

LEARNING THROUGH SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTERS

By

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Abstract

This qualitative study built upon prior research on spirituality in higher education and was informed by my own interests in spiritual memoir. The study used heuristic phenomenology and narrative research methodologies to explore how attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness are present when learning takes place through spiritual encounters. In Phase 1, 140 Canadian adults responded to a survey asking whether respondents had a self-identified spiritual encounter that taught them something. The questionnaire also included questions about the nature of the learning, spiritual identity, comfort levels discussing spirituality, and the impact of COVID-19. In Phase 2, 10 participants from Phase 1 were interviewed, resulting in first-person narratives co-created by myself and the participants. A multi-layered process of coding was undertaken on the full data set, which included the questionnaire responses and the narratives. Twelve themes emerged, suggesting that learning from spiritual encounters often happened at times of death and dying, involved a voice or a presence, took place in the natural world, and/or involved a heightened awareness of the body, senses, and emotions. Participants were often willing to ask questions or to take leaps of courage. In response to a spiritual encounter, participants reported making lifestyle or identity changes. The study suggested that spiritual encounters are not ineffable; many participants were precise with language and thoughtful in their descriptions. Other factors, such as fear of ridicule or judgement, respect for their own boundaries, or another's capacity to receive their story with care, influenced their decision to share. This research suggested that the conceptual framework of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness, related to Quaker processes of spiritual discernment, may be a useful reflexive tool in approaching learning through spiritual encounters. Implications for professionals working in education, healthcare, wellness settings, ministry, and sustainability were explored. New reflections on work cited in the literature were also discussed, including implications for graduate courses on spirituality in adult education, spiritual autobiography, and future research.

Dedication

For Carolyn.

I know it is more typical that a mother would say this to her daughter, but you probably needed to hear it even more than me:

You were loved and wanted more than you could have ever imagined.

(Valentine's Day, 2022)

Acknowledgements

It was a dream of mine to write a book, and this, by far, is the closest I have come. Thanks to some recent encouragement, I have a manuscript of poetry that I will be revisiting soon too. Like so many other writers and artists, I always struggle to know when something is ‘done’—at least done enough to send out into the world, that is—and this is certainly the case with my thesis. Not only because there is still a rawness here, more brilliant literature to include, or “how about I add another poem?”, but also because in some ways, publishing it feels like a goodbye. To this phase of life, to this project, to these working relationships, and perhaps in this case, to the identity of ‘student’ I have held for many years. And yet, age, life experience, and even this research, have left me rather skeptical of endings, especially tidy ones. We are not stagnant. We are not done. Even when we find ourselves in a different set of circumstances, or with new companions, or in a changing landscape—surely, all of this comes too?

In that spirit, I recognize that it's not just me writing a book, but a community of beings that have helped me: the places, plants, animals, and people. This is about *us*. I think about the Broadstairs seaside where I spent a good deal of my twenties and early thirties, my childhood homes, including the streets of my Downsview neighbourhood where I travelled from school to

Figure 1

Photograph of my Living Room



home singing “Down by the Bay,” playing Sherlock & Watson with dad, or going to Sunview Restaurant with my grandmother. The parking lot where I learned how to ride a bicycle on warm summer evenings, or admired the nostalgic Christmas decorations on lampposts in winter. I think about the train ride I took across Canada to my first academic conference, every pub I have ever danced in, the all-night chapel at St. Mary’s, and my current living room.

With great affection, I admire the green chair that my dad and I bought after my record player broke. The vase of roses I knocked over in the shop. The bluebells, the hills, and that tree I climbed in the Kent countryside. The deck. Rosie’s car. Wolfe Island. The Common Market. How much we loved Aunt Lucy’s. Our bleachers. The bench near Sydenham, United Church. The bench looking out over Viking Bay. Fort Henry Hill where Kristin and I tobogganed. The same one where he and I once tried to go and see a full orange moon and fireworks. Stonehenge. Yours, and mine.

I consider how the plants have inspired me, too—how my garden has changed me, and taught me these last seven years, or how picking up my vegetables on Friday evenings at Old Farm Fine Foods has become a sacred ritual. I recall the cherry blossoms in Tavistock Square, or how I used to buy myself carnations every week and put them on my mantle for good cheer when I was teaching full-time. Lovingly, I recall that we “haven’t got time to lose” when it comes to magnolias in Kingston. Smiling, I confess that I have been savouring tomato sandwiches during this research. How thoughtful it is that Annie brings me books about strawberries, and asks: How are you for plants at the moment? How much space do you have on your windowsills?

I think about the animals who have brought wisdom too—especially the birds who have come to me my entire life as signs. My father’s blue jays, and the morning routine of tossing peanuts. Walks at Lemoine Point with birdseed. I think about the dragonflies. My childhood cat.

I cherish the people. You.

Of course, all the participants who shared their stories with me in this research, and especially the 10 people I interviewed in depth, cross-legged at my coffee table. I thank you for those conversations; for embracing the virtual and the awkward, and that tiny moment of companionship at a time when so many of us were in the height of isolation. And I thank you for your courage and contribution.

I offer love to my friends in the PhD program, who have been such a blessing. Whether we found ourselves in a classroom, sat around a fire, sharing a meal at Poets’ Thanksgiving, or celebrating a rainy Halloween, your presence was always confirmation for me that this was the *perfect* time. We were all meant to meet. That’s for sure. You have done this work with heart. Kristin: you, and our phone calls kept me going—in the deepest sense.

Speaking of heart, I owe a great deal of gratitude to Rena, who stayed on to support me as my supervisor for an extra year past her retirement, and who inspired me with her brilliance from day one. In following many of her own creative and professional dreams, her ripples of wisdom and care are deeply felt by those in her presence (and I hope to continue to find ways to thank you). To Holly and Ian: your encouragement, curiosity, kindness, and guidance made this process of learning much richer, and I genuinely enjoyed our conversations over the last several years.

As for my family, my sister Rebecca has taught me what it is to feel unconditionally loved again and helped me understand the concept of family better than anyone. To feel it in my bones. Amazing how much living in the same city has made a difference. I love our drives for tea, our holiday celebrations, our laughter. I am so lucky to have you.

My Auntie Freda (who has always been one of the first people I go to with a story) and Uncle Gary who are just the absolute best, and my cousins with whom I grew up—you have brought so much happiness to my life. Thank you for your consistency and support.

My mother, with whom I share memories of bright yellow shoes, sleeping on the balcony, sunshine, peanut butter on fresh bread, and God jars, who took me on my first train ride. Your genuine love of Jesus has always astounded me. If that is all I had learned from you, it would be enough. My father, through his commitment, total selflessness, love, and hard work has made everything in my life possible: You are the kindest, most encouraging, and generous man I know (and it's not just me, we all know it, Dad—every family member agrees.) I am grateful for having had so many years with you.

My grandma Lorraine, who instilled in me a love of telling stories, staying up late, and enjoying the good things in life. I think the absolute world of you, and hope you and grandpa will be waiting for me on the other side. I have worn the Cookie Monster blue cardigan in these last days.

To future generations in my own family who may read this, I acknowledge you too. You have been a dream in my heart for a very long time, and my world is incomplete without you. I am excited you've found this. And strangers, thinkers, researchers: I hope you find something that speaks to you here, too.

To all of the others: A.R., who rode the subway with me to Union Station, my neighbour June (with her love stories), former students, artists, musicians, poets (Bruce!), teachers, dear old pals from school or the neighbourhood, strangers I have shared a laugh with, my beautiful friends and family, here and in the UK, who changed the whole course of my life, and the people I have sung with every day for the last year and a half, I will always remember you. You have lifted my spirits again and again. I have so many people to thank and acknowledge, but these days I'm more inclined to say let's go for a walk, or let me come for a visit, and let's go for a donut. Let me thank you in person, let me hug you.

