbelief, experience and knowledge, light and dark, her experience of enduring suffering but on the other hand she was granted peace. Logically there isn’t an explanation for paradox, yet, “there is something that keeps bubbling up and keeps moving us forward and keeps churning us along.” She is intrigued by the notion put forth by Wolfhart Pannenberg and his emphasis on eschatology as understanding the future as breaking in on the present. She sees how this is happening through mystical experience on an individual level, and believes it is likely happening on a bigger scale, “it is just we have our eyes closed to it, and we are not aware of it.” She believes we are being asked to hold paradox, these disparate notions, “That is all we can do.” She now relates to her experience with the divine, “like a snowball running down a hill, you can’t

really do anything about it, you can't control it." She recognizes the living paradox of this, in that we need to rest and at the same time we have to make decisions and move forward. "To make a decision to live this spiritual journey is not easy. We are being led in directions we can't imagine. ... It is difficult when we don't see where it is leading us, or into anything in particular." She is learning to rest in the assurance of God's love, to recognize the encounters that draw her forward that seem to affirm and give purpose to her experiences and knowledge.

Adam, following his dream experience at seventeen years of age, describes being left with a core belief, "like I just know it to be true." In the years that followed, "things would come into my mind, like if a situation came up I would have the thought of how would I handle this, what should I do, what is the kindest most loving thing I could do to alleviate this situation." This wasn't always easy as he would be handling things differently than other people in the male culture and "drunken boom times" that he was living in. Later in his life, suffering from a serious depression, the dream this time provided "encouragement to keep on going, because there was more coming. There was more that I had to learn, there was more that I wanted to learn, it was like a guide of some sort." It was strong enough to "jog me back into still wanting to keep living." A subsequent time he was awakened by a voice that said, "seek joy". His response to this was, "There was no questioning it. That was my mission." These dreams and experiences "opened my mind enough to be able to accept spiritual teachings." He now believes our purpose in life is to develop our spirit. "The way that happens is by allowing free choice, and incarnating on earth into the human society that we do allows us free will to develop in a sort of a – in a solid way without interference from

somebody else, we make our own decisions. So we advance at whatever speed to whatever level that we are able to.” His dreams continue to become more profoundly meaningful, more than he realized at the time.

George describes being awakened to “that sense of wonder” and now carries a perspective of abundance that thrives from the experiences. George recognizes a reconciliation of mind and spirit that has occurred; he loves being in the intellectual realm, but realizes at some point that can leave him empty and still wanting. “That’s not the answer alone. ... It’s getting in touch with those pulls, the things that pull us, and that aren’t so readily explained or written. Finding words for it is very difficult, so just kind of being in those moments is most rewarding.” He relates to his experiences, if viewed from the perspective of Hebrew Scriptures, as prophetic; changing his own understanding of reality. He wonders, “why is it that I’m not always on this path – it’s like some sort of frequency that I’m either dialed into or not.” He describes this spiritual understanding as something beyond the idea of conscience, “when I’m back in that zone or when I’m aware of my own spirituality, then it’s very easy to evaluate the milieu, of everything else that’s going on around – it allows for clarity, and adjustment of priorities. It allows me to put those things in a perspective that again to this point has been consistently successful for me. ... Without that spiritual grounding or that coming back to – or just having that part awakened ... then I’m stuck in me, and I’m doing things my way. ... I’m doing things in whatever state I’m at, and sometimes that realm used to be pretty confused in short order.” “It’s a strange almost paradox where it’s a seeking spirit while being spirit.”

George also describes times he experienced similar ecstatic moments in different states and stages in his life. As a runner he has experienced what some describe as a ‘runner’s high’; “there was that point of that feeling at the same time mortal and immortal; here I am, I am in motion, and I feel nothing if great. ... like it’s just this sense of perpetual motion, and that’s a really cool feeling.” He has also experienced it drug induced. When he used drugs it was with the idea of seeking shaministic states. “I wanted to feel, I wanted to know more, to feel more, but the trap for someone that’s got any sort of addictive tendencies is that in very short time it just becomes a means and it just becomes a matter of getting, and finding ways and means to getting more.” Having had the two experiences apart from drugs or exercise he now realizes, that “wow, this is for us and we don’t necessarily need to go there. ... and that’s where theologically it becomes an issue of grace for me. I can experience this. I don’t have to will it. In the Dominican [Republic, where he had a mystical experience while swimming in the ocean] self will had nothing to do with it. Everything I was doing was sort of a matter of just listening or feeling a pull.” It was also the “greatest high I’ve ever felt.”

For Sarah the knowledge of the heart isn’t a static knowledge. “It isn’t just about knowing God or the divine. It’s about knowing what you’re called upon to do ... what you are supposed to do with that knowledge of the divine.” Now she recognizes how these experiences tend to crowd themselves together and come faster when she is about to, or is going through a major change, learning or growth; a metamorphosis in her life. It’s like a preparation that results in “Oh, okay, now I understand. ... Like a divine intervention of help and support. ... It kind of fills my soul up and allows me and pushes me through whatever is happening.” These experiences impact her day-to-day life by

providing a sense of direction and purpose. “If my heart doesn’t have those sorts of feelings, then I’ve moved away from what I need to do. If I change my course or move back and I begin to get those stirrings and feelings again, then to me that’s confirmation.” She allows the spirit to guide her like following the flow of the river instead of fighting upstream.

Brian too recognizes his tendency, and that of our world “to work against the stream of love.” He comments on how we don’t have to “desperately make the universe.” His own awakening to this has changed over the past four or five years. At first there were moments that “stood out and then I went back to the mundanity of life and consciousness, thirsty for the next unbelievable, you know, awakening. It seems now that the moments are just – everything is an awakening, and there are moments of this sleepiness still hovering around it all, and maybe that will be the rest of this incarnation and the next one will be another unfolding. I have no idea.” The awareness has grown such that he recognizes the whole universe unfolding in each object, relationship and moment, “and I see all of that as a stream of love that I have been a part of.” “I know that soulfulness of me is just slowly stretching and it’s not forcing anything, and it’s floating on that amazing river.” “More and more there is that deep breath just breathing and knowing.” “There isn’t anything else. ... It’s just to let it do its thing and to be deeply aware of heartness or soulness.” Brian recognizes how our mind might think ahead or behind in its “endless babble”, however this awakening allows one to be present to, to tend to and to know oneself and all that one is around more truly and wonderfully, emanating love.

The experiences result in a journey of the heart; an awakened interior journey that resonates and guides one's living and learning in relationship with oneself, others, the world, universe and spiritual dimension. They are transformative, in that each of the participants recognizes a shift in their being, and in their being in the world. The internal shifts may be subtle, however they are life changing. As Karen describes, "I felt like I was a different person." It is a deeply personal transformation and a transformation of faith.

Faith and Belief:

As previously mentioned, all of the participants have had a shift away from the Christian belief structure they knew as children or young adults. They describe their current faith within expanding and flexible constructs.

Most of the participants describe their faith of before as a shell, or a consciousness of that time in their lives. Brian quotes the biblical phrase 1 Cor. 13:12 (NRSV), "as through a mirror dimly," recognizing how his earlier belief structure held relevance but now his knowledge is bigger than what he understood through the mirror of his Christian understanding. Or as George states, "That's one of the biggest joys, is having that old belief, just do what it did. It's okay that I used to think like that, that I used to believe in something that for a lot of people works. And I'm going to assume that. I can say with more conviction that it didn't work for me." While two of the participants remain involved in a Christian church community, all of them look beyond and are inclusive of other faiths, scientific explorations, psychological understandings, energy work, and other fields of study.

All the participants recognize their profound experiences, or “turning points” as significant milestones on their spiritual journey. It shifted or awakened something within that felt so truly relevant and significant that they were catapulted forward into further exploration, often in areas they previously would not have chosen. George describes, “To avoid the existential crisis I needed something to believe in. And for a while it was just the sort of scientific evidence that well, at the very least we are, you know, all bound by the same sort of rules and molecules that are all around us. ... But that wasn’t enough. I guess the next thing was embracing the mystery that seems to shroud the whole thing. ... it isn’t limited anymore to a specific religion. Now it’s shared ... Christianity is a way to God ... it isn’t about one way, there is an ability to share these beautifully profound moments, but that comes at the cost of sacrificing the ego ... taking ego out of the equation, out of institutions, and lots of biographies change. Things become radically altered.” While each of the participants took their own route exploring, they ultimately seek out that which resonates with the knowing and mystery of their own experience. It is not a static intellectual certainty that they hold, but more of a knowing; it’s what feels right or resonates within rather than head formulations. They continue to thirst for a growing understanding and integration of the spiritual in their lives. There are plateaus, and then new learning begins again. Adam states, “once you reach a level of spiritual awareness you just can’t stop doing things to develop it further.” Their spiritual understandings are not static or fixed. Faith is a growing entity, an ongoing unfolding.

Adam describes different spiritual beliefs as all connected to the same spiritual energy. Speaking with a friend who believes in having a personal relationship with

Jesus he realizes that it isn't that he doesn't believe in it, he just frames it differently. There is something valid and powerful about all of our experiences. It is part of the spiritual energy of the universe. He uses what he feels is a more inclusive language that describes his belief; it doesn't differentiate 'you' from 'it'; 'Jesus' and 'you'. And believes this may be dependent on one's degree of abstract tolerance. The language of specific traditions seems limiting for the spiritual knowing they have acquired through their spiritual experiences.

They now have an experiential knowing that is dynamic and organic. It goes beyond intellectually understanding something and taking it on as a belief. As Karen describes, she had believed intellectually that we are all connected in an energetic way. But following her experience she describes the experience of connection with a higher energy or power as, "It's absolutely a whole other knowing. And I'm no closer to understanding it, except I know it exists now. For myself." Sophie describes after having spent years in church life, still having a yearning for more. Now she states, "what I had yearned for, yes indeed is accessible to us. ... Everyone has the innate ability to commune with God, however you perceive God to be, and whatever avenue you use. For me as a Christian, Jesus was my avenue, but I don't believe that's the only avenue." "You're not just seeing the divine as something removed from us, something transcended, but as something that is just a whole part of us, and is always going to be part of us, always has been, always will be if we allow ourselves the opportunity to access that." The experience of the divine is personal and relational, resulting in a knowing beyond what they can learn or understand intellectually.

Eve's journey highlights some key expressions that are common among the participants. Eve knew the old paradigm of Christianity of sin and redemption was limiting but wasn't sure what she could embrace. For a period she didn't believe anything of a religious nature, she explored in areas of philosophy, sociology, psychology which all pointed to other possibilities. However, she longed for worship and to acknowledge something bigger than herself with reverence. She pursued theological studies at St. Stephen's College and came to recognize her previous Christian construct, "Jesus as my personal savior", as a historical viewpoint, and moved to a grounded place in her faith of origin from a new perspective, while embracing the teachings of Jesus. Many years have passed, and she continues to grow in her spiritual understandings, "it certainly isn't solid or fixed. ... I needed to explore it to find out what the teachings were all about and to discern what of that I could take with me still, what still had validity for me, and what I could let go of, knowing that it didn't really have any more validity. ... Looking at [the old Christian paradigm] today it is limiting and it really doesn't hold up as the truth. ... So many things that at that age we can't say today because we are dealing with different information." Eve recognizes her faith as a growing thing. She believes we need to allow these experiences rather than dismiss them. By doing so she feels more connected to the source, resonates and is moved by beauty, recognizes a sense of awe in appreciating something much bigger, and is more receiving from that place that feels sacred. Her desire for more connection with this unfolding is significant, and is grateful to have the time in her life to intentionally experience those things that connect her with the flow of life energy.

Eve's journey points out some of the common steps in the faith journey experienced by each of the participants. Their previous faith paradigm is experienced as limiting; left with an uncertainty of what to believe. They begin to recognize other possibilities that are often accompanied by a deep longing. Their powerful experiences somehow break open their previous belief structures to a new grounded knowing from which they explore further. This new spiritual understanding is moving and flexible, continuously growing and unfolding, with glimpses of truth not immutable fact. This desire to grow within this newly recognized sense of spiritual connectedness goes beyond their own limits.

Result of the Experience(s)

Personal Connection With Life and Mystery:

The participants speak of a connection with life and mystery in ways that are felt and alive. They no longer see themselves as human beings separate from divine mystery, but as spiritual beings alive in mystery. Sophie describes, "it is all mystery at the end of the day", regarding how and why these experiences happen. But she believes, "it's always a journey. It is key to give ourselves the permission to stay in that mystery, then we'll be drawn further into it. It takes courage of course. And sometimes you wonder just how far you should go ... once in a while you just say oh, that's enough for now...." She emphasizes how important it is to embrace mystery in our secularized world, "We live in a world of cause and effect; we're taught silence at a very primitive level ... these things don't fit in our logical world."

George now recognizes, "I'm not alone, and I never was, and that we're all part of something that is in a sense infinite ... coming to believe that has really changed the

way that a person can choose, or not, to get hung up on the trivial matters.” Instead of compromising a situation with expectations and a certainty in himself, this new level of awareness helps him remain more centered in the moment, awakened to that sense of wonder, possibility, abundance, gratitude and mystery that he now recognizes as embracing everything that is.

Sarah describes what it is like when living out of that place she describes as the heart space. “When you get to that place you transcend your normal thought process. It becomes all heart and connection.” She recognizes these times as filled with gifts and blessings that help her “not just survive but to thrive.” “Somehow I know that what we’re all doing is trying to get back into that presence, into divine light and energy. We’re trying to connect with each other to make that – the divine stronger and brighter and brighter.”

Karen describes looking at people and nature now in a more sacred way. She sees our human existence and experience, and all of nature around us as miraculous. She emphasizes how important it is to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness and diversity that each person and life as a whole has to offer. As a nurse she recognizes the value of people, and life itself and does her part in nurturing it along. Her experiences have deepened her appreciation for all things, and spoke to her hunger and longing for a deeper connection and experience of life. Knowing that this connection is there and is possible leaves her hopeful.

Brian describes wondrous anticipation as he expresses where he is now, “I’m in a big place, stretching into it and growing and finding the corners and all the nooks and crannies, and it’s just wondrous. And perhaps I will fill it out.” “I just think with joy. I

don't know what the rivers – what bend in the river I'm going to see. Like this thing is just whooshing down there, and something wondrous, absolutely wondrous is on the bank. It's the event horizon again. ... I don't have words. I have some images that I can't really describe when I think about it." There is a sense of knowing and unknowing, movement and wondrous anticipation.