But maybe just one more, for now. Lastly, to the man who sat at my table, and said: "Go for it." You were one of the first people who ever truly read my writing for pleasure, with the good whiskey, you said. I hope you enjoy this read too. Tonight, I am reminded of a wood table, pulled pork from the slow cooker (how you handed it to me from the car in that t-shirt), burrs stuck to my clothes, you peering over stacks of books, my hallway, and how you looked at me one evening with my head back laughing and noted: You look *really* happy.

I truly believed what you heard on the pier, what I heard that night in my dream, and in what we once both agreed was true (even if we didn't double-check the source) with a colour-coded heart:

I want my rapsallionly fellow vagabond...I want my tempter...I want my inspiration, my folly, my happiness, my divinity, my madness, my selfishness, my final sanity and sanctification, my transfiguration, my purification, my light across the sea, my palm across the desert, my garden of lovely flowers, my million nameless joys, my day's wage, my night's dream, my darling and my star... (*excerpted from a love letter by George Bernard Shaw*)

Everything, and nothing has changed.

I am forever grateful you knocked.

Blessing That Does Not End

From the moment
it first laid eyes
on you,
this blessing loved you.

This blessing
knew you
from the start.

It cannot explain how.

It just knows
that the first time
it sat down beside you,
it entered into a conversation
that had already been going on
forever.

Believe this conversation
has not stopped.

Believe this love
still lives—
the love that crossed
an impossible distance
to reach you,
to find you,
to take your face
into its hands
and bless you.

Believe this
does not end—
that the gesture,
once enacted,
endures.

Believe this love
goes on—
that it still
takes your face
into its hands,
that it presses
its forehead to yours
as it speaks to you
in undying words,
that it has never ceased
to gather your heart
into its heart.

Believe this blessing
abides.
Believe it goes with you
always.
Believe it knows you
still.

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Preface

About a year before I began the PhD program, I was walking with someone I loved around the streets of my neighborhood on a spring evening. At the end of April, beginning of May, during move-out days, students in our community often leave different types of furniture, objects, or books that they no longer need at the curbside. On *that* spring evening, at the height of our excitement about each other, he found a copy of *Moby Dick*, and I found a small piece of warped, ‘failed’ pottery. Something about it drew me in; it felt raw, honest, like it needed to be given attention and care, that it shouldn’t just be discarded. My love agreed. For the next six years I kept this object in a special place, first on my windowsill at home, and later, when I began the PhD, on my desk at school.

Even as this relationship ended, I found comfort in looking at it. It brought warm thoughts of him, a happier time, and the hope that perhaps one day we would be able to reconnect. A reminder, perhaps, that misshapen things could still be beautiful. And things in our world certainly felt misshapen. As it turns out, I didn’t visit my desk at the Faculty of Education from March 2020 to August 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When I came back last summer to tidy up my desk with its old mugs, library books, and a calendar that hadn’t been flipped for a year and a half, I took a moment to dust off this special object, and admired it again.

You can imagine how heartbroken I was, when a week later, upon finding out we had to clear out the Grad Lounge for renovations, I accidentally broke it. I had been moving some items to my sister’s car, and the piece of pottery went flying off my trolley and landed on the pavement, smashing in several pieces. While I was very upset, I figured I better go back and tend to the sharp broken pieces so that nobody would be injured or hurt by them. As I returned to sweep it up and put it in the garbage, much to my surprise and delight, I saw that in the ruins, the pottery had broken perfectly to reveal a beautiful tiny teacup, or a coffee cup, depending on how you look at it (and who’s drinking).

I took it as a good omen. Almost immediately, I perceived how this metaphor connected to my research in noteworthy ways; that joy can come from broken things, that a surprise or treasure is often hidden inside a challenge, and that spiritual encounters can come with a crash. It is my hope that as you read through this research, and consider the broken parts of your own life, you may recognize that in addition to hard work, healing and insight also involve grace (and a whole lot of love).

Figure 2

Photograph of Broken Pottery



Chapter 1: Introduction

Let's begin with a story.

Several years ago, I was sitting on a bench in Confederation Basin in front of City Hall on the Easter Vigil, sipping a hot apple cider. I was enjoying the return of springtime warmth and sunshine, writing in my journal, and having a conversation with God. That day, I found myself asking Him why a previous relationship of mine back in England hadn't worked out. I felt like I heard the answer "because he wasn't kind enough to you." I thought about that for a few minutes, and realized that was probably true of me too, though I told Him I was ready to welcome someone new into my life. God then put the following thought into my heart: "I am looking after you and will give you a sign shortly." I didn't really give it too much attention to be honest, as while I do have faith, I knew God delivered, but often took His time. At the same time, I had seen a family walk by, and head towards the water. I presumed they were tourists; a middle-aged couple and their sons—teenage boys, loud and gawky. I could feel myself feeling a little annoyed that they were interrupting this peaceful scene but was in a pretty good mood, nonetheless. I continued to write in my journal. Being relatively new to town myself, I had a strange feeling of dread they might ask me for directions. And sure enough, a few minutes later, the dad returned, and started pacing awkwardly in front of me. I wondered what the big deal was, and why he appeared so nervous. Then his wife stood beside him, and he finally spoke: "Excuse me, Miss. A moment ago, when I was standing over there looking at the lake, I had a message in my heart from God to give you."

Are you surprised? Have I already lost you? Or are you feeling curious? Do you have goosebumps? Perhaps you are already trying to look for the logical reasons this could be? Like maybe I was giving off a sense of sadness, or he'd looked over my shoulder and saw my writing? Or perhaps he was trying to recruit or convert me into his religion? Are you already questioning my mental health or reliability as a researcher for mentioning God in the first place? Have you

decided to conclude that it was a statistical probability, albeit a surprising one? It will be helpful to note your own reaction to this story at this stage in our discussion.

The man proceeded to tell me that God wanted me to know that I had tremendous value to Him, like a *princess* (a word I had never associated with myself), and that I was to continue to have hope; that God had a plan for me. In that moment, the man had no idea what I believed in, or whether I was going to yell, curse, or scoff at him. I ended up giving him a hug and told him that I'd just been told I'd be given a sign. I thanked him for such a timely message, and his willingness to share it. His kids shouted excitedly, "Isn't that cool dad?!" He went on to tell me that he had never done this before, but that he had been overcome by the urge to share that message with me. I was very grateful that he did. I asked him to repeat it to me one more time. He did. Then we wished each other a happy Easter and went our separate ways.

There have been many other spiritual encounters, some of which I will share in the next chapter. But yes, even as a woman of faith—I've been a Christian all my life—I was absolutely astounded by this event. This particular spiritual encounter taught me a few different things. First, it deepened my core spiritual beliefs. It took my breath away, bringing with it peace, awe, comfort, and a desire to learn more. Secondly, it challenged my perspective and made me re-think the judgement I had felt against the teenage boys when they'd first appeared in the park, and I felt more empathy towards them. Third, I considered: what if the message is *actually* true? It made me reflect on my life and the tangible changes I wanted to make. Fourth, I have come to realize how my openness to the man's message must have also been equally re-affirming for him as I imagine it from his perspective, and how much courage it must have required to approach me. Perhaps it helped him to deepen his faith and trust his promptings too. Lastly, the story has been re-told to many other people, bringing great inspiration to friends and acquaintances, written about now in a graduate level dissertation as a valid form of learning, and used as an anecdote at academic conferences to discuss and consider how powerful it can be to *believe* someone.

It has been said that spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise (Tisdell, 2003, p. 29). While scholars from a wide range of disciplines draw upon Tisdell's research, I noted their tendency to omit or diminish this last aspect of her 7-point definition of spirituality. From both a researcher and practitioner's point of view, I believed this to be somewhat counterproductive in adult education, particularly in an exploration of the type of learning which might be considered 'spiritual'—indeed the sort which represents my own home-base in this field. In a study exploring spiritual identity formation at secular universities, Stoppa (2017) alluded to this, citing Parks' (2000) observation that spiritual identities can be arrived at through experiences of “shipwreck, gladness and amazement” (p. 158). As you will soon discover in this research, I think I may have originally underestimated the power of the shipwreck.