The participants describe their experience of life now with words that acknowledge mystery in felt and alive terms. While our logical world doesn't easily embrace this knowing of mystery, the participants describe experiencing the infinite in a moment; gifts and blessings that awaken wonder, possibility, abundance, gratitude, the miraculous, joy, wondrous anticipation, and deep appreciation for life. They acknowledge mystery as personally present, and embracing everything.

Being and Becoming:

Overwhelmingly the participants describe a shift in their attention, from what they are doing in the world, to how they are being and becoming. There is a shift from much of their focus directed to their exterior lives, to one of greater attention to their interior lives and their sense of being, that then influences their actions in the world.

Sophie describes this shift as, “you understand that whatever it is you choose to do, at the end of the day doesn't matter so much as what it is you choose to be.” She describes this shift in her life as surprising for herself and her family as she had always been “a person that had to be doing, doing, doing, and I was always one of those type ‘A’ types that had twenty-seven different irons in the fire at any given time, and took a great deal of pride in keeping them all going.” However, “this whole experience of the divine in my life really made me understand that ... what I was becoming was more

important, or what I was being was more important.” “I think we can often miss the point of trying to live out our Christian life, and we think we have to be rushing about accomplishing great deeds, but I don’t think that’s always the case. ... If we can just be who we are to people ... It’s funny how life circumstances just put you in a place every once in a while where you just have to be for somebody all that you can be.”

Brian describes a tendency, that he recognizes both personally and in society, of urgently trying to create the world. We are “thinking there is something really important for us upstream while everything is downstream that is life giving to us, and all we need to do is let go of the oars and let this boat of our being be pulled along, .. all that will ultimately bring us to awareness of our creator and self.” “I think that’s my awakening now, is just being able to be – to let whatever it is that’s going on this moment be the most important and complete piece of my universe. There isn’t anything else. ... It’s just to let it do its thing and to be deeply aware of heartness or soulness.”

Adam too acknowledges this shift in his life as a result of experiencing divine oneness, and recognizing himself as a spiritual being, not just a human being. He has adopted Gandhi’s saying, ‘being the change you want to see in the world’. What is important for him now is “To be it, to be as spiritual and as joyful as I can and let that example be what people see. ... to live in the spiritual without having to explain it to somebody.” “If you let society push you into stuff, then that’s where you’re gonna be stuck and you’re gonna be resentful and you’re gonna be – you know, living somebody else’s values or some corporate values. I said live your own life. Like, be who you are, be what you want to be.”

Coming from this place of being, opens the participants to the fullness of their present circumstances. It allows them to be more fully alive spiritually within themselves while more authentically recognizing and connecting with others and their world. This spiritual awareness and congruency allows their essence to be expressed in the world rather than some created projection of themselves and the world.

Compassion:

As a result of this shift in awareness, each of the participants speaks of being less judgmental, more patient, and calmer; generally having a greater capacity for compassion. Compassion manifests itself in unique ways for each person, however it involves an inner shift where one's attention moves from self-centeredness to attending to others and the world; responding from the ground of their 'being' to the 'being' in others.

This compassion is recognized in the small everyday ways in which they live. For example, Adam speaks of one day having a quiet realization that the way he thought had changed into a gentler and more loving approach. He describes how he used to drive to work "hating all those other guys. Like just get out of my way. Drive it or park it. ... And then I realized one day that I didn't feel like that anymore. I just felt like we're all sort of pulling the same way, we're all doing the same thing. We're all just trying to get to work and cooperate here on the freeway as best we can, we're all just one going to work. So instead of feeling separate from the world, I began to feel like I was, you know, connected to everybody else." This change is recognized most significantly with his family, friends, with coworkers and in the simple interactions with others in the events of his days. Recognizing people as connected spiritual entities reduces the

tendency to be judgmental, allowing greater compassion for others, and one's surroundings to manifest.

Brian describes that sense of beingness, or “isness” as part of the energy of love that is the universe, “that is-ness stuff finds a unique manifestation in every soul. If the creator is like a ball of light, we are a ray coming off of that perhaps, inadequately said, and it will find its own color and hue and taste and flavor in this form world, this corporal thing. And I have become aware that at least one aspect of that color and flavor for me is healer. And I think that is an essential flavor of love maybe for everybody to a degree, but I know that in myself. If I say I am, it is I am healer. And it just takes on a tremendous number of expressions. ... And I have not really even begun hardly to explore what that is like, and the power behind it. But one piece of it certainly is just my idea of inside-wise, it's just to acknowledge that nothing I say to you will have any relevance to you, but it might draw out your wisdom and then that will have relevance to you. ... Healing for me means to remember wholeness, to remember absolute wholeness and truth of ourselves.” Brian describes how our beingness finds a unique manifestation in everyone, for him he names an aspect of this for himself as healer. He no longer is an active pastor in a church, but finds himself in the role of ‘healer’ with those whom he comes across in his daily life; often soulfully minded people, however, “they don’t have a language for it, and nor even an openness to speak about it with others.” In his interactions with people he allows them the opportunity to explore their soul; helping them put words to their experience and what is important to them. He enjoys these opportunities where he can hear their wisdom and have it respond to his own.

Other participants describe themselves as deeply evolving out of their own unique place of beingness in their own unique hues, but each of them acknowledging this shift as a result of an inner shift and an expression of compassion for others. George has always loved being in the intellectual realm, but knows that at times the intellect can leave him empty and still wanting. “That’s not the answer alone. ... It’s getting in touch with those pulls, the things that pull us, and that aren’t so readily explained or written. This reconciliation of mind and spirit has gifted and enamored him with learning in a new way. He describes now being passionate about learning, “not out of vanity, but out of grace.” He feels blessed to be able to share this with his students, “especially with teaching music, it’s all about giving and opening up young minds. ... planting that seed for life long learning with kids, ... constantly challenging them as a fellow student.” He describes this powerful shift of compassion in this way, “It’s not a mystery when I get out of myself and help other people. ... It’s that idea of giving which is so counterintuitive, because I can be a very self-centered person who wants a lot. ... but I’ve found that once again there isn’t a mystery when it happens time and again that the consistent feeling as a result of giving is joy.” In his vocation of teaching he describes, “It’s not a matter of trying to give, you have to. It’s a giving profession.” He sees himself as being part of an evolving world paradigm, in his vocation as teacher, inspiring students to learn and grow through the exploration of different perspectives, along with his own ongoing learning.

Eve describes making choices in how she responds to the needs of the world from this new awareness of compassion. “It’s not something that I think. ‘Oh I should do this’. It’s more and more of, ‘that feels right’”. She recognizes this as “aligning myself

with universal energy, which is ‘the ground of our being’, or in traditional language, opening myself up to the love of God.” Over the past ten years she has engaged in personal practices that increase her energy flow, and has also brought energy work into her practice as a psychologist. From that place that feels right, she is currently moving into a greater appreciation of the earth and our responsibility with it, and participates in some groups that help others where help is needed in the world.

Sarah describes the heart-way of knowing affecting how she interacts with the world in two key ways. First she believes when you come from the heart it influences your actions in a way that is different from your head. She believes that like attracts like, and “if people would allow themselves to feel – to have those experiences and to let those experiences settle in their heart, where the heart is doing the listening and the acting as opposed to the head, then I think we would build stronger communities, supportive communities and there wouldn’t be room for some of the ugliness that’s all around us.” Secondly “the heart has a way of just knowing God differently ... it changes your perspective and how you approach what you’re doing or how you perceive the world.” It is both a personal change that alters how she interacts with the world around her as well as a shift in perspective. She speaks of living the heart-way of knowing by living it, to “share the feeling with others, so instead of coming from a place of ego, being gentle with people and understanding and accepting and not judging.” Now in her work, she frequently feels a strong presence that is very alive in her relationships with residents and families in long term care.

Sophie describes coming from that place of being deeply loved and loving, “At some point we have to step up and try to accomplish justice in whatever small corner we

choose, and we're not all going to choose the same thing, and it's probably just as well we don't." She tries to live out her faith in non-obtrusive but helpful ways; acknowledging the seeming paradox of paying attention to her own being while also acknowledging the biblical passage, 'of those to whom much is given, much is required'. She is intrigued by the notion put forth by Wolfhart Pannenberg and his emphasis on eschatology, understanding the future as breaking in on the present. She sees how this is happening through mystical experience on an individual level, and believes it is likely happening on a bigger scale, "it is just we have our eyes closed to it, and we are not aware of it." She believes that at this time we are being asked to hold as paradox, these disparate notions, "that is all we can do." She describes being a mirror for love most directly with her children and grandchildren, making time for them in meaningful ways. For her neighbor whose husband died tragically, "I've just had to try and be what I can be for her." After a number of years, she found a cause she felt comfortable with and is now actively involved in the Grandmothers group of the Steven Lewis Foundation.

Karen describes looking at people and nature in a more sacred way; as miraculous, recognizing the uniqueness and diversity of each person and life as a whole. From her powerful heart opening experience, she knows a deeper connection and experience of life, and knows what a good death is. As a nurse she appreciates the enormous capacity of the human body to adapt. Often she has the opportunity to support families while caring for a dying family member. She recognizes the value of people, and life itself in a deeper way and does her part in nurturing it along; enjoying and celebrating their lives.

The participants' expressions in the world come out of a deep place of compassion. A number of them mention how helping others is an important gateway to the self. Rather than urgently trying to right the world's wrongs, they recognize the subtle shifts in themselves manifesting in actions of grace and compassion. This new knowing in which they find themselves encourages them to acknowledge the paradoxes and tensions in their world while acknowledging their beingness and wholeness as flowing from this universal energy / love at the ground of their being. They are engaged in the complexity of the world while connected to an evolving process of life.

Role of Companions, Community, and Spiritual Practices

When asked "What do you find helps to keep the heart way open?" Sarah states, "living it, talking about it, and praying about it." In the section above on compassion, the participants have each described how they now live from it. Now, how do they talk about it? How important is it to be heard? Where have they found community? And how do they pray about it?

Being Heard:

Having their experiences heard has played an important part in integrating the resulting knowing of their experience. Each of them have shared the details of their experience with only a few people. Karen describes how she shared her experience with a fellow nurse instructor who shared similar understandings around healing energy. This woman had grown up in the Catholic tradition and recognized Karen's experience as "God speaking to me". While Karen could accept this way of naming it on one level, the aliveness and fullness of the experience seemed more than that. As a result, Karen

describes, “I can’t always share things like that with other people. For one thing you want to hold it close, and in trying to explain it to other people that don’t understand, it dilutes the experience a bit, so I like to hold it close. ... It feels good to share it with somebody that understands.”

For Adam it was years after his first experience that he was able to share it with someone. In retrospect he realizes how important it has been to tell others of his experience. However, this wasn’t possible until he had deeper friendships and people he could trust in his life. Up till now he has only told a half dozen people. Sharing about these deeply personal and relational experiences needs to be shared in relationships of safety and trust.

The unique and unusual nature of these experiences has sometimes caused the participants to question its validity and significance, causing them concern about their own mental state. George describes, “first of all [having it heard by his confidant/friend] validates the existence of the moment. It keeps a type of record of the experience.” Recognizing himself as a neurotic type, he believes that if he hadn’t shared it with his friend and then further explored it with a member of a theological college, “I’m sure what would have happened would be this trend where historically I experience something or think something and I just kind of push it down ... I’ll either talk myself out of it or just stop... I certainly won’t consciously integrate it into life thereafter, and so that was very important to share with somebody the immediate experience.” In addition to validating his experience, speaking with others helped him to recognize what within the experience was there to be sought and explored.

Sophie too believes it is very important to have witnesses to these experiences. They are easily discounted in our secular society, and there are many efforts of various scientific studies that try to explain these experiences as misfirings of the brain, thereby leaving us with the notion that these are not to be considered as reality in any form. Therefore it is important to have a place to have these experiences validated. Otherwise, like she did in her earliest experience, we put it aside. She describes it being “quite a march” for her to understand that this was a legitimate experience, and that it wasn’t an extraordinary experience, “there really wasn’t anything very out of the ordinary about it, it was just what it was”. Sophie believes, “Being able to incorporate the experience into our own psyche and our own being as reality depends on the presence of a witness.”

Sophie believes these experiences are to be valued and treasured, but at the same time they need to be balanced with the knowledge that we are not ‘more spiritual’ or that we are not on a higher step up the spiritual ladder from anyone else. “I think that longing is in each person articulated in different ways or not articulated, I think, which is a problem for a lot of people. ... It is just an ordinary experience that has embodied spiritual beings, it is accessible to all of us in different ways.” It is an experience based on knowing, that she believes many people have, but they just don’t have an avenue or place to articulate it. Having a witness helps validate the experience, and provides a way of articulating and valuing the experience while not aggrandizing the experience or oneself.

Eve too describes how the swami at the Ashram didn’t make much of her experience, but did affirm the message of the voice that woke her from sleep, recognizing it as part of the spiritual life. Brian’s spiritual director, after Brian

experienced a number of different sensations of timelessness and “ridiculously vibrant” colors, assured him that the body’s senses become highly attuned when dipping into parts of consciousness. He also came across an author, David R. Hawkins, (Hawkins 1998) who describes these types of experiences as cross over points to new levels of consciousness. Adam describes how confusing it was to have all of these experiences happening in such an emotionally confusing time of his life. Meeting the woman from his dream, in person, helped him “understand that it’s okay to think of myself as a spiritual being ... and that I wasn’t weird or there wasn’t something wrong with me if I understood that I was a spiritual creature having a human experience rather than the other way. ... She also encouraged it and sort of held my hand as I learned to walk.” Each of the participants describe having their experiences acknowledged and validated, valuing the content of the experience and the value of the new spiritual awareness or consciousness that has resulted without making the experience extraordinary or seeing themselves as more or less spiritual than anyone else. What is important is recognizing and affirming the nature and resulting value of the experience.

The witness helped them recognize the importance and legitimacy of the personal and spiritual awakening that results from the experience, acknowledging that it is part of the spiritual life and helping them walk and integrate this new knowing.

Reading and studying have been important ways for the participants to be heard and to explore their experiences. Many of them describe reading and studying in areas that resonate deeply with the knowing of their experience. As Adam describes, his vivid dream experiences “opened my mind enough to be able to accept spiritual teachings.” Reading of other’s experiences and understandings reinforce and validate their own, as

Adam states, these writings “made everything ring even more true.” Or as Brian shares, the writings were very helpful in providing a way to understand “the geography of myself, God and life view.” George too had his new understandings validated, and understood himself in a different theological paradigm as a result of reading W. Paul Jones’, *Theological Worlds* (Jones 1989) in his studies and explorations at St. Stephen’s college. It helped him, “really for the first time in probably my life feel okay with what I understand my spirituality to be, and to know that, yeah, for what it’s worth I’m not alone in that.” This integration happens over a period of time through conversations with others, exploring new perspectives through reading and studying, and noticing the events of their days as they take on a different significance.

Each of the participants is more consciously and excitedly engaged in spiritual explorations; recognizing and exploring spirituality in ways they would not have considered previously. The following are the frequently mentioned connections that most of the participants would have dismissed or considered heretical at earlier times. They speak of reading the works of the mystics, of a variety of faith traditions; of theological and philosophical writers exploring paradigms of faith, both current and past. They are excited to recognize connections of theological explorations and science through quantum physics and the cosmic perspectives of the unfolding of the universe. Philosophical and psychological explorations of human consciousness provide context for exploring the egoic states and stages they recognize in their lives and in society. Psychic, astronomical and other esoteric traditions no longer seem outrageous; from this new perspective they draw out new understandings and create greater space for their life experiences. Psychic episodes are recognized by one participant as a veil lifted

rather than mere coincidence. Energy work and what western society calls “alternative healing modalities” are fully embraced and integrated into the lives of at least three of the participants. These connections evolve out of their experiences and resulting journey. They don’t hold any one of these as new belief constructs, but as all providing glimpses of truth and fuller recognition of their life experiences as part of their evolving spiritual journey.

Reading and studying in areas that resonate with their experience, having someone to explore the knowing of their own experience as it is a part of their lives allows the participants to integrate in a deeper way, and to live within the new landscape as their knowing continues to evolve.

When old paradigms no longer make sense and start to fall away and new awareness emerges, it is often difficult and requires time and support, as from a Spiritual Director or guide. As Brian describes, over a few years his experience with the spiritual director got him, “out of bed and walking in my soul”. Brian was in a difficult place in his life, resisting movement within, and at the same time knowing he desperately needed to talk to someone. The person that kept coming to mind was a man a friend had recommended he see, but he felt, “I can’t talk to him, he is way too weird.” But not knowing who else to turn to he started to visit this man on occasion, even though he didn’t connect with him initially. At first what the spiritual director would present to him seemed too rich, dense and wondrous for him to understand. When leaving his meetings, his director would say something like, “practice miracles today.” “I’d say, ‘well, what do you mean’. ‘I don’t mean anything. I mean go out from here and practice miracles.’ ... So I’d leave, and think what in the heck is he talking about. And

I want to. But it's like telling somebody that's never walked or swam just to go and do it." He describes his spiritual director as an intuitive mystic enlightened in consciousness and love. He provided care, guidance and instruction, but mostly pulled out of him "that which he knew was already there, just gently carefully weaving it in front of me so I could see this is – this is soul, this is love." The relationship has changed over time, "what he did was created the space where I could grow in awareness of that wisdom that is mine, that's meant for me, that's connected me to all wisdom that we are all connected to or whatever. ... Now it feels like two old friends, more peer-like than student/pupil or student/teacher. ... our connection doesn't have anything to do with necessarily the corporal world anyway. It occurs regardless of geography or time. ... He is a gift of love, and I guess that's what he remains to me." Now, Brian's wife plays the role of spiritual director for him, "Her deep wisdom for herself often pulls out my own, in very genuine and pleasant ways, and sometimes in conflict." He finds the interactions with people he meets in the events of his days are also important guides, as he notices how their wisdom resonates with his own.

For Sophie her spiritual director accompanied her through a very dark and horrifying spiritual experience, and helped her to be open to grace and to express gratitude for this suffering. Without the support of a spiritual director, Sophie believes it could be very harmful to be alone in these deep and transformative places. Her Spiritual Director has been very helpful; having a relationship with someone who knows her well, and who accompanies her through intense prayer experiences and her journey is vitally important to her. She notes, "It's always a journey. It is key to give ourselves the

permission to stay in that mystery, then we'll be drawn further into it." Having a Spiritual Director helps her to stay in the mystery of her journey.

Adam now believes we have many guides. Some we meet in this incarnation on earth, others are spirit guides. During a very dark period in his life, in his dreams, he met a small community of spirit beings that provided encouragement for him to go on, helping him recognize that he had more to learn and live for. "We have spirit guides that are here to help us through this incarnation rather than just having to face the big exam at the end." He understands these guides as beings that are like "professors" whom we will rejoin in the afterlife, or in-between lives to continue our growth as spiritual beings. His experience of spirit guides has been reinforced by readings of Michael Newton, who describes the experiences of thousands of people with similar understandings. He has also met two other people, on separate occasions, who have had the same or very similar dream experiences. One of the spirit guides from his dreams he has now met in person, in this life. This guide supported him in the new awareness that was opening up for him; she encouraged him and was an important guide at that time in his life; someone he is forever grateful to for saving his life.

Eve describes the guiding voice that woke her; "where did it come from, I don't know, whether it was from outside me or some projection towards me of some intelligence that was guiding. I am open to what many people believe is that there are spiritual forces around us that guide us in some way or protect us at times, you know, why not have them say something to us." Eve too had a guide / loving friend whom she met for years, a woman from the Buddhist tradition who remained an important confidant and spiritual guide until her passing about a year ago.

Community & Church:

Seeking understanding often leads into new ventures of community. Sarah describes how it is important to talk about her experiences to “relive it”. She finds that she wants other people to share their experiences also, and ends up surrounding herself with like-minded people. She recognizes the difference between the ‘group think’ that she has experienced in religious or church settings, where people share what they think from the religious teachings and dogma of the church, to sharing from personal experience. Noticing how she is more aware of the presence and movement of Spirit in her day-to-day life, she states, “this is something the Bahai faith did for me. It broke me out of the conditioning of Sundays being the church fix to carry you through to the next week.” When people share from their experiences, a deeper fellowship and community forms with these close and trusting relationships. Yet it is difficult and she recognizes in some ways the feeling of Spirit can never be fully articulated; “When you vocalize something, when you hear it, it resonates and feels true.” Having a place to share or reflect on the experiences is important to keep them present and alive in her life, to nurture the longing, and to create close trusting relationships of fellowship.

Adam, shortly after his dream experiences and meeting his guide, began to attend workshops and started reading and studying, and happened upon the Center for Spiritual Awareness in a way that some may call ‘luck or coincidence’, but to Adam, “it looked to me like someone was leading me into this place where I needed to be.” He continues to attend the Center on Sundays, for the “spiritually uplifting music and message – in a way that really speaks to me that I can understand and that is something I can take home with me and kind of hold in my heart.” Perhaps it is as Sarah states, that like attracts

like, and “if people would allow themselves to feel – to have those experiences and to let those experiences settle in their heart, where the heart is doing the listening and the acting as opposed to the head, then I think we would build stronger communities, supportive communities and there wouldn’t be room for some of the ugliness that’s all around us.”

Sophie acknowledges the tension of seeking community in the Christian church while having this deep sense of knowing from experience. She is surprised to find in her studies that “indeed there are theologians who are basing more of their teachings on experience. And who knew?!” She feels that the church, has separated itself from its spiritual roots in a lot of ways. She recognizes a huge longing for it, “it seems they don’t know where to find it. Some individuals recognize the importance of this connection and we are lucky for that.”

Having just attended a presentation by Diarmud O’Murchu (O’Murchu 2000) she was intrigued by his visual explanation of “pouring new wine into old skins.” She believes our new knowing of experience is trying to be poured into a religious framework that hasn’t made room for it, and that is where much of the paradox in church life/structure arises. Our experiences break these structures open. As O’Murchu pointed out, Christianity has been focusing on being ‘the way of the light’ and has overlooked the fact that we have only been around 2,000 years in a 7 million year history. Not only do we have a tiny portion of knowing, often what we have is wrong or way too narrow. Therefore we need to reclaim what we have lost and as we go forward we need to drop barriers between ourselves, humanity and all of creation. She

recognizes how this helps us question our faith and how we make sense of these mystical experiences within the Christian belief.

Sophie went through a six year process of discerning her involvement in church community and decided to leave the denomination she had belonged to for 25 years. She has taken on the perspective of Evelyn Underhill (Underhill 1986), that “church is not there to nurture your spiritual life. That’s your own responsibility. Church is there for worship, it’s there for community, it’s there for a place of service, but it’s not there to nourish your own spiritual growth.” Seeking as she was, for spiritual growth, she now realizes how she was “doomed for disappointment.” Now she has asked herself what she needs, and “I realized that what I didn’t need was necessarily preaching. What I needed was a communion service. ... And that is a very nourishing thing for me, and that is very directly connected to the experiences that I’ve had.” The communion table brings her into a deep point of focus and it’s a way of experiencing presence. In the past three years she has been baptized in another denomination and joined a church that offers her access to the Eucharist on a weekly basis.

Sophie still struggles with not having a sense of rootedness in church community. Having recently attended a workshop with a number of elderly nuns, she realized how fortunate we are in these times and in our part of the world, to have the opportunity to share our spiritual experiences so openly. “Perhaps we take this for granted, and instead should recognize how fortunate we are to have opportunities and communities, although often communities that are meeting outside of formal church structures, to share in how the Spirit is moving in our lives individually and collectively.” “I think the key is always to try to keep yourself open to where the Holy Spirit wants you or where – if you

keep yourself open, the Holy Spirit will lead you to what you need, and to what feeds you. ... The other thing I've given up is trying to predict where it's going to go. You just can't." The deeply personal experiences of Jesus' presence, and her experience of God's love is what keeps her going to church despite her ongoing struggles. She notes how important it is to hold and to share in the current paradoxes of our experience and hold the knowing as possible breakthroughs to the future.

Brian also acknowledges this paradox of Christian faith and church structure. He is no longer a pastor at a parish, but continues to fill in for different parishes and conducts various ceremonies when asked. While thankful for the consciousness of his previous belief structure, he has come to a point where he has grown past the group consciousness of religion. "I can go back and be involved in the church at will, but I don't – only to the point that translation is possible, and then I have no interest in it anymore." It is unlikely that he will return to a parish or become "enmeshed in the political structure of the church", he is open to where the river will take him and not knowing what this may mean for him in the future. What he does know is "the universe seems to bring opportunities to me in surprising ways, and unexpected ways, so for the most part I like to follow them and see where they lead." Currently he is being led to opportunities not directly involved with church, meeting those "who us religious folk would have considered to be kind of lost souls" and through interactions helping them explore their soul in a way that church or friends haven't been able to. "I think there are people, men and women, looking for that without them even knowing it."

Participants are actively seeking communities that affirm who they are without judgment. They are looking for discussions and messages that resonate with who they

are while discovering themselves with this new awareness. As Eve expressed her relief in being a part of community at the Ashram, “this fits with who I am, it embraces more of who I am. I want to be a person of integrity and honesty, that’s what I want to be. I don’t want to live a lie.” It has to relate to their growing consciousness and personal integrity, allowing them to advance at whatever speed possible. Participants tend to explore and move around to various communities, finding what is resonating with their current place and spiritual growth. The participants frequently mention small groups that they meet with to share in their spiritual journey and experiences on a regular basis. They have a desire to explore and grow in their awareness. Some of the participants are looking for places that affirm their faith roots but encourage them to explore beyond these constructs of understanding. In this way it doesn’t place limits on their spiritual experience(s) and nurtures the aliveness and fullness of their experiences while still valuing and bringing forward that which still resonates in new and deeper ways. They want to be in community, but are uncertain of where that is going to take form. Some find partial solutions within a church community while all of them seek more broadly, frequently drawing from a number of faith traditions, various groups or small communities, and including a broad scope of practices.

Practices and Prayer:

The participants recognize how our culture is inundated with life robbing activities that are contrary to their awakening experiences. They recognize many tendencies in their lives that pull them away from the knowing to which they have been opened. Many of them describe how busyness and the sense of not having enough time takes them away from their own soulfulness. As Brian describes, these situations often lead to

“a cascade of emotional experiences that will likely be sleepy experiences.” “It takes way too much energy to engage in life-robbing experiences, ... and uses so much energy to sustain them.”

Sarah describes how worrying is a big distracter from attending. “I don’t know if the experiences have helped the worry because it takes away the fear, or if stopping the worrying and being mindful and present allows the experience.” She notices conditioned responses to various triggers; those situations that cause her to be uneasy, and how they take her away from the journey she should be on. She recognizes after a triggered response, how she used to fold up into herself to try to nurture and analyze the hurt she felt. By doing so, she is paying greater attention to the response, and now tries to be aware of her conditioned responses, recognizing them for what they are, that there is no core reason for her reaction, and to let it go. “They bring you back to earth harshly, but they aren’t based on reality. Letting go of the smaller ones allows you to get to the bigger things. They get in the way of the heart connection.” Quieting our lives, recognizing and letting go of conditioned and emotional reactions, attending to our own interior is key to tending the heart way.

They all describe practices they have learned throughout their spiritual journey that help them create space and connect with the flow of life. Sarah describes how “Being in the moment, being present and attending” is essential to her living from the heart. It requires “discarding things that really don’t have meaning and aren’t important ... like the way we accumulate things ... not to say that you can’t have those things. But to clear away some of the clutter and busyness of your life so that you make time to allow that. ... We don’t’ allow ourselves to have the time to feel those things. And we do

have to get in a space where you can be mindful. ... Sometimes it's as simple as noticing how pretty that tree is, or the way the sun's on the leaves and the tree is alive."

Being in nature and recognizing the oneness of everything is mentioned by all of the participants. As Adam describes, every day he consciously tries to experience the oneness of everything, like, "looking at the plants and understanding how wonderful it is that life just springs forth from the earth and how the energy that creates that is part of the same energy that keeps me alive." Or as Brian describes a message from a movie that he believes is very poignant, "When we look at ourselves and we see what we really see, how can we not weep with joy at the awesome beauty, whether it was manifested or lived out in consciousness or not; it's there." By acknowledging this connectedness and creative potential regularly in daily activities, now any moment is an opportunity for meditation or prayer.

Reading and studying spiritual writings and teachings from a variety of perspectives is mentioned by each of the participants. Learning seems to nurture the child-like wonder and desire to explore and be filled with awe. They often refer to how they integrate their learning with their experiences, acknowledging how, "one is not substitute for the other." The thirst for growing understanding and integration of the spiritual in one's life is strong. Adam describes it as an ongoing process, "once you reach a level of spiritual awareness you just can't stop doing things to develop it further."

Music, poetry, painting, yoga, exercise, energy work, breath work, meditations and prayer are common practices that they integrate into their lives. All of these practices help, as Sarah describes, "to ease out of our ego and attachments to reach our spiritual

core and essence.” Prayer changes, as Sarah describes, from “this is what I want, when I want- controlling how it should show up”, to having faith and trust in the process. They are more intentional about their practices and know, as George shares, “If I don’t play the drums or exercise for oh, say a week, then my mood is off, and it’s apparent to me, it’s apparent to my wife, it just changes everything.”