Still, as I began exploring this topic in more detail, the lack of surprise in the discussion around adult spiritual learning felt a bit conspicuous. Perhaps, I thought, this reveals our fear of ambiguity, emphasis on outcomes, accountability, and productivity in education (Tan & Tan, 2016). Spiritual encounters hint at the type of experiential learning which, in many ways, still remains at the fringes of the academy, the deeper waters I find most intriguing because of their potential for adventure, heightened attentiveness, embodied knowing, and social imagination: the kind of wide-awakeness Maxine Greene (1995) advocated for, and the lighthouse our world so desperately needs right now.

Given the emerging research in cognition, and the inclusion of surprise as a focus in diverse subjects from counselling (Hays, 2016), to the psychology of magic (Griffiths, 2014; Mayer, 2013), and serious gaming (van der Spek et al., 2013), I felt it was a rich time to bring surprise back into the conversation about adult spirituality and learning. This led me, in my own research, to begin exploring related tangential literature from across these disciplines. In preparation for a phenomenological narrative study, I started to consider how spiritual encounters can result in learning in adults.

In my own career as an instructor of pre-service teachers in the Bachelor of Education program at Queen's University, I have observed how spiritual themes remain largely unaddressed. Whether this is because we believe we have insufficient language, opportunity, and resources, or because it just feels too risky, I have come to learn that while we may speak about teaching wholeheartedly or even spirit-centred learning as a philosophical ideal, there is considerable resistance to this in practice. While my research does not deal specifically with teaching and learning in higher education settings, I still think there is something to be gleaned here. In our Faculty of Education, for example, we accept students from a wide variety of disciplines, the majority of whom have completed an undergraduate degree, so by the time they come to us are well trained with 16 plus years of compliance to the system. I find myself remembering this when I am caught off guard by their reactions. For instance, when I ask them to do anything that deviates from the lecture/readings/tutorial/ 'assignment-with-clearly-defined-rubric' models, most become uncomfortable. Much to my surprise—isn't this the spice of teaching and learning, I thought?—when I give students assignments that advocate freedom, choice, creativity, opportunities to explore their feelings, their preferences, and use their bodies, it is here that they show the most discomfort.

One such example, was the Wonder Walk activity I had students do in a course called *Teaching and Learning Outside of Schools*, where in pairs, I asked the teacher candidates to create a 10-minute experiential activity for a small group of their peers, that might promote wonder. It was to be held somewhere on the university grounds, outside of our 'normal' classroom, on a topic of their choosing related to their subject specialties. They were welcome to provide their peers with a one-page handout or other souvenir, map, or artifact to supplement their lesson, highlighting any relevant connections to the curriculum, etc. They were graded on participation with feedback using the ICE Method of assessment, with a focus on Ideas, Connections, Extensions (Fostaty-Young, 2005; Fostaty-Young & Wilson, 2000). While I was very excited about the assignment the first time I offered it, I was deeply taken aback by my

students' reaction to it; fear, backlash, frustration: *I don't get it. How exactly are we being graded? I'm not sure what you expect of me?* Around this time, I remember going for a walk by Lake Ontario with my supervisor and very wise mentor, talking to her about this. I was describing how inspired this type of assignment would have made me feel as a student, and how I didn't understand why I was receiving such a fearful response. Her next bit of advice really struck me. She said something to the effect of: "If you're going to give students the opportunity to be creative, you also have to allow them the opportunity to feel something about it" (R. Upitis, personal communication, September 2018). Since I still believed in the value of this exercise, her comment really resonated, and reminded me, that I too, could better support their learning by managing my own feelings. In essence, I needed to be willing to accept that they were having an emotional response in their learning—that this was healthy and natural. With this shift in perspective, I found myself more capable of attending to their needs and questions in a kinder way: more supportive, less defensive. As a result, these assignments turned out to be among the best I have ever seen in a Bachelor of Education class; the activities they planned and delivered were vibrant, meaningful, interesting, and deep. Most satisfying of all, perhaps, was seeing how proud these students were by what they had created and accomplished within these creative boundaries. This was an area of profound learning in my career and personal life, with many positive ripples.

So perhaps surprises are a good thing. I am not referring to gimmicks and tricks, but those moments that can bring attentiveness to what genuinely *moves us*. As a start, we might do well with incorporating more feeling and playfulness into our exploration of what it means to be a learner. For the purposes of our discussion here, if Tisdell's (2001, 2003) research with adult educators suggests that spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise, in or out of the classroom, moments which might otherwise be dismissed may indeed have value to learners spiritually and are worthy of pedagogical consideration too. But how might we identify them? The term "shimmering moments" offered by Tisdell (2003, p. 68) and Hays (2001) is among the

closest fit yet: we seem to just *get* that phrase. It is used to describe those remarkable moments in our lives that seem to pop; they feel extra-ordinary, and often stand out as profound turning points, pivotal to our learning and life experience. People tend to have their own terms for these, and even those without a spiritual practice will often say, “well, there was that one time...” When I ask people about their experiences, some of the terms I have heard used include *goosebump moments, moments of awe or wonder, coincidences, chance, synchronicity, serendipity, the uncanny, providence, fate, signs from the universe*, and among those with a religious or faith practice, *God moments, answered prayers, or blessings*. In my experience, no matter what we call them, *stories* provide the best way in, and I will be going into greater depth on that in Chapter 2.

Defining Learning and Spirituality

Learning

In the context of this research, learning in adults might include intellectual/cognitive, emotional, professional, or spiritual growth and development that happens in any number of ways, and is certainly not restricted to a particular setting or context. It may refer to the type of learning which can occur in what we might consider formal or traditional settings for example in adult and higher education, workplace learning, etc., and informal or non-traditional settings such as the type of learning that might happen experientially, on a hike. My own belief is that these categories, i.e., “formal/informal” or “traditional/non-traditional,” promote a sense of duality that is far too limiting, and I would like to see more intentional blurring of these lines. I align myself with Taber et al. (2010), who suggested that learning happens everywhere. I believe learning is non-linear, and often spiral in nature, in that we can return to similar themes again and again throughout the course of our lives as we collect experiences.

Learning may involve the deepening or acquiring of new knowledge or skills, and may or may not always be visible to others, or easily measured externally. For example, let’s say someone is learning how to plant and grow vegetables at a community garden. We might, in that

case see some visible results of that endeavour; we could observe the person working in the garden or test them about their knowledge of companion planting, or indeed look at the health of their plants, from season to season. Even then, there would be factors unseen, but overall, we could likely identify some learning taking place. In that same scenario, however, suppose the experience of growing vegetables is creating an inner shift in the novice gardener; that they are learning more patience, gratitude, or awe; that being in the garden allows them to feel more at peace, or speak more kindly to their children, and that they've started to think twice before swatting a bee that sneaks into their kitchen. Perhaps the sunlight in the garden has helped them heal from a sadness they've been carrying for years, or the daily greeting from a nearby gardener has offered them a sense of hope. What if this new gardener stumbles upon a quiet, unexpected sense of fulfillment when they donate some of their produce to a charity or friends, which deepens their resolve to share their harvest?

In the above example, we might only come to get a more fulsome picture of the learning that has taken place by making the time to speak to this gardener. Likewise, when it comes to discussing matters of learning through spiritual encounter, it is my position that individuals themselves are well suited to identify or self-report this learning, as only they have access to the nuances of their inner lives, their thoughts, emotions, sensory details, and personal histories.

Spirituality

The definition of spirituality I will be using as a starting place, both for this introduction, and throughout the body of this work is inspired by Tisdell (2003) and is among the most commonly cited in literature on this topic. It includes the following seven components:

1. Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated.
2. Spirituality is about an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what many I interviewed

referred to as The Life-force, God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha nature, or Great Spirit.