All of these practices support one to move beyond thinking into a different space of attentiveness. Sophie recognizes being increasingly needful of silence in her life, sometimes through structured opportunities and most often it is just part of her lifestyle of living alone. There is an inherent desire for silence, yet as Karen acknowledges, we are conditioned to think it is a waste of time, and that we are not using time wisely. The above mentioned practices bring the participants into a place of deep focus, beyond thoughts, and in connection with presence; often referred to as a rich place of silence. Ritual and discipline nurture a different rhythm and attentiveness in their day to day lives.

5. EXPLORING LITERARY VOICES PAST AND PRESENT

Hearing the participants relate their own mystical experiences and resulting spiritual journeys resonates with many aspects of my own. It is not unlike what I found when I first came upon some of the writings of mystics like Theresa of Avila, Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, the poetry of Rumi and others; I felt that something of myself was being understood in a way it hadn't before. Yes, it is reassuring to know others have had their own unique yet somehow similar experiences to my own, but perhaps more significantly, it opens up the movement and points of resonance to even greater fullness and possibility. I will now touch on areas that stood out for me from the discussions with the participants that also draw me to the writings of various mystics and theologians, contemporary and past, to further explore 'the heart way of knowing'.

Opening to and Speaking of a Greater Truth

Perhaps the most moving point of the collective experiences, is also expressed in the exclamation of St. Theresa of Avila when she says, "O my God, how different from merely hearing and believing these words is it to realize their truth in this way!" (Theresa of Avila 1997, 266). All of the participants point to how their experience opened them to a truth other than how they understood it to that point. They experienced new understandings in surprising and unexpected ways, beyond what they could have imagined. Theresa, who wrote these words in 1577, knows this experience as well. Her works are valued for the indepth inquiry and analysis of her own spiritual experiences, spiritual growth and transformation.

Theresa speaks of the soul as being the interior castle with seven mansions or rooms. These rooms are not placed in succession, but are part of a whole,

...if this castle is the soul, clearly no one can have to enter it, for it is the person himself: one might as well tell someone to go into a room he is already in! There are, however, very different ways of being in this castle; many souls live in the courtyard of the building where the sentinels stand, neither caring to enter farther, nor to know who dwells in that most delightful place, what is in it and what rooms it contains. (Theresa of Avila 1997, 42)

She was willing to dwell in the mansions of her soul and shares with us her experiences. In the first three mansions she recognizes the importance of humility, self-knowledge, prayer and good works, but it is in the fourth and following mansions that she speaks of supernatural occurrences and spiritual consolations as dilations of the heart, as in Psalm 118:32, 'When Thou didst dilate my heart.' In the fourth to seventh mansions she describes a growing intimacy with the divine through spiritual consolations, union, marriage, and presence. She distinguishes this infused contemplation from the sweetness of prayer, by stating,

... we experience the greatest peace, calm, and sweetness in the inmost depths of our being; I know neither where nor how. ... This joy is not, like earthly happiness, at once felt by the heart; after gradually filling it to the brim, the delight overflows throughout all the mansions and faculties, until at last it reaches the body.

Therefore, I say it arises from God and ends in ourselves, for whoever experiences it will find that the whole physical part of our nature shares in this delight and sweetness. ... This joy does not appear to me to originate in the heart, but in some

more interior part and, as it were, in the depths of our being. I think this must be the center of the soul, ... (Theresa of Avila 1997, 100)

As she explores the fourth mansions and further we hear a more familiar resonance to those of the participants.

... It is not a thing we can fancy or gain by anything we can do; clearly it does not arise from the base coin of human nature, but from the most pure gold of Divine Wisdom. (Theresa of Avila 1997, 101)

The after-effects on the soul, and the subsequent behaviour of the person, show whether this prayer was genuine or not: this is the best crucible by which to test it. (Theresa of Avila 1997, 101)

Until the soul has gained much experience it doubts what really happened to it. ... The mind feels a thousand misgivings, and well for it that it should, because, as I said, nature may sometimes deceive us in this case. ... neither the imagination, the understanding, nor the memory has power to hinder the graces bestowed on it. (Theresa of Avila 1997, 122)

She speaks of God arousing the soul;

... by means of words addressed to the soul in many different ways; sometimes they appear to come from without; at other times from the inner depths of the soul; or again, from its superior part; while other speeches are so exterior as to be heard by the ears like a real voice. (Theresa of Avila 1997, 175)

She recognizes how frequently the ‘words’ address things the hearer knew nothing about or could even imagine, resulting in understandings much greater than implied by the words themselves.

This woman, who lived in the rugged time of the Inquisition and amidst the harsh realities of a rather brutal patriarchy, understood and gave words to this experience of infused contemplative knowing. She was speaking up with potentially grave consequences to her own life, to reform the Carmelite order, and ultimately to influence the Catholic Reformation of that time. Today, many centuries later, enduring our own inquisition of secular, logical sequential cause and effect thinking, we are once again recognizing, valuing, and naming mystical experiences as important “mansions” in our spiritual growth, having significant meaning and impact in our lives, and influencing our living in the world. Theresa was, and is, a prophetic voice of her time and ours. She was challenging the current order and breaking new ground of religious understandings, much as we are awakening to greater understandings in our own. Unlike the choice of entering a convent, or strict religious life, life circumstances of our contemporary world can lead us into the classically understood stages of mystical experience.

Looking Beyond Institutional Christianity to Our Own Experiences of Divine

Vitality

Much later, in 1914, Evelyn Underhill describes her own experience and perspective of the Mystic Way. (Underhill 1992, 303) Like the participants of this study, Underhill’s personal journey to explore the divine mystery was in response to the failure of institutional Christianity to meet the deep spiritual needs and religious intensity she was yearning to experience. (Greene 1987, 22-38) She recognized mysticism as something

attainable to all, and wrote her thoughts for the ‘common man’ of her time, defining mysticism as “the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.”

(Underhill 1986, 23) She believed that we all have an inner tendency to want to unite with Reality, but few nurture that consciousness to live in the full awareness of the quiet movements of the heart. Her inclusive voice is significant today as we hear echoes of her experience in that of the participants; we continue to seek deeper expressions of our spiritual selves beyond the institutional church in the growing complexity and diversity of our world.

Evelyn Underhill was exploring the writing of mystics, looking beyond the dogma of the Christian church and the classifications of science of her time to bring meaning to her own spiritual journey.

We feel, interpenetrating and supporting us, the action of a surging, creative Spirit, which transcends all its material manifestations: something which the least dogmatic may be willing to describe as “the living presence of an eternal and spiritual Energy.”... Piercing its way to the surface of things, engaged, as it seems to us, in a struggle for expression, it yet transcends that which it inhabits. It is a Becoming, yet a Being, A Growth, yet a Consummation: the very substance of Eternity supporting and making actual the process of Time. In such hours of lucidity we see, in fact, the faint outline of the great paradox of Deity; as it has been perceived by the mystics of every age. (Underhill 1992, 14)

Her words come from someone who has explored her own experience as well as the experience of Christian mystics before her within the modern context of science.

She describes the true mystic as,

the adolescent of the Infinite. ... From first to last he exhibits all the characteristics of youth; never loses – as that arrested thing, the normal adult must – the freshness of his reactions on the world. He has the spontaneity, the responsiveness, the instability of youth; experiences all its struggles and astonishments. He is swept by exalted feeling, is capable of ideal vision and quixotic adventure; there is “color” in his soul. (Underhill 1992, 49)

Describing those times of personal unexpected mystical experience, she refers to the pressure of the transcendent side we call “grace”, and by our own interior tendency of “love” that emerges in a cataclysmic and abrupt way,

As abrupt as birth, since it always means the induction of consciousness into an order previously unknown. The *élan vital* is orientated in a new direction: begins the hard work of cutting a fresh path. At once, with its first movement, new levels of reality are disclosed, a transformation both in the object and in the intensity of feeling takes place. The self moves in both an inner and an outer “world unrealized.” ... This emergence is seldom understood by the self in relation with life as a whole. It seems to him a separate gift or “grace,” infused from without, rather than developed from within. It startles him by its suddenness; the gladness, awe and exaltation which it brings: an emotional inflorescence, parallel with that which announces the birth of perfect human love. This moment is the spiritual spring-time. It comes, like the winds of March, full of natural wonder; and gives to all who experience it a participation in the deathless magic of eternal springs. An enhanced vitality, a wonderful sense of power and joyful apprehension as towards

worlds before ignored or unknown, floods the consciousness. Life is raised to a higher degree of tension than ever before; and therefore to a higher perception of Reality. (Underhill 1992, 50)

Speaking of the same characteristics as described by St. Theresa, and seemingly speaking directly of the experiences of the participants, she notes how all mystics have experienced abrupt access to divine vitality, which has broken old barriers, overflowing the limits of their previous conceptions, changing their rhythm of receptivity, and the quality of attention to their lives. (Underhill 1992, 51) These changes in consciousness she believes most often occur at the height of adolescence or at the attainment of maturity, although recognizing it can happen at any time in one's life, as it is the expression and movement of life itself. This is supported by the participants of this study, recognizing the experiences as key to shifts in their own growth and maturity. Like Underhill they believe this movement is available to all people, not just a select few.

Spiritual Growth and Maturity

Recognizing the evolving life and consciousness of mystical experience Underhill describes the stages of spiritual growth that can follow as: purgation, illumination, and states of union.

During the first stage, purgation, one is adjusting to the new order resulting from experience, there is a change in our attention, a rearrangement of our ideas and energies. It requires us to withdraw from our attachments through self discipline in order to open the doors of our perception. Our awareness is drawn to unsuspected meaning, beauty and power as well as our imperfections, finiteness and disharmony. This inner movement helps us awaken to our need for union with the Absolute or divine Reality. It requires us

to make voluntary choices that draw our inner and outer life into greater congruency – “a progressive uniformity of life and experience.”(Underhill 1986, 100) At the end of this stage, it is what she calls the Simple Eye of Intention that, “love and will – the feeling, the intent, the passionate desire – of the self, which shall govern your activities and make possible your success.”(Underhill 1986, 104)

The second stage of illumination is where we experience a growing capacity for the Infinite, and begin to recognize our own deep reality and ultimate place in Eternal life. It is a process of expansion where “you are to enlarge your boundaries and become the citizen of a greater, more joyous, more poignant world, the partaker of a more abundant life. ... a world that is ‘unwalled’.” (Underhill 1986, 115) It is also a stage where one swings from pleasure to pain, which she believes governs the mystery of growth. (Underhill 1992, 53) It is during this stage that Underhill recognizes what St. John of the Cross calls the Dark Night of the Soul. Our experience supersedes our concepts of understanding, resulting in a sense of obscurity and moral crisis that cleanses one of all previous attachments to selfhood. Although it is a place of darkness, it is also a place of intense silence; the place the psalm speaks to, “Be still, and know.” (Ps. 46:10) Underhill refers to Ruysbroeck who describes a condition of this stage as, “there begins a hunger and a thirst which shall never more be stilled.” (Underhill 1986, 131)

The final stage recognized by Underhill is one of Union with Reality and God. As described by St. Thomas Aquinas, it is a place where “the soul both seizes and is seized upon.” (Underhill 1986, 164) She underlines how this immediate union with God is a place of consciousness far above the ideas and images of both popular religion and philosophy. “You enter upon an experience for which all the terms of power, thought,

motion, even of love, are inadequate: yet which contains within itself the only complete expression of all these things.” (Underhill 1986, 161) It is an experience of an inpouring of Love and Union that results in an outpouring in the world. Underhill uses the term “divine fecundity” to describe this transformative experience that becomes incarnate and is expressed in a variety of ways that impact the world.

Again we recognize the experiences of the participants in these stages, not uniform in its presentation in each person, but certainly recognizable. The stage of purgation was often experienced in the breaks or discontent with religious understandings, often accompanied by significant personal searching and changes in their lives. As Brian described, a “waking up” occurs. Some came to this stage of purgation through recognition of deep meaning, beauty and power, while for others, the starting points were more through the recognition of imperfections, finiteness, and disharmony.

They experience deep helplessness or humility in their circumstances. Various degrees of beauty, meaning, or suffering resulted in a letting go of previous conceptions of Reality. We hear in their stories the illuminative stage; the sense of expansion and abundance, a recognition of the importance of Being, an expanded understanding of Love and compassion. Consistently we hear in the participants’ stories experiences of union; experiencing the inpouring of Love and Union results in new consciousness, changing and transforming them personally and transforming how they interact with the world.

While many ancient mystics refer to stages of spiritual growth, most notably Sister Theresa of Avila and the seven mansions of the soul (Theresa of Avila 1997), Underhill’s three stages are generally recognized as inclusive of their classic understandings. They are also referred to and expanded upon in current day understandings and realities. Father

Richard Rohr speaks to the importance of nurturing a contemplative stance and the limitations of religion today, when he states;

[one of religion's greatest imitations is] it has given us conclusions rather than a process, of coming to those conclusions for ourselves. It taught us what to see, ahead of time, before we were often asking the questions, instead of how to see. ... and that is a much more difficult process. It demands the cleaning of our own lens and clarifying and quieting of our own hearts, and I think we somehow thought we could avoid that whole terrifying and wonderful journey by just telling you here is what you should see at the end of the process. (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD1, Track1)

He recognizes how the Catholic Church in particular has played a negative role in our ability to 'see'.

Certainly that is the part that we Catholics have so played, and I would say overplayed, that we made sure that Catholics would trust hierarchy – priests, bishops and popes – and in overplaying the outer authority part what we are finding we lack in so many Catholic countries, a much deeper sense of inner authority. That sense that they can say “I know”. Not, “I believe doctrines”. That I know for myself, I know this to be true because I have experienced it. (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD1, Track1)

And like St. Theresa, Underhill and the participants, this knowing has a much greater meaning and resonating influence in our lives from a place of truth that comes out of a deep inner knowing.

Rohr speaks of six stages of consciousness: information, knowledge, intelligence (which he breaks into analytic and intuitive), understanding, wisdom, and transformation. (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD 3) Not unlike Theresa who makes a point in saying that we all have seven mansions, he too prefaces his discussion of stages of consciousness by recognizing our ego tendency to rank one stage higher than another. He is encouraging us to recognize the mansions or stages of consciousness as a means of directionality; something to shoot for and to help us recognize when we are in regressive behaviors. In fact, he says, we are deceiving ourselves if we believe we can make this journey on our own, this is a delusion of the rich. For it is, at the center, radical grace. Or as the participant Sophia states, “at the end of the day, it is all mystery.”