3. Spirituality is fundamentally about meaning-making.
4. Spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment.
5. Spiritual development constitutes moving toward greater authenticity or to a more authentic self.
6. Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art, image, symbol, and ritual which are manifested culturally.
7. Spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise. (pp. 28-29)

How to Proceed: An Invitation

Regardless of your own spiritual inclinations or lack thereof, I am inviting you to come along with me for an adventure. In the following chapters, I will attempt to demonstrate and deepen your understanding of how self-identified spiritual encounters can be seen as valuable learning opportunities for adults. My goal is to move beyond old barriers that have been holding us back in research, mostly around language or the burden of having to “prove” or “disprove” something overwhelming, e.g., the existence of God. Instead, I invite us to *listen* to people’s stories, asking questions such as: What did they experience? How did it make them feel? What did they learn from it? In doing so, we might come to accept that experiences need not be logical to generate learning and changes in the realm of core belief, but can often have many practical, tangible applications in other areas of people’s lives. In my view, it seems far more make-believe to *not* consider the impact of subjective experiences, such as spiritual encounters, on learning.

Nel Noddings (2016) has a wonderful line, in which she encourages her students to *just read and believe* for a few chapters when reflecting on Dewey. I feel like this type of hospitality

and generosity of spirit would be best offered to each other as well, particularly when dealing with themes of this nature. As included in the foreword to *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (1985), perhaps Jung said it best in his remarks from 1950:

I hope it will not be construed as presumption on my part if I make uncommon demands on the open-mindedness and goodwill of the reader. Not only is he expected to plunge into regions of human experience which are dark, dubious, and hedged about with prejudice, but the intellectual difficulties are such as the treatment and elucidation of so abstract a subject must inevitably entail. As anyone can see for himself after reading a few pages, there can be no question of a complete description and explanation of these complicated phenomena, but only an attempt to broach the problem in such a way as to reveal some of its manifold aspects and connections, and to open-up a very obscure field which is philosophically of the greatest importance. As a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, I have often come up against the phenomena in question and could convince myself how much these inner experiences meant to my patients. In most cases they were things which people do not talk about for fear of exposing themselves to thoughtless ridicule. I was amazed to see how many people have had experiences of this kind and how carefully the secret was guarded. So, my interest in this problem has a human as well as a scientific foundation. (p. 6)

Over seventy years later, and I am still echoing Jung's request, though perhaps less apologetically. Regardless of whether you have a spiritual practice of your own, I would invite you to keep an open mind to the experiences of the participants and stories that are shared here. I also ask that you understand that the examples here are not representative of every religion or practice; we will not be delving deep into theology or world religions in this volume. Instead, the findings presented may provide a snapshot of the phenomenon of learning through spiritual encounters, and of the lives of those who were generous enough to share their stories with me. I

do believe that in this respect, this research has gone deeper than some before it, and for that I feel proud.

In this chapter, I will share an overview of the study, and describe how I developed a conceptual framework for this research. In Chapter 2, I will share some of my own experiences with the phenomenon, and briefly introduce the concept of spiritual autobiography and memoir as a form of writing relevant to this endeavour, describing why stories were so integral to this work. In Chapter 3, we will explore some sites of spiritual encounter and literature in the field, to better understand what research has been done by others in this area previously. In that literature review, I will draw upon research from many fields, including psychology, cognitive studies, curriculum research, and social work to explore how this body of research provides an appropriate and fruitful pathway for better understanding how adults learn through spiritual encounter.

In Chapter 4, I present the Methodology for this study, explaining the theory, methods, and philosophical considerations involved in conducting this work. Next, in Chapter 5, I will present the results of a Canadian study I conducted in 2020-2021 which asked individuals “Have you ever had a (self-identified) spiritual encounter that taught you something?” In that chapter I will present findings and descriptive statistics regarding the nature of participants’ spiritual experiences, the learning that took place, their spiritual identity, comfort levels discussing spirituality, emotional intensity, level of surprise, and the impact of COVID-19.

In many ways, Chapter 6 is the heart of this manuscript, and includes ten stories offered by participants. I will begin by offering a brief bio of each participant, including relevant demographic and contextual information, and then encourage you to go on a choose-your-own-adventure style reading of their experiences, offering some questions for reflection. As you explore the first-person narratives, which were co-written with the participant using their words from our interviews verbatim, I ask that you take your time with them, in whatever order they speak to you. While this body of research was not explicitly designed as a case study, I very

much believe that these stories can be interpreted in this way. We have strived to make them clear, honest, beautiful, and useful through a process of deep sharing and listening. These narratives may be of particular benefit for individuals who are seeking to better understand the value of this kind of learning, or to those who wish to find examples beyond their own to broaden their appreciation of the phenomenon. They may also be useful to those working within education, healthcare, social work, ministry, spiritual direction, and other wellness settings.

In Chapter 7, I will discuss 12 emergent themes, grouped as insights, gleaned from the study on *Learning Through Spiritual Encounters* in what might be seen as a thematic analysis of results. In Chapter 8, I will bring all of this together to offer some concluding thoughts in a discussion format as they relate to the research questions and offer personal reflections. For those who are so inclined, in the appendices you'll find the ethical clearance for the study (Appendix A), letters of information and consent for participants (Appendix B and Appendix C), the online questionnaire (Appendix D), an interview guide (Appendix E), debriefing letter (Appendix F), sample recruitment ads (Appendix G) and codebook (Appendix H).

My vision for this manuscript is that it reads like an engaging piece of literary non-fiction, weaving poetry and stories—some my own, and others co-authored by participants—to give voice to those who may not have had their spiritual experiences believed or seen as significant, to better understand the value of this learning. In formal scholarship, this is referred to as *heuristic phenomenology* (Patton, 2002). In my opinion, these narratives offer a pathway which can help create spaces for future interventions with adult educators and administrators who are skeptical about the role of spirituality in adult learning. Ideally, this research may serve to create a sense of what Quinn (2010) describes as “radical openness to other” (p. 107); the kind of hospitality which makes room for the uninvited guest—be it person, event, or ideology. As you read these stories deeply, allow them to resonate, and take note of how you are *attentive, willing, and responsive* to these, your guests.

The Research Problem

While significant progress has been made in the last twenty years, much of the research on adult spirituality continues to turn in circles due to a preoccupation with defining terms (e.g., the strong need to define itself separate from religion), fear of ridicule, and an unwillingness to accept paradox or the role of the body and emotions as valid places of knowing. There remains a lack of understanding around spiritual encounters and the profound impact they have on learning. In Canada and the US, our current education systems and capitalist, consumer-driven societies place high value on rationalist perspectives, which do not make adequate room for the beautiful, holistic, or unexpected. If we continue to place spiritual learning in an inferior position, I fear we will miss valuable learning opportunities that support more inclusive, loving, and sustainable ways of living and being in this world. When spirituality is a ‘hot topic,’ it is often repackaged to us in ways that feel conspicuous, uncomfortable, or shallow, often to tick a box or sell us something. Given the large number of people who have a faith or spiritual practice, coupled with our increasing efforts to decolonize and learn about other ways of knowing in education—for example, a return to Indigenous wisdom—I believe we have skipped a crucial step: we don’t listen to people. We don’t *believe* them.

The Research Questions

In my doctoral research, I began to focus on these central research questions. It is my hope that throughout this work, I will be able to present findings that bring us closer to answering them, together.

1. How are the qualities of *willingness*, *attentiveness*, and *responsiveness* present in spiritual encounters when learning takes place?
2. What role does emotional intensity play in learning through spiritual encounters?
3. What role does surprise play in learning through spiritual encounters?
4. What is the lasting impact and value of learning through spiritual encounters?

Rationale

The literature points to four barriers which have typically prevented adult educators from taking a deeper dive into spiritual constructs: (a) *the language problem*, i.e., scholars are heavily preoccupied with defining the difference between spirituality and religion, and how to capture something so personal and subjective as described by English and Cameron (2013) and Gunnlaugson and Vokey (2013); (b) *fear of ridicule*, i.e., talking about spirituality in the academy can still be risky business, and involves vulnerability in general as addressed by Groen (2008), Shahjahan (2005, 2009) and Swinton (2016); (c) *the tendency of Western colonial perspectives to dismiss the body as a valid place of knowing* (Trousdale, 2013); and (d) *the problem of paradox*—which abounds (Groen, 2018).

As Groen (2018) noted, spirituality has been discussed more widely in academic literature in the last decade, with the field of social work at the helm (Groen, 2009). The adult educators she and other researchers have surveyed *want* to talk more about these themes explicitly and many of them reported deeply meaningful experiences in their own lives. I count myself among this group of scholars who recognize that emotional and embodied experiences are deeply interwoven with our knowing and acting, and that learning may include the sacred and transcendental (Sumara & Uptis, 2004). As Tisdell pointed out, this does not involve pushing a particular religious agenda—far from it. Rather, it supports and acknowledges the idea that one can bring their *whole* self into the learning space, in what Groen (2015) called an “undivided life” (p. 121).

Uptis (2019) reported that adults typically describe their most profound learning encounters as involving the body, the arts, and the natural world. Considering my interests in the type of embodied and experiential learning that has been somewhat excluded from the academy, e.g., serendipity, synchronicity, etc., and the intuitive awareness that people don’t tend to make decisions based on probabilities, but rather from places of generalized belief situated in

their own life experiences and sense-making (Maguire et al., 2011), the emerging cognitive research on surprise also resonates.

It is worth noting that given the strong role surprise can play in this type of learning, I have also chosen to predominantly use the term spiritual *encounter* rather than “experience” when describing the phenomena, due to its greater sense immediacy and implication of a certain kind of exchange, both common themes in the literature. While the difference is a subtle one, even a brief look at popular definitions of each word in various dictionaries will show a distinction.

In traditional schooling at all levels, I have often shuddered at comparisons that liken teaching to performance, or when I see signs posted outside classrooms that remind students to “check their problems or attitudes” at the door. For those who critique the place of spirit in learning, given the existing research and current statistics on the spiritual practices of Canadians highlighted later in this chapter, I would argue that this attempt to stifle it is far more ineffectual. For many, leaving one’s spirituality at the door, is as absurd as leaving one’s grief on a coat hook after a heartbreak or death. We could give it a whirl, but wouldn’t it still be there? We may be able to keep up appearances for some time, but even in instances where someone might choose not to share this aspect of their identity explicitly—we do this all the time for various reasons, including fear of judgement or intensity of emotion; sometimes because things feel private or sacred, or indeed, just to ‘get by’—I would argue that it is still present in the learning space. I would even go as far as to suggest that we are missing valuable opportunities to learn from some of life’s shimmering moments when we exclude these emotions.

Tolliver’s (2016) reminder that “Spirit-ness showing up without permission can be a revolutionary, powerful and transformative way of being in a world that too often supports status quo activities that are not life enhancing” (p. 80) rings true in my own life personally and professionally, where I draw little distinction. Moreover, in my desire to keep the topic alive in academic conversations, I noted this sentiment is reflected in the research findings themselves.

Indeed, in my research, Greene's central question: *How do we wake people up?* is key to my theoretical framework, and my own grounding as a teacher, poet, and academic. In general, I think learning should involve far more attention to feeling. These days, I position myself closely with poet Mary Oliver (2009) who in *Our World*, shares her discovery that attention without *feeling* is only a report, and reminds us that openness and empathy are required if attention is to matter. I believe that this way of thinking is a fertile entry point into a discussion on spirituality that seems to be swimming in circles in current literature and scholarship.

Research Design

In 2020-2021, I conducted a PhD study on *Learning Through Spiritual Encounters* across Canada in two phases; the study combined heuristic phenomenology and narrative methodologies to explore how adults learn through spiritual encounters. This volume is the culmination of five years of academic focus on the topic (and 41 years of lived experience); it includes findings from the literature and from the study itself, presenting results from the questionnaire, including 75 stories submitted, 10 co-written narratives, over 15 hours of audio interviews, and various artifacts including electronic communication and other items such as a book of haiku poetry and an essay. I will offer more information on this in Chapter 4, but essentially, 140 people responded to a survey that I distributed across Canada, and the majority shared a story of spiritual encounter. I spoke to 10 of these people in one-to-one online interviews while the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing at the one-year anniversary mark, and we co-wrote the narratives which make up a large body of this manuscript. Through the process of collecting data and working with the stories in such intimate detail, as well as coding and analyzing responses to the questionnaires, the in-depth interviews, and texts in a more systematic way, I was given a great opportunity to learn more about the phenomenon, and glean some new insights, which I will share in Chapter 7. To help us along, I will introduce my theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this project, as they help to provide the reader with lenses for navigating this research.

Considering a Theoretical Framework

When I first began my research, I was often steered away from the term *spiritual*, and was encouraged by several colleagues to find another word for it. In this process, I began looking at Mezirow's work on transformational learning, which I thought may have some relevant connections. I soon noted, however, that according to many scholars in the field, his ideas were beginning to feel outdated or too singular, with the unit of analysis being centred primarily upon the individual. His theories also seemed to exclude some of the spiritual elements that I was the most interested in. As such, I began exploring other options: Synchronicity? Serendipity? Surprise?

Adler (2008) argued that "we like having our attention awakened. Optimism, hope, and an upbeat feeling are fueled and reinforced by the world's ability to surprise" (p. 151). As noted earlier, Greene's (1995) theories on wide-awakeness and social imagination were also central to my research and resonated with my own background as an arts educator. While Greene's career and body of work primarily emphasized the arts as a pathway for this type of learning, she also emphasized the role of our bodies and emotions. Greene believed awakenings could bring our "bodies into play, excite our feelings and open the doors to perception" (Greene, 1995, p. 28). In a 1998 lecture on Imagination, posted as part of the Museum of Education's *Readers' Guide to Education* exhibit, Greene speaks of social imagination, and the ability to use our imaginations to envision a better world. She said that it was her hope "to awaken people, not only to see, not only to feel, but to hold somebody's hand and to act." That line struck a deep chord with me and felt like an *aha moment*. I found myself asking: do spiritual encounters involve these three elements, *to see, to feel, and to act*? Do they lead to wide-awakeness, or does wide-awakeness lead to spiritual encounters? I had a hunch that there was something to this seeing, feeling, and acting stuff, but as I began to play around with this idea, I found that I had a hard time articulating it. At the time, I suggested that in order for learning to occur from a spiritual encounter, either in the moment or retrospectively, an individual must:

- experience some kind of heightened attentiveness or arousal (seeing)
- come to new, enhanced, or deeper embodied understandings as a result (feeling)
- self-identify it as spiritual, often involving a call to action, a moving from inward to outward focus, or vice versa (acting)

Learning in the spiritual domain might therefore be thought of as a cognitive, emotional, and embodied response sparking wide-awakeness. I came to believe that this involved three interconnected processes: seeing, feeling, and acting. While I considered this, I was keenly aware that *seeing*, in this sense, often happened in other ways besides the eyes, and that many of these processes may overlap. Neither was this necessarily a linear or sequential process; for example, one might experience a knowing in the body first, which sparks heightened attentiveness, or a physiological response to the adoption of an action or identity. While I recognized this complexity and paradox, I suggested that all three components must be present (at least in my own study) as I came closer to a working model. Indeed, as you will read below, these three components helped guide my understanding of the type of learning that could occur from a spiritual encounter, and provided an excellent foundation for my conceptual framework, which you will soon discover, landed in my lap rather serendipitously.