Rohr’s first two and a half stages he compares to Underhill’s stage of purgation. Stage one is Information, where he believes we all have to start but where a lot of religions today seem to be trapped. This is where we are gathering data, facts, formulas, and information, yet always searching for the more correct information. This keeps us at a level of power struggle passing for intelligence. Stage Two is ‘Knowledge’, when we begin to see patterns, and connect information into small wholes. Stage Three, ‘Intelligence’, he divides into two parts: Analytic Intelligence, and Intuitive Intelligence. Analytic Intelligence appears when we begin to see much bigger patterns and connections, and are able to synthesize in more complex ways; typically understand as seeing outside of the box. However, the emphasis is on form because we have not yet experienced the formless. One is still measuring reality more than meeting it on its own terms.

There is a crossover point when one moves into the second half of Stage Three, ‘Intuitive Intelligence’, the beginning of Underhill’s illumination stage. He believes that

to move into this stage we have to experience an epiphany, or an enlightenment. Two great experiences that catapult us into the intuitive intelligence are great suffering and great love, as we have heard in the experiences of the participants. This experience breaks down logic, “and you have to open up to mystery to survive another day without going crazy.” (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD1, Track 3) It is a place where we begin to meet reality instead of just measuring it. It is a place where the head and heart begin to work together, outside of our usual dualistic thinking. We often feel a “little crazy” as we still fear and mistrust this place as it is outside of our usual way of operating. Plus there are few people who understand and support us in it. This is the beginning of contemplation where the spirit in us recognizes the spirit in others, the love in us encourages the love in others. It is intuitive, not logical, it does not dismiss the critical faculties, in fact they are most often sharpened in this place.

He describes the knowing of this intuitive intelligence, by referring to Thomas Aquinas, as a knowing by “co-naturality”. Rohr states;

God is not known like any other object of information. What has created atheism largely in the west is the assumption that God can be known as you know a tree or a bit of scientific data and that you can prove it right or wrong. God knowledge is in a category all of its own. In fact, if you listen to the mystics, they will describe it almost as a non-knowing that is allowed within you because you are known. It is a feeling of being known more than knowing. (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD3, Track 4)

We hear this in George and Sarah who describe a sense of a previous or “ancient knowing”. This knowing is a “feeling of being held, someone is holding me so well that I

can hold things that I couldn't otherwise." (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD3, Track 4) Or in referring to Meister Eckhart, "The eyes by which we look back at God are the very same eyes by which God first looked at us." Rohr believes all we are doing is completing the circuit, we receive the gaze, learn to abide in that gaze, then we learn to live there in some degree of permanence; looking back at the world with loving eyes. This is the beginning of unitive consciousness.

Rohr believes that this is where mature faith starts; everything before this unitive consciousness is religion. Now in Stage Four, 'Understanding' (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD3, Track 8), we can be sympathetic and empathetic to all of the previous stages; love, acceptance, understanding, patience, forgiveness, and recognition of how under stress we go back to stages one and two. It is a place of immense compassion for ourselves and others. We begin to know things by conaturality, kinship, or affinity instead of merely mental analysis. He refers to this as *Mini mysticism* (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD3, Track 8) where we begin to meet reality on its own terms, without a need to categorize it, control it, explain it, or even understand it – "it is what it is."

Stage Five is 'Wisdom', where all of the previous stages are included, used and honored, but we transcend them all into non-dualistic thinking. There isn't a need to divide the field for the sake of being right, being in control, or being perfect. Everything is allowed to teach us. In this contemplative stance we are patient with paradox, mystery, and seeming contradictions.

Rohr's final stage, 'Transformation', occurs when our consciousness actually takes on a new form. If practiced it becomes our life program, one of habitual non-dualistic seeing, as it has for saints and other enlightened beings before.

What strikes me in his progression of consciousness is the acknowledgment of a shift from head knowledge to an intuitive and contemplative stance. He mentions that frequently glimpses into this intuitive intelligence occur in the late teens and again at mid-life. As many of the participants shared, how alone we can feel in these new places in our lives. Rohr points to the charismatic movement recognizing how many people experienced mini mysticism, but they didn't have good contemplative teachers to help them move to understand this first parting of the veil. They had momentary states of unitive consciousness, but there was no one around to help turn these momentary states into more permanent traits. (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD3, Track 7) Rohr believes that we can only understand people one stage above ourselves, therefore we require someone with a mature faith and unitive consciousness in order to understand these inner experiences. It points to the importance of having others to support us in these places of new understanding, recognizing that not all people will be able to be there with us. Some of the participants found companions on their journey who supported them in this integration of their experience and as a result have found ways to live more fully within this expanded sense of knowing.

Spiritual Experience within the Context of our Lives

Ken Wilbur is another important voice in our contemporary world, with his "integral approach" of formulating a theory of spirituality. (Wilbur 2006, 313) Recognizing the influences of modernity and postmodernity he presents a theory or approach that embraces the complexity of our times – new and traditional faith traditions, science, culture - and helps us locate ourselves in our conversations and explorations of spirituality. On first read I found his work overly methodical. As I ventured further I realized the importance

of his work in helping us clarify what perspective we are approaching the subject of spirituality from, and how it is important to acknowledge the multiple approaches that exist instead of confusing them all as one.

When Wilbur refers to types of mysticism and states of consciousness, he recognizes that there isn't simply a variety of religious, meditative or spiritual experiences, there is also a variety of interpreted religious meditative or spiritual experiences based on our context and religious background, which also includes a sequence of interpretative capacities. (Wilbur 2006, 93) He refers to these differences as states (or phenomenological states of the spiritual path), stages (developmental stages of the spiritual path), and lines (multiple lines of intelligences – e.g. cognitive, moral, emotional, spiritual, aesthetic, kinesthetic). Drawing from the work of recent researchers on selfdevelopment and consciousness (such as Self Identity by Jane Loevinger and Susann Cook-Grueter; Spiral Dynamics by Don Beck and Chris Cowan, orders of consciousness by Robert Kegan, multiple intelligences by Howard Gardner), and from the wisdom traditions (such as Christian Mysticism, Vedanta Hinduism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Jewish Kabbalah) he explores the states and stages of religious, spiritual and meditative experiences.

His key point is;

a person can have a profound peak, religious, spiritual, or meditative experience of, say, a subtle light or causal emptiness, but they will interpret that experience with the only equipment they have, namely, the tools of the stage of development they are at. [Referring to James Fowler's spiritual stages of development] A person at magic will interpret them magically, a person at mythic will interpret

them mythically, a person at pluralistic will interpret them pluralistically, and so on. But a person at mythic will not interpret them pluralistically, because that structure-stage of consciousness has not yet emerged or developed.”(Wilbur 2006, 91)

Therefore the interpretation of a state is based on the stage one interprets it from; “the subject of knowing co-creates the reality it knows.”(Wilbur 2006, 111-112)

Wilbur refers to William James’ and Evelyn Underhill’s work as describing the states (phenomenology) of the spiritual path, while the work of James Fowler describes the structure stages of spiritual development. To conceptualize these differences he speaks of the stages on a vertical plane of development and the states on a horizontal plane. For Wilbur, true enlightenment is becoming one with all available states and stages of one’s time. (Wilbur 2006, 129) However many spiritual traditions or practices do not recognize these differences; many include state meditations, but often do not recognize or have a framework for encouraging vertical stages of development. In fact an individual’s or a tradition’s framework can either hinder or help vertical growth. He therefore encourages both individuals and traditions to “supplement!”. “Nothing needs to be subtracted from your spiritual path (except, perhaps, any claims to exclusivity); all that is required is adding or supplementing with information generated by Spirit’s continuing evolution and unfolding.” (Wilbur 2006, 141) The participants in this study seem to inherently have done just that, exploring in many fields, and including a variety of methods of prayer/practise along their spiritual journey. They speak of their journey as evolving and changing, not static within a certitude of belief. They have reached out

beyond the previously defined parameters of their tradition to evolve in their spiritual journey.

The other quality of Ken Wilbur's integral theory, is that it recognizes every circumstance as having multiple dimensions. He describes these dimensions in four main quadrants: the dimension of "I", "we", "it", "its". (Wilbur 2006, 33-40) Wilbur's model of quadrants offers a way to recognize the individual not as a building block of society, but "offers us a way to integrate individual and social without trying to reduce social to individual nor make individuals merely parts in a web or cogs in a wheel, but members in a social system that is a dimension of their own being-in-the-world." In this way every spiritual circumstance includes all four of these dimensions: a subjective, objective, intersubjective and interobjective connection. A person will interpret an experience based on their multitude of intelligences recognized by the self (subjective), their contexts of cultural background (intersubjective), their neurophysiological abilities and limits (objective), and social systems in their life (interobjective). (Wilbur 2006, 94) All of these are interconnected as mutual dimensions of every occasion throughout the stages of spiritual development. Again, the participants' descriptions of not only their experience, but also of what has resulted from the experiences, point to the multiple dimensions that are a part of their experience, lives, and resulting journey.

These four key spiritual authors (St. Theresa of Avila, Evelyn Underhill, Richard Rohr, and Ken Wilbur) of various times and places, help us recognize the complexity and richness of mystical spiritual experience. They emphasize how not only are there personal experiences, but personal experiences that occur within multiple dimensions of our lives. Without specifically naming their experiences within the constructs presented by these

authors, the participants have named them from the context of their own lives; how these experiences have influenced their faith, personal sense of life and death, ability to be compassionate and loving, and how it has changed how they make choices and live in the world. The experiences are wholistic and expansive, and likewise influence their lives.

Faith Beyond Belief

The mystics of the past, and of this study, call into question what is meant by faith. The progression of history, especially since the 16th and 17th Century, has led us to rely heavily on scientific and rational thinking. We have grown to mistrust other means of knowledge beyond our thinking minds. Raimon Panikkar describes how,

in modern Western Christian tradition, a strong wind of objectivity has swept away the mystical consciousness, pushing it to the margins of Christian life. Christic faith, which began as “religiosity of the Word,” has continued to evolve, sociologically speaking into a “religion of the Book.” (Panikkar 2004, 84)

The acknowledgment of the life and Word that dwells in all of us, has become so rationalized that we have been encouraged to know faith through our study of the scripture as separate from us, and the resulting moral rules, definitions and dogmas we have built around this to govern our lives of faith.

Marcus Borg (Borg 2004, 28-41) highlights four primary meanings of faith. The first meaning is a “matter of the head”, the following three are “matters of the heart”. The first meaning is one of *assensus*, where we believe in a set of propositions outlined by a particular ‘faith’. In our post-modern time, often this is asking us to assent to things that are contrary to evidence. This seems to be the prominent understanding of faith today, and is also a primary cause for disbelief Christianity constructs. We can witness to the

relative impotency of this way of believing, as “you can believe all the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Believing a set of claims to be true has very little transforming power.” (Borg 2004, 31) Each of the participants have pointed to this in their own experiences, recognizing how belief as they had grown to understand it no longer rang true for them, there were too many contradictions. Their experiences opened them to a different truth.

The following three meanings relate to the participant’s expressions of faith. The second meaning is faith as *fiducia*, as radical trust in God. This is not a trusting in a statement about God, it is a faith like “floating in a deep ocean.” (Borg 2004, 31) This meaning asks us to trust and relax in the buoyancy of God; “trusting in the sea of being in which we live and move and have our being.” (Borg 2004, 31) Some of the participants spoke of going with the flow of the river instead of fighting up stream. Others recognized a knowing that perhaps they had thought of before, but now understand it from a place of experience that has resulted in a buoyancy of hope. This is a faith that one does not have to achieve, it is something that one can now relax into and know it to be true.

Faith as *fidelitas*, is a faith in our relationship with God. It is a loyalty, and commitment of the self at its deepest level. The opposite is not doubt or disbelief, the opposite is being unfaithful or idolatrous, “centering in something finite rather than sacred.” (Borg 2004, 33) Borg describes this as being attentive to our relationship with God which is both simple and challenging through the simple means of prayer and practice and living a life of compassion and justice. The participants, out of their experiences, recognize the sacredness of life in a deep way, and have found ways to nurture that relationship through various practices and indicate how this ongoing

relationship influences their living in more compassionate ways, seeking justice in their personal relationships and interactions with the world.

Borg's last definition of faith is faith as *visio*; a way of seeing. He refers to H. Richard Niebuhr recognizing the "central importance of how we see the whole of what is, for how we see the whole will affect how we respond to life." (Borg 2004, 34) He recognizes three possible ways to see the whole. One way sees reality as hostile and threatening, in which case we respond defensively. He believes much of popular Christianity has viewed reality this way – one of judgment and punishment. The second way is to perceive reality as indifferent to human purposes. Reality may be seen as elegant and magnificent but is neither hostile or supportive to our human lives. This he recognizes as most common in our secular viewpoint, we may be less anxious and paranoid than the first way, but will still be defensive and cautious. The third way is to view reality as life-giving and nourishing; it has brought everything into existence. Reality is seen as gracious, even if at times it is a terrible. "It leads to the "self-forgetfulness of faith" and thus to the ability to love and to be present to the moment." (Borg 2004, 35) The vision goes beyond ourselves and we are willing to spend and to be spent. It is connected with faith as *fiducia*, and *fidelitas* in that they are all relational, flowing out of a deepening relationship of faithfulness and trust. As Borg states, "Faith in these three senses enables us to live our lives and to face our deaths in a new way. ... it transforms the way we see and live our lives." (Borg 2004, 37) Again we hear this echoed in the participants; they express how they see the world, the divine, others and themselves through a new vision of evolving and abundant life.

Relational Dynamic of Human and Divine Nature

Fr. Thomas Keating invites us into this deeper Christian expression of faith by stating;

That God is manifesting who he is at every moment, in and through us and through all creation. Jesus' teachings initiate us into how to take part in this cosmic adventure. For human beings, it is the most daunting challenge there is – the challenge of becoming fully human. For to become fully human is to become fully divine. (Keating 2005, x)

Based on the evidence from this study, the participants truly know from experience, not just an intellectual belief, the potential that exists within each of them; the energy and powerful expression of divinity not only within, but in all of creation.

Raimon Panikkar speaks of this relational dynamic of our human and divine nature. He goes so far as to state,

We don't have to consider ourselves shallow-minded or sinners just so that Jesus might appear, by contrast, holy and divine; he would probably not appreciate this attitude. ... Why should we not feel authorized to speak as Gods? Personal dignity implies this: not only are we one of many rings in a chain of beings (or even Being) but each one of us is also unique, unsubstitutable precisely because each one of us bears infinite divine value. (Panikkar 2004, 116)

He emphasizes that this acknowledgment of our divinity must be understood in relationship! He explores this relationship through the Trinitarian dynamic (Panikkar 2004,106-120) of all of creation, citing various texts from the gospel of John.