Seeing: Heightened Attentiveness and Arousal

This aspect of spiritual encounter involves a sense of the extra-ordinary, which might be identified through heightened attentiveness and arousal. It's the moment we notice, something feels elevated, etc. This moment is often accompanied by a physiological response. Consider our discussion of "shimmering moments" earlier in this introduction. Spiritual moments can pop. The literature suggests that people are hard-wired for surprise in the spiritual domain. Indeed, both spiritual experiences and surprise can be seen as brain events, and connected in meaningful ways, as evidenced by emerging research in the field of neurotheology which explores the links between neuroscience and religion and spirituality (Newberg, 2010).

Swartz (2011) traced the discussion of spirituality in neuroscience back to William James' 1905 Lectures on the "Varieties of Religious Experience." She discussed how contemporary psychiatric-practitioner researchers such as Colzolino and Sigel (2010) have discovered mirror neurons, which allow us to be "in tune" with our environment, aiding in social cognition. As Swartz pointed out, Giordano and Engebretson (2006), Harris (2009), and Meeks and Jeste (2009) have all done studies on the neural and cognitive connections of spirituality uncovering "diverse, culturally embedded forms of intentionally altered states of consciousness that shared a common specific neural pathway" (p. 17).

In their work which explored the neural and cognitive basis of spiritual experiences, and ethical implications in clinical medicine, Giordano and Engebretson (2006) presented hypotheses and synthesized research which supported the value of spiritual experience in clinical medicine, including during end-of-life care. Indeed, spiritual experiences have been described as "liminal or trans-liminal," "sublime," or "ecstatic," involving "an altered state of consciousness that may be the result of activation of distinct neural mechanisms by external and/or internal stimuli" (Giordano & Engebretson, 2006, p. 217). Giordano and Engebretson argued that phenomenologically, spiritual experiences "generally consist of an extraordinary and conscious experience with both strongly perceived subjectivity and intentionality" and involve various modes of awareness (p. 217). They can be based on both symbolic and observable phenomena, and their cognitive interpretation reflects individuals' prior and current experiences.

In an empirical study on shamanism and magic, Mayer (2013) described how Extraordinary Experiences (EEs) tend to be divided into two categories, including those which people classified as spiritual, religious, or mystical, and others which tended to fit into the scientifically anomalous or paranormal sphere (p. 191). He acknowledged that these experiences tend to differ significantly from traditional worldviews, and are considered unorthodox in light of traditional Science, but emphasized the role of Extraordinary Experiences in the adoption of

spiritual and/or religious beliefs or an individuals' conception of their spirituality. Specifically, he conducted theme-centred, extensive interviews with seven contemporary shamans and eleven magic practitioners in 2001, and again in 2004-2005. The primary focuses of these interviews were the biographic contexts of these shamanic and magic practices, the use of heterodox bodies of knowledge, methods and particular practices, experiences, and evaluation of these practices, as well as their influence on values, beliefs. and ethics. A key aspect of this discussion considered how uncommon practices can be incorporated (biographically and cognitively) into a modern culture with a dominant scientific, rationalistic worldview. While spirituality was not the explicit or intended focus of Mayer's research, the nature of the research took an empirical phenomenological approach, following the principle of "openness" presented by Hoffmann-Riem (1980).

In looking at extraordinary experiences, a graduate thesis out of Queen's University published by Olvet in 2009 helped pave the way for additional research into these kinds of phenomena at the Faculty of Education. Olvet developed a central research question to guide his work: "What does it mean to have an epiphany?" while addressing four sub-questions regarding experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon. His research used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and explored 16 retrospective first-hand accounts of epiphany as it occurs in lived experience. He used serendipitous, snowball sampling and gathered his data between July and October of 2008. This collection involved 5 face-to-face interviews ranging from just over an hour, to over an hour-and a-half, 11 completed written questionnaires, 29 pieces of electronic correspondence from participants containing exchanges of thoughts and ideas about epiphanies, and 10 artifacts (p. 28). Interestingly, in his analysis he used a spectra of contrasting dimensions of light to highlight the importance of the interplay between various characteristics of epiphanies (p. 78-79). In the end, while he did not find archetypal experiences of epiphany, the phenomenon could be differentiated from other related experiences by the degree of impact and timeframe. He also noted that most of the participants in the study

recognized that these experiences were out of the “ordinary,” and “easily distinguishable from day-to-day experience” (p. 85).

While most people are not consciously aware of their bodies when they are doing something (Tobin & Tisdell, 2015), there are a series of neurological and physiological processes at play. Whether they recognize it or not, people chronically observe their environment (Whittlesea & Williams, 2001) and are, in a sense, primed for surprise. In a study out of the University of Western Ontario, Olson and Janes (2002) conducted two experiments on surprise and vigilance, which demonstrated that people are more attuned to stimuli that exhibit difference rather than similarity. They noted that this may have practical implications on phenomena in social psychology, e.g., stereotype formation.

Maguire et al. (2011) studied the factors influencing surprise judgements and tested various sense making hypotheses in four experiments. They suggested that people “adopt a proactive information seeking-strategy [by] focusing their attention on anomalous events and motivating them to resolve representational discrepancies” (p. 185). They remind us that heightened arousal serves a purpose; surprise has utility for survival. In response to discrepancies, people can exhibit heightened arousal, including distinctive changes in their facial expression and nasal cavity. Fuller (2007) further described the arousal that accompanies surprise, including impacts on adrenaline, heart rate, organ function, and muscles, including “species specific” and evolutionary gestures and expressions such as raised hair, goosebumps, enlarged or constricted pupils, and the tightening or opening of the mouth (p. 25).

People frequently describe these sensations in spiritual encounters. Whenever I am asked to give a brief overview of my research interests, I know that I tend to refer back to my own body and call them “goosebump moments,” and similarly, have found people often describe chills or tingles in their own accounts. In my own life, and in the literature, it is this heightened awareness and bodily response, that often catches our conscious attention, and makes these moments more readily distinguishable. As we’ll see later in the literature review, there are

several sites of spiritual encounters, including surprise, which might provoke this type of attentiveness. It is also important to note that there appears to be a paradox here: a spiritual encounter can lead to heightened attentiveness, but heightened attentiveness can also lead to spiritual encounter.

Feeling: Embodied Knowing and Meaning-Making

Tobin and Tisdell (2015) reaffirmed that “embodied learning is situated largely within experiential learning, sometimes connected to non-Western ways of knowing, somatic and affective” (p. 216). This aspect of learning through spiritual encounter refers to the ways in which our bodies interpret, respond to, and (re)member information we become aware of through the cognitive, affective, and symbolic domains. In the literature, this is sometimes referred to as *embodied knowing*, with embodied spirituality being closely related. This may involve sensory, emotional, and intellectual experiences. In this framework, embodied knowing and meaning making is our primary focus; this may include embodied spiritual experiences and subjects may come to new, deeper, or enhanced understandings as a result. Feelings, memory, and beliefs are of primary importance here, and are considered valuable sources of information.

In the introduction to an issue of the *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, on “Knowing Bodies,” Sumara and Upitis (2004) argue for the presence and importance of the body in learning encounters. They discussed the ways knowledge is linked to the environment and our own bodies and suggested that although there continues to be an obsession with the state of the biological body, there also continues to be a pervasive ignorance about the complex ways biological and phenomenological bodies interact to create what becomes noticed and deployed as ‘knowing’” (p. vi). They tell us that it is not just the way the world is marked on our bodies, but indeed the mark we make on the world. This can sometimes feel like a surprise, e.g., the way a piece of music might return to the pianist through body-memory, or the physical impact of grief that can come in waves after the loss of a loved one. In this volume, they point to Harper’s book review of *Taught Bodies* which asks us not only to

acknowledge the body being “present in pedagogical encounters, certainly more than we ever imagined or, more to the point, than we would dare to admit,” but to consider why this is relevant (p. xi).

When the body is present, we make room for spirit, awakening parts that were numbed, deadened, or ignored (Ferrer & Albaredo, 2005). In her article tracing the history of embodied spirituality from Celtic traditions to the present day, Trousdale (2013) explained that in the West, the body has been consistently constrained, regulated, disciplined, suppressed, and repressed in the name of spirituality. Indeed Wilson (2001) also noted this tendency towards the dichotomization of the body, divided into “higher” and “lower” parts of self, good and bad, etc., and of earthly things to be associated with indecency and obscenity (p. 167). Trousdale described how the term “embodied spirituality” has been used to counteract the disembodied spirituality that seems to dominate our culture:

The term ‘embodied spirituality’ is generally understood to reflect a view that all dimensions of the human being—body, soul, and spirit—are potentially sites for the transcendent, for understanding the mystery that lies beyond and beneath and within the world we live in. (p. 24)

Indeed, our bodies can be deeply intertwined with our spiritual knowing. As Tisdell (2011) pointed out in an article about wisdom and complexity, the body is recognized as a site of knowing in many religious and cultural practices. She reminded us that in *Tales of Wonder* (2010), world religions scholar Huston Smith emphasizes this embodied aspect in his discussion of the world’s spiritual traditions; “Most mystics don’t want to read religious wisdom: they want to be it. A postcard of a beautiful lake is not a beautiful lake” (p. 147). Smith described how Sufis do not pray simply with their minds, but with their bodies.

In a related TedX talk (2013) titled, “Opening the Heart Through Ecstatic Poetry,” Dr. Coleman Barks, professor emeritus, renowned for translating Rumi’s poems into English in the West, provided a relevant example. In this presentation, he discussed three surprising and

embodied experiences that guided his career path. The most startling incident he recounted occurred on May 2, 1977, when he encountered a stranger named Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in a dream, who shared with him the meanings of the poetry one year prior to their meeting in real life. He described the feeling of mutual connection and atmosphere of the dream in detail, and remarked that while he could not explain it, some humans are able to experience other levels of awareness. He credited this, and other chance encounters and synchronicities, as being essential to his understanding and personal transformation. Jokingly, he said to the audience: “You all can believe this or not. I don’t have the luxury. Because it happened to me.”

This sense of knowing may be better understood by some of the findings included in a study that emerged out of Simon Fraser University, published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* in which Whittlesea and Williams (2001) described a series of experiments around expectation, uncertainty, surprise, and feelings of familiarity. In the article, they used the term *surprising coherence* to describe something which fits so well into its context, that it almost feels like an “achievement or unexpected resolution of tension,” to those who have experienced it (p. 27). This construct may be very helpful in understanding some of the nuances of how people interpret spiritual phenomena, for example when one perceives the answer to a prayer or receives a sign that they were looking for, i.e., it affirms their expectation, and results in positive feelings.

Acting: Identity, Imagination, and Action

This aspect of spiritual encounter suggests integration of inward and outward experience, where spiritual encounters can be seen as a powerful catalyst for change, as we begin to incorporate new beliefs or ideas, and may experience a shift in identity and/or corresponding action. Furthermore, I suggest that, if learning is to occur in the spiritual domain, a subject must self-identify it as spiritually significant, either in the moment or retrospectively. This seems fitting considering the literature tells us that the etymology of the word *spirit* is rooted in the word *breath* and implies a sense of one’s personal relationship with the life force, as opposed to

traditional definitions of ‘religion’ which imply a binding together. The idea of *breath* also mirrors this sense of relationship of inward and outward action rather beautifully.

I suppose it is possible to discuss this type of learning, and indeed many of the phenomena in this study without directly using the word spiritual—indeed I have been questioned about it by colleagues, many of whom view these occurrences as less “shimmering” and more “statistical probabilities,” “chance encounters”, or “random events”—but I remain a strong advocate for its intentional inclusion in the academic conversation. I believe we have given a good deal of voice to rationalist perspectives, many of which are still affirmed in this research, and believe that using more spirit-focused language is an inclusive practice which acknowledges the reality of our complex identities, and the diverse and meaningful ways people move and learn in the world. I also hope that my study might pave the way for other researchers and colleagues who might remain in a spiritual closet.

While the 2021 Canadian census results were not yet available at the time of this publication, according to a report published by Statistics Canada (Cornelissen, 2021) in 2019, over two thirds (68%) of Canadians reported a religious affiliation, and over half (54%) described their spiritual and/or religious beliefs as being somewhat or very important to their lives. Over one third (37%) of Canadians reported engaging in a religious or spiritual activity on their own at least once a month, and approximately one quarter (23%) participated in a group spiritual or religious activity at least once a month the previous year. An article published in *The National Post* in 2013 also suggested that a growing number of Canadians are identifying as “Spiritual But not Religious”. Consider that in 2017, 67% of Canadians still believed in a God or Higher Power, 51% had an active religious or private faith practice, and that even among the 30% of Canadians who identified as “spiritually uncertain,” 57% of them believed that a God or a Higher power existed (Angus Reid, 2017). Among those who self-identified as an immigrant or visible minority (many of which were non-White and non-Christian), faith practices have been on the rise. With immigration, “a rising share of Canadians identify with other faiths, including

Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism,” according to the 2018 Pew Research Center survey, which found that these five groups together make up 8% of Canadian adults. The same source indicated that Christians make up approximately 55% of the adult population. It is also interesting to note that in Canada, the highest number (61%) who identify as unbelievers (of any faith) are white men under the age of 55. According to Statistics Canada, while on the whole spiritual and religious practice declined from 1985 to 2019, overall, it is still of considerable value to many Canadians, with women and immigrants more likely to report a religious or spiritual affiliation. For example, regardless of age, women are more likely than men to report a religious affiliation (72% vs. 64%), report it being meaningful in how they live their lives (61% versus 47%), and are more likely to participate in religious or spiritual activities, especially on their own (36% vs. 24%) weekly. Given Mezirow’s (2000) position that adult educators “are never neutral. They are cultural activists committed to support and extend the social practices, institutions and systems that foster fuller, freer participation,” (p. 30), we would do well to note these trends, to see how they are reflected in education, healthcare, and other areas of society, i.e., who is valued in these systems becomes much clearer.

In the field of neuroscience, Damasio (2010) suggests that cultural and religious rituals may provide a jump start to the brain’s decision operations, in moving from pre-conscious thought to action. From a scientific standpoint, we seem to know enough about neuroplasticity, i.e., the brain’s ability to change and adapt throughout a lifetime, to recognize that the thoughts and behaviours we engage in have the ability to affirm or disrupt habitual neurological patterns. This is the ‘fire and wire’ basis of various models in cognitive behavioural therapy (Beck, 2020). In this sense, Swartz’s (2011) reminder that “learners might be in the midst of a serious re-wiring that they can’t control” (p. 23) also hits home in this aspect of the definition and has implications for identity and behaviour. Essentially, we know that people’s beliefs can change over time, and surprises may have a role in this.

In *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), Greene devoted a chapter to “Imagination, Breakthroughs, and the Unexpected,” and noted the need to integrate what we learn in embodied ways: “There has to be a live, aware, reflective transaction if what presents itself to consciousness is to be realized” (p. 30). She spoke of surprise and identity directly:

... others determine ‘exactly’ what ‘you are’ and use fixed names. To be yourself is to be in the process of creating a self, an identity. If it were not a process, there would be no surprise. The surprise comes along with becoming different... it comes along with hearing different words and music, seeing from unaccustomed angles, realizing that the world perceived from one place is not *the world*. (p. 20)

In describing her ideas on social imagination, Greene explained how she came to concentrate on the imagination in her work for social change and stated that she believes it is imagination which makes empathy possible, allowing us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and other. She tells us that if others are willing to give us clues, we can experience imagined, alternate realities, allowing us “to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (p. 3). Throughout her career, Greene advocated strongly for social change, and essentially, summed up social imagination as “the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 19). In Pinar’s (1998) book, *The Passionate Mind of Maxine Greene: I am ...not yet*, in her autobiographical introduction, Greene commented that even after she retired, she continued to host conferences and educational salons in her home which brought together “the multiple realities of philosophers, college presidents, educational activists, child playwrights, musicians, actors, jazz players, rappers, classroom teachers, poets” (p. 11). She pointed out the informal and personal nature some of these encounters and seemed to understand the value of the unplanned: “We have had good personal discussions about art, imagination, teaching on various levels; and I find that, when a space is provided (and people can sit on the floor, drink coffee, take their time) something rather wonderful can happen” (p. 11).