“I and the Father are one.” John 10:30

“The Father is in me and I in the Father” John 10:38

“He who has seen me, has seen the Father.” John 14:9

“As the Father, who is life, has sent me and I live for the Father, so he who eats of me lives for me.” John 6:57

He acknowledges how identity and difference exist. The Father and the Son are different, but they are one relation. They are neither identical nor different. Rather “God is the ultimate and infinite correlative of reality” – “For from him and through him and to him are all things” (Romans 11:36) Correlative highlights how one implies the other, and one cannot exist without the other. It is in this “not one, but not two” relationship that we also exist. He highlights two important points in this powerful relational dynamic,

I am one with the source insofar as I too act as a source by making everything which I have received flow again – just like Jesus. ... And this is possible only if this intimate union is neither egotistical nor conserved but rather shared, in service and love. (Panikkar 2004, 116)

Although our rational minds don’t easily grasp Panikkar’s words, his expression of experience expands and resonates with the participants’ experience of the relational dynamic, in the multiplicity and diversity of their lives, that is intricately connected with the diversity and unitive oneness of all of creation in the cosmos – the dynamic nature of divinity.

Rohr also emphasizes the importance of this dance of relationship. He believes much of the problem that Christianity is encountering is because we have been introduced to Jesus without introducing us to the Trinity. We are only seeing one third of the

mystery. He believes Jesus' purpose was to bring us back into the flow of Love. When people have these deep experiences they feel themselves as part of this movement, as

Happening to them, with them, through them, for them, and almost in spite of them.

... All you can do is allow it, enjoy it, draw from it, recognize it – you can't create the flow. ... You just weep before it when you recognize it is happening. (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD1, Track 8)

He believes when we have been drawn into this divine dance, experienced a total givenness which is often too much for the ego, it is a type of wounding to receive this grace. "It is always a humiliation to the ego to receive love and to realize it had nothing to do with worthiness." (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD1, Track 9) Our objective goodness has nothing to do with us, it is the divine indwelling. When we have experienced this then we truly understand the meaning of 'redemption'.

This understanding, expressed by those deeply steeped in the contemplative and mystical way of knowing, encourages us both personally and as communities, to make shifts in our acknowledgment of faith. They are not asking us to "adopt" their thinking, but rather to acknowledge our own experience. The "Word" is more than scripture separate from us, instead we are encouraged to recognize how "Word" resonates within us; the divine indwelling. Mystics help us recognize how faith is more than belief; it is our deep experience of truth. When we consider the incarnation not only as a past event, and the "kingdom" as something more immediate than a future destination, we and all of creation participate in a creative divinity; a dynamic, intimate, and evolving (and in the Christian tradition, Trinitarian) relationship of Love. They are encouraging us to attune ourselves to this heart-way of knowing in our daily lives; lives of direct experience, of

inner resonance, of intimate relationship, of active participation in creation, moving in the fullness of our human and divine energy of service and love: lives of faith.

Transformative Lives of Faith

It is in living these lives of faith that we experience our human and divine relatedness most intensely and dynamically. In this way we come face to face with our divine immanence and our human limitations, or as Ivonn Gebara states, “Our lives are always more than our own boundaries and always less than the unlimited character we would like to give them. This is simply the paradox that we are.” (Gebara 1999, 206).

But she encourages us to welcome our relatedness in the spirit of wisdom,

It is in the spirit of wisdom that humanity seeks and hopes for redemption, and it is in the spirit of wisdom that all creation, as Saint Paul says, ‘groans in labor pains (Romans 8:22) in order to be freed from the multitude of slaveries that holds us in subjection. There is then, a wisdom that can be read in the very history of the universe and of the earth, one that makes us all able to understand the presence of this power, which ‘helps us in our weakness’ (Rom.8:26). (Gebara 1999, 191)

We experience the paradox of immanent possibility and abundance in tension with self and societal limitations in the groans and labor pains within our lived context. Rather than pursuing perfection within preestablished formulas she believes we need to attend to the “gradual, dialogical, spatiotemporal process that would allow beings to go on living, to avoid voluntarily hampering their own development, and to seek balance and shared existence – one based on a community of differentiated beings that vitally need one another in order to continue to live.” (Gebara 1999, 98) Rather than suppressing our ‘evil’ tendencies we need to welcome them recognizing that “The evil we do comes from

ourselves, as does the struggle against it. This reality forms part of the human paradox itself, or that lack of symmetry that dwells within us and leads us to destroy that which oppresses us and build that which gives us life. And this process of construction and destruction, of creation and elimination, is the very pattern of what we are: It is integral to the fabric of our lives, to our everyday lived reality.” (Gebara 1999, 169-170) Or as Joanna Macy states in her book, *The Great Turning*, our problem isn’t the pain of the world but our repression of it. By repressing our pain we are cutting off the feedback loop. (Macy and Young Brown 1998, 29) We need to live fully in these points of discomfort and paradox to draw from the deep wisdom within the sighs and groans too deep for words.

Janet Ruffing points to how it is in this dialectic relationship of mystical consciousness interrupting our lived lives that a prophetic consciousness emerges. “Mysticism is a transformative process that supports self-transcendence, the overcoming of too small of a sense of self.” (Ruffing 2001, 12) She recognizes this limited sense of self as being self centered and isolated, as well as being defined by the conventional and socially determined form of ‘normality’.

The conventional isolated self with its anxious self-preoccupations takes for granted current social arrangement as “given” and uncritically conforms to the requirements of the dominant culture. Late-capitalist and postmodern culture tends to foster a self that is rootless in relationship to community and place, closed in on itself and essentially nomadic, uncommitted to projects beyond employment and the multiple diversions that make such rootlessness provisionally tolerable. (Ruffing 2001, 12)

She believes mystical consciousness challenges both of these conceptions of the self. “The self discovered in mystical consciousness is a self related to Ultimacy, a self that is more than the self can imagine itself to be and surely more than any society conventionally wants it to be.” (Ruffing 2001, 12) In fact she believes mystical experience brings a deep transformation to existence itself, by where mystical experience “becomes the repository of “that immense remnant” of everything of the human experience that has not been tamed and symbolized by language.” (Ruffing 2001, 13) Thereby mystical experience can contribute to social change, in that it challenges the question that Bernard Lonergan poses, “How, indeed, is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization?” (Ruffing 2001, 20)

Dorothee Soelle sees mysticism and resistance as deeply related. She relates to Matthew Fox, and the mysticism of Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328) in their slightly different interpretation of the classically recognized stages of the mystical way. The stages are: radical amazement, letting go, and resistance. The first stage recognizes the ultimate goodness underlying all things, and the relational experience of amazement. “Without this overwhelming amazement in the face of that encountered in nature and history, without the experienced beauty that can become visible even in [the ordinary of everyday], there is no mystical path that leads to unity. We need to be touched by the spirit of life. Without reinspiration, nothing new begins.” (Soelle 2001, 46) Instead of being seekers, we are in a receptive state of being found. The goodness we have already experienced precedes us, “like every form of ecstasy, the ability to be amazed implies a

forgetting of self, which enchants us out of the normal fixation on self and its corresponding triviality.” (Soelle 2001, 46)

The second stage is one of letting go. We discover how attached we are to our current age of habits; consumerism, compulsive behaviors, false wishes and needs. This second stage of letting go of ego, violence, and possessions leads us to a unitive living with God. “Becoming one with that which the creation intended has the form of cocreation; to live in God means to participate in the ongoing creation.” Living cocreatively with compassion and justice leads us to healing and resistance where “The mystical becoming still, ... belongs together with the clear loud speech of the “No” of resistance.” (Soelle 2001, 51) Like Eckhart she sees the first ecstatic experiences of God as only the beginning of the life of spiritual practice. We are not to get stuck in the sensual satisfaction or spiritual experience, but rather have these experiences lead us into action and further spiritual progress.

Eckhart emphasizes this co-creative process at the same time as guarding us against our own personal goals and societal contexts. He believes that we receive the all that is God by ‘living without a why’; recognizing the nothingness of all things insofar as they are created and other than God, and their equality insofar as they are divine.” (Hollywood 2001, 85) He believes the divine is radically immanent in the eternal now, not only in the historical incarnation of Christ, but also in this moment. Our experience of pain and limitations, our creatureliness, has no power to affect the detached soul’s divine intention. While we experience pain and limitation, our creatureliness, this has no power to affect the detached soul’s divine intention, in fact we share in divine transcendence. “The justice that ensues subverts the very dualisms between creator and creature, and also

between body and soul, whose radicalization gives rise to new consciousness.”(Hollywood 2001, 87) Eckhart, Fox and Soelle point to the importance of the dynamic of amazement, letting go and living co-creatively in the questions and paradoxes of life. This is the internal transformative process that results in new consciousness and actions in the world.

Roger Gottlieb recognizes mystical experience resulting in fundamental shifts in how we sense the nature of the universe and our own personal identity within our socially defined contexts. “We develop a deeply altered and often highly critical sense of the meaning and validity of social life: of its teaching about what is important, of its norms of human interaction, and of its models of success or adequacy.” (Gottlieb 2001, 181) Here lies the value of mystical experience. He also recognizes that “It is in this promise that the danger lies: the place where mysticism can betray itself and deteriorate into self-deception, folly, and escapism, for mysticism can be and has been used simply to evade that which is frightening, confusing, or difficult in the social realm.” (Gottlieb 2001, 182) He also highlights how important it is to recognize the social context in which the experiences unfold; while they may hold truths we need to know there is danger in using mystical experience to support a particular social authority. Therefore he emphasizes, as does the mystical tradition, the importance of disciplined practice of prayer, meditation, fasting, study, retreat, knowledge, and service to help release us from false attachments. (Gottlieb 2001, 182) From his perspective, mysticism is an experience of illumination:

Not to believe in something else, but to see more clearly (and more brightly) what we have and who we are. In the end the work of mysticism is to join us to what we have: in delight, in grief, in life and death. Sometimes that joining will have the

force and pleasure of a sexual climax, sometimes the utter peace of a spring flower or the caress of a child's hand. Sometimes it will be the knowledge that we can join with what is only by resisting it and that "acceptance" must mean that we fight back in our struggle for justice. At such times, we fully realize our desire to transcend the falseness of our social world not by finding some other realm, but by performing acts of solidarity and resistance, by transforming the emotional, moral, and therefore spiritual meaning of the falseness of our social world. (Gottlieb 2001, 194)

These mystics of our current day and recent and distant past recognize the prophetic importance of mystical experience. Recognizing the dialectical dynamic of lived paradox we live in a cocreative process of contemplation and action that evolves organically to resistance and social transformation.

A recent book addressing social change, *Getting To Maybe*, reflects on the lives of people whom we have generally treated as heroes. The authors recognize how many successful social innovators have received a 'call' or strong signal that they can't ignore. While many of the people they encountered were deeply religious those who weren't seemed propelled by a value system they couldn't ignore or dismiss. "The operative word is "can't." Those who try to resist often find that events literally pull them, kicking and screaming, over a threshold into what becomes a terrific struggle, more of a nightmare than a dream. The only way out is to get through it." (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton 2006, 32) They describe how this creative impulse, or instinct of one person has so much more impact than a particular blueprint or plan in making social change.

They describe how it is in the dynamic relationship of this individual instinct that resonates with the energy of others that ultimately results in form and substance. "There

is a kind of dance or oscillation between the social innovator and the collective effervescence. With flow at the individual level, we need focus, feedback and skill. But at the group level we need something more, a kind of letting go on the part of the social innovator, a kind of trust in the possibility of emergence, a faith that when critical mass is reached a tipping point will occur, and a sense that there are some simple rules for managing that emergence.” (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton 2006, 141) Within our postmodern context the authors, experienced in observing and facilitating social change, point to the emergent, co-creative, evolving, and dynamic possibilities of individual mystical experience in relationship with social transformation.

As a result of their mystical experiences, the participants of this study also recognize that their lives are more than their imposed boundaries and they come face to face with the limits of their own lives. They experience the tension of paradox in their lives; personally, collectively in communities, in society, and globally. Their mystical experiences have awakened them to this lived paradox in new ways; appreciating the groans of labor pains and opening them to the grace that helps them in their weakness. Having experienced this immanently and intimately they are awakened to the possibilities and abundance in their lived lives. This prophetic consciousness is noted in the shifts from being obsessed about how they do things, and how many things they do, to how they are being. It reflects the political and social message of the Franciscan order, in highlighting the importance of living as a true example, recognizing an alternative way of living with an emphasis on being rather than doing. (Lachance 2001, 71) This has resulted in changes or shifts in their careers, and more importantly in their relationships leading to greater compassion with themselves, others, nature, life and God – a

transformation of the self that challenges how they participate in the world. Each of them has named a new direction or purpose in their lives. It is an ongoing discerning process, moving from a place of 'shoulds' to following the flow that resonates with the value and deep appreciation for life that has resulted from their mystical experience(s).

This new consciousness does result in different actions in their world; they recognize it as a cocreative journey in the actions of their day to day lives that are now altered, in varying degrees, from their previous personal ways and habits, and often counter to the cultural ideals and societal trends. As a result they too face intimidations, as did many mystics of the past. While the participants have not been confronted with the extreme measures of being excommunicated or burned at the stake, they do face many subtle and powerful disparagements and condemnations that intimidate those who are challenging the religious and power constructs of today. (Jantzen 2001, 42) However, the participants have found ways to live in this tension and paradox, recognizing that this change is not only a personal change of consciousness, but one that they believe is happening at a societal and even point to global levels of change in which they are each a part of in some way.

6. MEANINGFUL MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

What a privilege it has been to be a witness to the spiritual experiences and journeys of the participants. During the interviews and throughout this exploration I have felt a connection with the poignant points of their mystical experiences that has expanded my own spiritual understanding and journey. Recognizing their interest and trust in sharing these personal and life shifting moments and the resulting influences, that few others have heard, is truly affirming. Their personal experiences need to be heard, explored and opened to resonate in our lives. As Frederick Bauerschmidt states; “I am simply trying to open a space in our self-confidence so that we might hear echo the sometimes familiar, sometimes alien voices of the mystics. For unless we hear them, we will never know how much they matter.” (Bauerschmidt 2003, 21) It was a very rich time to listen again and again to our recorded interviews and draw out the key elements of their ‘heart way of knowing’. I became curious about certain dynamics in what they shared that led me into new discoveries and explorations with literature. I heard within a condensed period of time a number of varied contemporary experiences in the different stages and contexts of people’s lives; I engaged in letting this relate to and intertwine with the writings of the mystics of the past, and current authors, to provide a unique opportunity to witness and bring to words the nature of what I’ve called, ‘the heart way of knowing’.

Experience of ‘The Heart Way of Knowing’

The nature of the experiences is timeless. Many of the experiences are very similar, but the personal and social contexts vary. Here there is similarities between the words of St. Theresa of Avila in the times of the Inquisition of the 16th century, and those of Karen,

a true spiritual seeker in our contemporary world of uncertain belief. Theresa states, “O my God, how different from merely hearing and believing these words is it to realize their truth in this way!”. And Karen says, “It’s absolutely a whole other knowing. And I’m no closer to understanding it, except I know it exists now. For myself.” These surprising incidents, at times initially alarming, happening in a moment, embodied, felt, rich in emotion, going beyond what we have known, hold a truth that is beyond our imaginations and logical constructs of our world. The resulting expanded awareness and potential, while new and not fully understood, has a sense of rightness, calmness and groundedness with an ongoing life or resonance.

This soulful awakening is a dynamic interaction of connectedness. It is relational and not static. As Underhill states, “This discovery of your fraternal link with all living things, this down-sinking of your arrogant personality into the great generous stream of life, marks an important stage in your apprehension of that Science of Love which contemplation is to teach.” (Underhill 1986, 123) Similar to other participants, George experienced this understanding in a sudden break, “where I suddenly ceased to be me. ... followed by something much more profound, and that was a sense of oneness ... a sense of the infinite ... that’s something I’m a part of.” He describes that powerful awareness when he stepped into the vast and powerful ocean and was suddenly overcome with this sense of humility and at the same time gratefulness in his awareness that everything around us is made up of exactly that which constitutes us. Or as Underhill states, “You enter upon an experience for which all the terms of power, thought, motion, even of love, are inadequate: yet which contains within itself the only complete expression of all these things.” (Underhill 1986, 131) This new sense of unity breaks old barriers, overflowing

the limits of our previous constructs, changing the rhythm and quality of attention and receptivity in our lives. Without fully understanding where it comes from, those who experience it at some level accept mystery as authentic and the resulting mystical knowing to be a deep wisdom.

This new ‘knowing’ has significant personal implications. The participants and literature describe how great shifts in self awareness and consciousness resulting from mystical experiences supports people through deep conflicts in their lives. Mystics of our past, like St. Therese of Lisieux and St. John of the Cross, speak of ‘the night of nothingness’ (Lisieux 2001) and the ‘dark night of the soul’ (May 2004) that opens to personal transformation. The ancient mystics and contemporary participants describe it as being opened to an expansive mystery that draws their awareness to their individual worthiness, shedding doubt and judgment of self and others, and a new sense of wonder, possibility, and gratitude for the interconnectedness of all things; self, other, nature, the world, and the divine. These gifts are three fold: first, to be filled with love both in actions and feelings, second to realize the essential union of all things, and third, to be led into active participation in Divine Love. (May 2004, 74) This transcendent experience brings them into a more soulful place.

This experiential ‘knowing’ of a dynamic and interconnected Love is multidirectional and powerful. Meister Eckhart describes this Love, “Listen then to this wonder! How wonderful it is to be both outside and inside, to seize and to be seized, to see and at the same time to be what is seen, to hold and to be held ...” (Fox 2000, 483) We hear this in the words of Sophie when she describes feeling the emotion that you are loved in the same moment as returning that love; or when Sarah states, “It’s like all the

love that is coming into your heart is going out of your heart. Like you don't know if it's coming in or going out ... it's the same thing." They acknowledge a simultaneous receiving and giving of love that again overflows their previous concept of relationships and love. Rather than discovering something to attain or create, they recognize that these are gifts of love, part of a flow or dance of love, and experience themselves within this dynamic interconnectedness of all things.

Their understanding of the divine has moved from a separate, anthropocentric, judgmental God to an experience of divine oneness. They recognize a divine spark, *élan vital*, life energy of which we are all a part and with which we are in a continuous relationship. Raimon Pannikar describes this experience of 'truth' as, "an experience of union. I do not wish to be misunderstood. The word "experience" is ambiguous and polysemic. In this instance it is not a question of a mere psychological experience, but of an ontological "touch," so to speak. It is an experience that transforms our entire being; we have a feeling that we have been taken over by a stronger reality that penetrates and transforms us." (Panikkar 2004, 21) Our Beingness is inseparable from this creative force of Love that is evolving, relational and dynamic. We are a part of a cocreative way. Pannikar speaks deeply about the experience of oneness and identity, and how "Relation is the fundamental category that governs all that is." We hear this in Brian's words when he states, "I am beginning to know 'I am', and that is all that one can say. But that encompasses whatever it is that has created this love in the world, this creative force, the universe, God, I don't know. Any name you want to use for it is inadequate and insubstantial. And that not only am I part of it, I'm inseparable from it. I'm not it but I am it, and I've never been separate from it regardless of what my mind has told me over

these years. That has been a lie or an illusion. And the wonder of that unfolds if I'm really wanting to be present just moment by moment."

As a result of these deep shifts in 'knowing' they have new understanding of life and death. As Sarah describes her understanding of life and death, she states, "It's pretty much the life force, you might not be in this physical world, the life force still lives, that energy still is." Or as Adam states, "Our sense of what we know as life now is just one little part of the ongoing life; it's just one part." This acknowledgment of continuation of life in death is also recognized by Meister Eckhart, when he states, "To the extent that our life is being, it is in God. To the extent that our life is enclosed in being, it is related to God." (Fox 2000, 84) "We esteem dying in God so that he may remove us to a being better than life – a form of being in which our life goes on living to the extent that our life becomes being." (Fox 2000, 85) They experience being, and love amidst suffering and death, resulting in acknowledgment of continued life after death or in the instances of some of the participants, belief in reincarnation.

The felt knowing resulting from their experiences carries an ongoing wisdom and reverberation, a discerning dynamic that informs their lives in meaningful ways. The participants speak of being awakened to personal purpose, opened to more creative ways of living. They first describe a change in their attention from doing and busy-ness creating the world, to being and becoming. Meister Eckhart explores the depth of being and becoming and how it is from the depth of our being that love flows forth. From the relational experience of amazement comes a forgetting of self, which moves us out of our normal fixations. This leads us into a letting go, a need to sink deeply within, to that place of nothingness where we are open to an indwelling love, from which we co-creatively

give birth to this love in the expressions, attention and action of our lives. (Fox 2000, 83-101) The participants recognize this also in how their immediate experience of wonder and amazement moved them from an exterior focus of what one should be or do, to a more interior and intuitive focus of listening and feeling the draws and pulls in their lives. They express a dynamic of love of which they are a part. Living from this deeper interior space thereby influences the actions in their lives, allowing spirit to guide them into a life of deeper congruency.

It is important to acknowledge the depth at which the experiences influence growth. Self-awareness, ego consciousness, the capacity for love and compassion, the quality of relationship with self, others, nature, divine oneness, attitudes to life and death, faith, personal being and becoming, direction and purpose of life, are not areas of contained and simple answers, or limited growth. These are places of relational, evolving, dynamic, and cosmic growth. It is not like learning something from reading a book or taking a course, or taking on a new career of expertise. It isn't gradual, but is a significant shift in understanding and lived experience that is multifaceted and immediate – affecting dimensions of our living selves that are not easily put into words. It is expansive, overflowing the limits of our previous conceptions; we have grown in our capacity to live as well as to understand.

The participants frequently speak of this expanded capacity, of knowing in areas where they had no previous knowledge, and being able to hold the tensions and paradoxes of life more fully. As Janet Ruffing states, “Mysticism is a transformative process that supports self-transcendence, the overcoming of too small of a sense of self.” (Ruffing

2001, 12) Or as Underhill beautifully describes the abrupt birth of consciousness previously unknown,

At once with its first movement, new levels of reality are disclosed, a transformation both in the object and in the intensity of feeling takes place. The self moves in both an inner and an outer “world unrealized.” ...It seems to him a separate gift or “grace,” infused from without, rather than developed from within. ... An enhanced vitality, a wonderful sense of power and joyful apprehension as towards worlds before ignored or unknown, floods the consciousness. Life is raised to a higher degree of tension than ever before; and therefore to a higher perception of Reality. (Underhill 1992, 50)

By being opened and able to remain present to the tensions, the groans and labor pains of life, something keeps bubbling up and moving them forward, leading them in directions they couldn't have imagined, sometimes finding themselves in circumstances where they are being asked to be all they can be. Ivone Gebara, Dorothy Soelle and Meister Eckhart all speak of our lived paradox of our divine immanence and interrelatedness, and the pain of our personal and societal concepts. It is often out of these tensions that the participants express an increased capacity for compassion from which they recognize the love and wisdom of others and allow that to resonate with their own and that of an interconnected whole, thereby nourishing greater expressions of love.

Being awakened to a new consciousness, new clarity or illumination, results in altered actions in the world. The participants name changes in how they relate to others; reaching out to family, friends, neighbors, and complete strangers with greater acceptance, and acknowledging this resonating interconnectedness of which we are all a part. They

approach their lives and work as teachers, health care workers, healers, and volunteers with ecological or global issues with a different attention and quality of relationship than they previously had. They seem to be willing to break out of the conventions of society and live more fully in the paradox, tensions and complexity of the world while recognizing self and other interconnected in Ultimacy. There is attention to the creative impulse that is itself paradoxical in nature, inclusive of a dynamic of noticing (contemplation) and movement (action). They are engaged in the complexity of the world while connected to an evolving co-creative process of life. They are not trying to save the world but instead are following the flow of life, or the creative impulse, that is leading them into different ways of Being in the world.

Discerning and Nurturing ‘The Heart Way of Knowing’

The experiences aren’t something to be continually sought, but rather received with the grace in which they have been given. As St. Theresa (Theresa of Avila 1997, 101) states, it is not something we can fancy or gain, it is a gift. Or as Meister Eckhart states, “For insofar as creatures are open to receive him, to that extent God pours himself out into them.” (Fox 2000, 91) It is important in our secularized world, to receive the authentic nature of this knowing and to allow it to integrate with the whole of our lives. As noted by Pannikar, “In the modern Western Christian tradition a strong wind of objectivity has swept away the mystical consciousness, pushing it to the margins of Christian life.” (Panikkar 2004, 84) Each of the mystics indicate how important it is to let go of our created constructs and to enter deeply into our experience and allow this deep interior knowing to guide us in our world. The participants, in their own way, have come to a

place of not worrying where the experience comes from or how it happened, and as George stated, just respect, acknowledge and observe that thing called mysticism.

Discerning the authenticity of the experience is important. As both the participants and literature have indicated, sharing it with someone trustworthy who is able to understand is certainly important. As Ken Wilbur (Wilbur 2006, 313) describes, this may not always be easy, as the experience and resulting consciousness may be beyond some peoples' experience or understanding. Sophie believes it is very important to have a companion to validate experience, otherwise our secularized world can easily cause us to put our experience aside. She believes, "Being able to incorporate the experience into our own psyche and our own being as reality depends on the presence of a witness." Or as Richard Rohr comments, it is important to have someone to help move these momentary states into more permanent traits. (Keating and Rohr 2007, CD 3, Track 7) This is also a role that faith communities can play, as there are often trustworthy mystics, although often hidden, who can serve as witnesses and offer a body of knowledge upon which to draw for discernment.

Discovering through reading and studying others' experiences is also helpful. Often it is through others' words that we recognize our own experience and thereby have that validated and allowed to resonate in our lives. Noting similar characteristics and contexts of experience is assuring. Eve highlights the importance of recognizing the circumstances of the experience, and whether it is energetically dissociating or integrating is important. St. Theresa of Avila (Theresa of Avila 1997, 101) acknowledges that the after effects on the soul, and the subsequent behaviour of the person indicate whether the experience is genuine.

As Roger Gottlieb also points out it is important to recognize the danger of falling into self-deception and escapism with mystical experience, either evading the difficult truths of our social realities by remaining caught and attached to the experience itself, or to use the experience to support a particular authority or cause. Therefore it is important to hold and explore the experience within a larger context of prayer, meditation, fasting, study, retreat, knowledge, community and service to help release us from false attachments.

Having a companion through these times is valuable in helping hold the space for discernment, and to allow the experience to move and inform our lives. Although sometimes unsettling, mystic experiences ultimately have a grounding and illuminating quality, and if acknowledged as authentically spiritual, become discerning and life-giving experiences that continue to inform our lives to varying degrees and at different times. Having a safe place to hold and explore this dynamic knowing is significant to help us overcome our too-small sense of self both personally and in our social context.

Milestones on the Spiritual Journey

The participants and literature recognize these mystical experiences as turning points or milestones on a spiritual journey. St. Theresa of Avila, Evelyn Underhill, Richard Rohr, and Ken Wilbur (and there are many others) each point to the significance of mystical experience and the dynamic of growth that is inherent to it. Theresa refers to how spiritual experiences move us to live more fully in the seven mansions of our soul. Underhill emphasizes how the ‘common man’, not just a select few, can become conscious of and live in the full awareness of the quiet movements of the heart which then propels us beyond the consciousness of popular understanding. Rohr believes these

experiences of enlightenment are significant shifts in the maturity of our faith, moving belief beyond the dogmatic constructs of religion. And Wilbur provides an even broader context to recognize the multifaceted movement of experience within the complexity and multiple dimensions of our lives.

Each of them speak of an awakening to an intuitive intelligence, a growing capacity for the Infinite and our own deep reality, that leads us into new understanding, wisdom, and transformation beyond our popular constructs. Unitive consciousness leads us into non-dualistic thinking, where everything is allowed to teach us. We are more patient with paradox, mystery, and seeming contradictions. A dynamic of pleasure and pain, experiencing the yearnings and groans and labor pains as described by Romans 8: 22 seems to govern the mystery of growth. How this is understood is based on our personal and social contexts and a spectrum of interpretative capacities.

The mystics, past and present, in their own way encourage us to supplement our knowledge, traditions, and practices. This isn't a question of finding out what is better, or more right or wrong; this is a process of supplementing and expanding our knowledge as it relates to and resonates with our experience. As the Orthodox Rabbi Gliberman, states, "In exploring other traditions and in embracing them, remember, it isn't a question of instead of – Buddhism instead of Christianity, or Christianity instead of Islam – but rather of in addition to." (Teasdale 1999, 49)

The participants express this dynamic of growth from their own experience. Eve states how what she 'knows' now is so much more than what was before, and acknowledges how what she 'knows' now will likely be so much less than what is yet to come. George and Brian both acknowledge how they value their faith of before, but now

recognize themselves within a much more expansive, flexible and evolving construct of faith. Sophie describes being led in directions that we can't imagine, "like a snowball running down a hill." This is not a static knowledge, but rather acknowledges a dynamic and organic growth allowing the spirit's continuing evolution and unfolding.

Mystics have a faith that is growing and responsive to the multiple dimensions of their lives. They have moved from static and rational constructs of faith to intuitive knowing through experience. They have an inner confidence of faith that results from the feeling of: being known in their day-to-day lives, the experience of beauty, awe and wonder, recognizing that unitive and dynamic mystery that we are love. They 'know' from experience rather than intellectually believing a set of doctrines. As Marcus Borg describes, we move from faith as a matter of the head to faith as matters of the heart – a trust and relaxing in the buoyancy of "the sea of being in which we live and move and have our being", a deep loyalty and commitment to self and others at its deepest level, and loving and being present to the moment in acknowledgment of the Unitive oneness of evolving and abundant life. The participants describe the awareness that results from mystical experience as glimpses of truth, not immutable fact. They don't hold these glimpses of truth with a static or intellectual certainty, but with a 'knowing' that is growing and unfolding as they continue to seek out what resonates with the mystery of their experience. It isn't important to try to fit within their particular understandings, or with any others, but to let them inform our own, to help bring words to our faith and knowing, and to let our own experiences be free to resonate and grow uniquely in our lives.

Applications for Faith Communities

The literature and participants both speak to limitations of traditional Christian faith communities in supporting spiritual mystical experience. Yet they also speak of places and people that nurture their ‘knowing’ from mystical experience, and the resulting growth and evolving spiritual journey. Frequently they have found these places and people outside of traditional Christian churches. There is much that contemporary faith communities can learn from this.

First, we can learn the importance of reflection and validation of personal experience. The participants name companions on their journey who help them feel heard. By listening, these companions draw out the participants’ own wisdom. Encouraged to listen to the vibrations of their heart, they attend to the resonating wisdom not only in the “wow” moments of mystical experience, but also in the resulting intuitive awareness in their day to day lives.

Secondly, attention is drawn to awe, wonder, joy and beauty while patiently accompanying them in the paradox and mystery of life, in the dark places of great suffering, and of great love. Their experiences are explored and valued in and of themselves, rather than quickly interpreted and confined within specific religious, scientific, or other intellectual constructs of understanding. In the complexity of their lived realities they are encouraged to discern their actions with the resonating wisdom of their experience.

Thirdly, further study and exploration is encouraged beyond their previously defined parameters; inclusive of other faiths, theology, science, nature, psychology, poetry, and esoteric traditions, while recognizing all as glimpses of a much greater truth. They draw

from a broad scope of practices, nurturing the mind, body, and contemplative spirit, learning how to see rather than what to see.

Fourthly, by letting go of the specifically defined dogmatic constructs of the sin and redemption understanding of the Christian faith, some have discovered a deep resonance of faith within the spiritual roots of the religious tradition of their upbringing. They have found a greater meaning that lives more fully within a dynamic and relational expression of faith. Exploration of other faith traditions expands the context of their own spiritual journey and understanding.

Mystical experience points to the importance of acknowledging an evolving, and relational dynamic of faith rather than a certain or static belief construct. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect all of these to be available in one place, and people should therefore be encouraged to explore in a variety of ways, inclusive of one-to-one relationships with a spiritual director, in small journey groups, and through a variety of practices and communities of faith. As Wilbur's work would suggest, and the participants' varied experiences would support, the combination looks unique for each individual, dependent on the multiple dimensions of personal growth and the context of one's life.

Mystical experience inherently questions and challenges how religious constructs of our times (as well as times past) recognize, support, and nurture spiritual growth. The participants acknowledge the importance of practices and communities that recognize and nurture stages of growth and personal capacities within a variety of spiritual experiences, including mystical experience. Having people and communities that accompany us as we discern how to live lives of faith within these new and dynamic places within ourselves is

important. Being encouraged to live in the questions and paradox, allowing being and becoming to emerge, is crucial rather than providing certain answers to our questions and solutions to our dilemmas. A spacious and contemplative stance is welcomed in contrast to a prescriptive, dogmatic and driven-to-action environment; rather than an outer orientation of belief, mysticism nurtures an inner authority that is dynamically alive in our lives of faith. In this way religious communities are challenged to recognize and nurture the personal, communal, social and cultural nature of mystical experience.

Points for Further Study

This study points to many questions on which it cannot comment. The participants in this study are all of western European heritage and grew up in Canada with a primarily Christian influence. While some of the participants would not name themselves as Christian, either in their early years or now, they grew up in a country and at a time where the influence of Christianity is prevalent. The literature sources cited are also primarily based from the Christian tradition, while acknowledging the importance and influences from other traditions and fields of study. For these reasons I'm led to wonder how the mystical is experienced, and how its influence is similar to or different from others across cultures and religious traditions.

While this inquiry touches on the importance of a companion to validate mystical experience and to support and discern the value and resulting actions, the helpful characteristics of a companion could be explored in more depth. It would be interesting to explore not only the value of being companioned, but also explore the perspective of the companion in hearing and supporting others who share mystical occurrences with them.

This information would be valuable for training programs of spiritual directors, to be supporters of the mystical life.

This study highlights the importance of acknowledging mystical knowing as dynamic points of spiritual growth. The participants indicate how traditional Christian faith communities have not been effective in validating and nurturing their growth. Yet we also know that some of the participants continue to be a part of faith communities and many of the literary sources also draw from the traditions of the church. There are people in congregations, often hidden from sight, when given the opportunity to validate or question mysticism and its significance, can become important testing groups for exploring the importance of mystical experience within a community of faith. While this study identifies various points in which faith communities can benefit in supporting people with mystical experience, it also acknowledges the complexity and context in which we have and interpret mystical events. Further study could explore in more depth how faith communities can better support people in and through the complexity of multiple states, stages and lines of spiritual growth.

Summary of Key Findings

It has been a very privileged time, to hear and sit with these life-changing moments in the lives of the participants. Reviewing them collectively and within a broader context of literature helps us recognize their importance beyond our own personal experience. Prophetic in nature, mystical experiences stretch our personal and societal boundaries and knowing; they frequently enhance recognition of the multifaceted nature and contexts of our lives inclusive of the understandings of self, personal relationships, communities of faith, commonly held beliefs and understandings in our society.

While the experiences have a grounding component, they bring us into the fullness of the lived paradoxes, which can be confusing and uncertain. It is in this tension that we feel the groans and labor pains that often open us to a deeper place within ourselves which encourages us to engage with the world with renewed, revitalized, as well as somewhat shifted and altered ‘knowing’ and approaches. Having someone with whom to share these times not only validates the importance of the experiences, but also allows them to deepen and to become integrated in the fabric of our being and expressions in our lives.

Can this new ‘knowing’, attention and acknowledgment of this deep inner being contribute to significant social change? While mystical experience forms a new foundation of knowing within us, it does not express itself with specific and concrete answers to our personal and world issues, but rather is directional and discerning in the tension of abundance, possibility, and limitations in our lives. The sense of being and becoming is one that acknowledges an attention to the now that seems to have an altered energy or dynamic to it, recognizing an evolving movement; mysticism provides a space of mystery and grace where we can live co-creatively through our interactions with the world.

Participants speak of an altered approach in their lives. This is not always an about-change in the direction of their lives, such as a change of career, but a change in how they interact with people, change in the choices they make and how they interact with the world. If mystical experience, and the resulting ‘heart way of knowing’ results in new personal sensibility and interactions with the world, it seems possible that new tipping points will result from a new consciousness that in a collective way can contribute to social change. While mystical experiences are internally transformative, they also hold

potential for new consciousness and actions that can have great impact on our external lives of faith, and the potential for significant social impact.

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APPENDIX A

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

In a Master's Thesis Study of

“Reclaiming the Heart-Way of knowing the Divine”

Have you experienced a time/moment when you were infused with a new knowing? An experience that left an impression on you? Perhaps you were or still are uncertain about it, but you know somehow it is important? Does it have a sense of the mystery, of the Divine, and your relationship with the Divine? If so, then please consider sharing your experience(s) with me in personal conversations in order to deepen and enrich our understanding of such an experience and its influence on our lives.

I'm a student in the Masters of Theological Studies program at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton. My own unexpected mystical experiences (or what I'm referring to as 'the heart-way of knowing'), my hesitancy at first to acknowledge them, and now discovering the wisdom that they hold for my life has made me interested in exploring the experience of others and its implications in their lives and in their faith. The purpose of my thesis is: to explore the heart-way of knowing the divine as experienced by individual spiritual seekers today, and its implications for faith.

What would this involve?

I would meet with you on a one-to-one basis on two occasions. The first meeting would be to explore your experience in a conversational style interview in a location that is private and mutually agreed upon. The second time we would review the initial

conversation and discuss any further insights or areas you wish to explore. At the completion of the thesis I will also be offering the opportunity for those involved in the study to get together in a retreat-like environment to share in the results and to further nurture ‘the heart-way of knowing’.

In order to reflect on the content of our conversations they will be audio recorded and the first meeting will be professionally transcribed. Your name will be changed to a pseudonym and any identifying information will be altered to maintain your anonymity throughout the research project. You will also receive a copy of the transcribed conversations to review and ensure they capture the intent and meaning of our discussions. The second conversation will also be recorded and a summary of what we discussed will be shared with you, again for clarification and verification.

I would be delighted to share with you more information about this narrative form of study, and to discuss any questions you may have. Please contact me at (780) ----- during the day or evenings, or by email at -----

It is my hope that we can share and explore together these important and sacred moments.

Sincerely,

Heather Mattson McCrady

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

Research Title: Reclaiming the Heart Way of Knowing the Divine

I voluntarily consent to participate in the research being conducted by Heather Mattson McCrady, a student in the Masters of Theological Studies at St. Stephen's College, Edmonton.

I understand that this is a research study. It may offer no direct benefit to me other than experiencing personal satisfaction in having participated in a research project and having gained personal insight into my own growth and awareness.

I understand that I will be asked to reflect on my own experience of the heart way of knowing the divine and to share with the researcher from my life experiences in one-to-one conversational interviews.

I understand that our initial conversation will be audiotaped and transcribed professionally. A copy of the transcription will be sent to me for review to ensure that my responses reflect accurately my thoughts and experiences. I will meet with the researcher to review the transcripts in a second meeting and can at that time share any further insights or thoughts of my experience of the heart way of knowing, or ask to have any of my words stricken from the transcript. This meeting will also be audiotaped and the researcher will reconstruct and share the key points with me for clarity and verification.

I understand that the taped conversations will be confidential with access granted only to Heather Mattson McCrady (the researcher), myself, the professional transcriber (who is bound to confidentiality by professional standards) and to the research supervisor

if assistance is required for analysis of the data. Others who are involved in working with Heather on the research project will only view transcripts and texts where all names, places, and identifying information have been removed or disguised.

I understand that excerpts from the taped conversations and data used and reported in the research will be anonymous through the use of a pseudonym chosen by me if I so wish.

I agree that this information may be used in publications, and in presentations without naming me. Any information that I specify to remain confidential will not be shared in the research text or other publications and presentations.

I understand that if personal issues arise during the interviews Heather Mattson McCrady (the researcher) is willing to help me find appropriate professional support (i.e. spiritual director, counsellor, minister).

I understand that I may withdraw from the research at any time without incurring negative consequences. I understand also that the researcher may discontinue my involvement in the study at any time.

This information has been explained to me by Heather Mattson McCrady who has agreed to answer any further questions I may have. Heather can be reached at -----, days or evenings.

Date: _____

Signed _____

Researcher _____

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Participation in the Final Retreat of the Research Project

The Heart Way Of Knowing: A Narrative Review of Contemporary Mystical Experience

I voluntarily consent to participate in the retreat, the final meeting of the research being conducted by Heather Mattson McCrady, a student in the Masters of Theological Studies at St. Stephen's College, Edmonton.

I understand that this meeting is intended to share the results with participants of the study and to continue nurturing and growing in the heart way of knowing with all of those who participated in the study.

I understand that if I choose not to participate in this retreat, this will not be considered as a withdrawal from the research. The information shared previously with the researcher will remain important data for the project.

I consent to my identity being known by the other participants at this retreat.

I agree to keep confidential what is said by individual participants at the retreat.

I will also keep confidential the identities of the other participants.

Date: _____ Signed _____

Researcher _____

APPENDIX D

Interview Outline and Questions

General Introduction

**Set up recording device

**Review Consent form and sign

“What drew your interest in participating in this research?”

Inner & Outer (Opinion / Value)

Explore and affirm the individual experience

“Tell me the story of your own experience of the heart way of knowing?”

Inner (Experience, feelings, sensory, demographic, place)

Discerning the ‘knowing’ of the experience

“With soft eyes and attention remember your experience, try now to enter into it once again. Tell me what resonates for you now?”

“Does anything come to mind?”

“Is there anything you can tell me about the ‘knowing’ of this experience?”

Inner (knowing, surprises, interpretations, opinions, value)

Recognize the variety of expressions of the heart way of knowing the divine

“You have described the heart way of knowing by (describe the ways they have already identified in the interview), do you recognize the heart way of knowing in other ways? Explore.

Inner & Outer (Experience / behavior, opinion / value, knowledge, place)

Understand its personal impact on the individual’s relationship with the divine

“How has this impacted your relationship with the divine?”

“How do you now understand your relationship with the divine?”

Inner (experience, feelings, opinion/value, knowing, interpretations)

Faith practises that nurture the heart way of knowing

“What is helpful in nurturing the heart way of knowing?”

Inner & Outer (Place, experience/behavior, opinion/value, knowledge)

Discover resulting shifts in consciousness and ways of interacting with the world

“Tell me how the heart way of knowing has shifted your awareness in your daily living.”

“Has there been a shift in how you interact with the world as a result of your experience(s)?”

Do you anticipate other changes that may result from the heart way of knowing?

Inner & Outer (Present, future: experience/behavior, opinion/value, place)

Demographic / Background Influences

“What significant demographic and / or life experiences do you recognize as influencing your experience of the heart-way of knowing?”

- Age / stage in life
- Culture (where you live / where you grew up)
- Position within family
- Work / occupation
- Life changes / challenges
- Faith tradition
- Education

Conclusion

“Take this time to reflect on our discussion and your experience of the heart way of knowing the divine, please share anything else that is being asked to be shared?”

What & How Questions

Inner Experience

Outward Experience

Past Present Future

Place

Behavior / Experience

Opinion / Value

Feeling

Knowledge

Sensory

Demographic / Background