Greene's ideas on social imagination are well suited to the literature on hospitality and the willingness to receive other. This call to action is also discussed in much of the spiritual literature. As people become more aware of their own spiritual identities, there tends to be a movement towards outward action. As we will see in the literature review, surprise can be intricately linked to spiritual experiences and understandings, and this type of wide-awakeness, makes room for personal and social change. Indeed, the literature points to several possible sites of spiritual encounter which may lead to learning. Depending on what individuals find there, these can lead to experiences of wonder, connection, forgiveness, healing, self-acceptance, problem-solving, creativity, and increased empathy.

Conceptual Framework: Willingness, Attentiveness, and Responsiveness

Palmer (2017) suggested that “in a sacred landscape, with its complexities and convolutions, surprise is a constant companion, it lies just around the bend or hidden in the next valley” (p. 115). Indeed, surprise struck again in my own spiritual life, when in mid-January 2020, right before the onset of the global pandemic, I ended up stumbling into the Office of Faith and Spiritual Life at Queen's University in need of some guidance and spiritual community, and in the process ended up finding Quakerism *and* a conceptual framework for my study. Coincidentally, Palmer is a Quaker, too. I only made it to a few meetings in person before the provincial shutdown due to COVID-19, but I have continued to attend virtually ever since. In those early days of attending, I simply could not believe I had struck upon something that was so rich, bringing a greater frame of understanding, both to my own spirituality, and my research. While I won't go into depth about the history of Quakerism here, essentially during an unprogrammed Meeting for Worship, Quakers meet and wait in silence to hear from Spirit. They also believe in, and practice, principles they call 'testimonies' such as Simplicity, Peace, Truth & Integrity, Justice, Equality & Community, and Unity with Creation, as described on Quaker.ca (2022), a website for those wishing to learn more about Quakerism in Canada.

In listening to spirit throughout the years, which in my own faith practice, I have always called Jesus, God, or the Holy Spirit, I frequently had spiritual encounters in my own life (more on that soon). I was astounded to meet a community of others who shared similar values and believed that this type of exchange was possible; essentially, that one could *discern* what Spirit was trying to teach.

In my effort to learn more about Quakerism, I read many books by Quaker authors and stumbled upon several which talked about the process of *spiritual discernment*, a phrase which, over the years, had struck a chord with me every time I heard it, in that shimmering kind of way. In *The Guided Life: Finding Purpose in Troubled Times* (2018), Barnett described spiritual discernment as “a form of perception, by which we come to sense the action of the divine life within our own feelings, thoughts, and experience. It requires us to become sensitive to the ‘promptings of love and truth within us’ (p. 2). He quotes Quaker writer Patricia Loring in Chapter 1, who refers to spiritual discernment as ‘listening spirituality’ and goes on to say that, “If we are listening for the will of God, it behooves us to listen with our hearts, the marrow of our bones, and our whole skin, as well as with our ears” (p. 2).

In *Decision Making & Spiritual Discernment* (2016), Bieber explained how the qualities of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness can be used to explore a process of spiritual discernment. She described these qualities as three strands, “woven together as we live” (p. 6). Bieber, who herself was a clinical psychologist, spiritual director, and teacher, described how in her years of practice, she had found that willingness, attentiveness, and responsiveness “weave together again and again, creating a strong rope to grasp onto...” (p. 6). While her volume deals primarily with wisdom and decision making, and is explicitly theistic, I was struck by how this terminology seemed to align so beautifully with the thinking I had already done about seeing/feeling/acting respective to learning through spiritual encounters.

Briefly, I will describe how she uses the terminology, and what might be borrowed in our endeavour. With attentiveness, Bieber discusses how discernment is about “paying attention,

about noticing those fine differences that are complicated and hard to distinguish” (p. 7). She suggests that one aspect of being attentive involves becoming present to what is true and real in one’s life—to pause and consider who we are, who we dream of being, and the circumstances of our lives. She talks about this process of becoming attentive as often bringing up feelings of confusion or contradiction: “We discover what we already know, though we often didn’t know we knew it” (p. 7).

Of willingness, she talks about being “willing to receive” or “expecting to receive” and describes it as a combination of “Help!” and “Yes!” (p. 6). While her explanation focuses more on receiving loving guidance and wisdom from the divine, I can envision willingness having resonance with hospitality too; that we might also be willing to receive another, to listen, to make something or someone welcome. I can also see this as the willingness to explore something, try something new, to feel, question, or ask.

Lastly, responsiveness can be understood to be “the third theme in the interwoven braid...we respond to what we’ve been attentive to” (p. 7). She describes how this is often the most visible aspect of spiritual decision making, involving “doing something, making a decision, taking some steps, getting somewhere” (p. 7). To me, this feels much like Greene’s call to action. Bieber also mindfully acknowledges that this process of creation often continues beyond the experience; it’s not an endpoint; “We continually renew our willing openness to the Light and pay attention to the landscape within and around us” (p. 7).

While the use of Light with a capital “L” may make some readers uncomfortable, it is an apt choice for this discussion. Yes, it connotes the spiritual, but it also speaks deeply to the metaphorical as we will learn in Chapter 3. As we move through this research, we will continue to use this framework of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness as a lens, to help us to better understand what is occurring for those experiencing a spiritual encounter, and how it might be seen as a valuable place of learning.

Looking Ahead

Now that we have a clear overview of the context of this research, its purpose, and key terms, in the next chapter I will highlight some of my personal experiences with the phenomenon and take a brief look at the genre of writing which may be considered spiritual autobiography and memoir. This may be helpful both to situate my own interest in the topic, and also to set the stage for the study; that we might come to better understand how stories are a powerful component of learning about, and often through, spiritual encounters.

Chapter 2: Spiritual Autobiography & Memoir

The centrality and need for stories in this type of research became apparent to me very quickly as I began to discuss my ideas with others in an academic setting. In the early days, when I introduced the topic, it was often met with blank stares, or that sort of squinty skepticism that can overcome a face, and make you want to make a beeline for the snack table at a conference.

Certainly, early on in my PhD research, I came to rely heavily upon stories when trying to explain what I wanted to study, “Ok. Let me give you an example. It’s like this...” To be honest, I think I was somewhat taken aback by the lack of understanding and discomfort from many when I would use terminology such as spirituality, synchronicity, the serendipitous. The “S” words, we joked. People were much more comfortable when I stuck to the word *surprise*, and perhaps, in this context, I was too. But not in my heart or body. While my foray into research on surprise proved very fruitful, I knew I had to return to a focus on spirit eventually.

In many ways I had to re-learn how to speak, mostly to make the topic more palatable to others. I found it surprisingly difficult to communicate more formally about something that had been so interwoven with my own being and lifestyle, and quite natural in the lives of friends that I invited over for tea, or phoned for a catch-up: “Tell me your God stories we’d say...any miracles lately?” What made it so difficult to speak about it in academia? Many of my friends were also highly educated people, and I knew several of my colleagues, including those in roles of administration at the university, had spiritual practices too: they meditated, or prayed, went to church, even psychics. So why was I feeling so nervous as I stood in front of an instructor in a research class and tried to explain why this topic might be relevant to adult learning? Intuitively, I suspected there were two main reasons: first, some people legitimately did not have a personal frame of reference for what I was talking about. They did not practice a spirituality or recognize it as a valid place of knowing at all; when they heard others speak of it, there may be some polite acknowledgement, perhaps even a sort of frustrated curiosity but not any kind of real belief.

Secondly, some could relate personally but not *professionally*—appearing to participate in a game we collectively play, where we either do not talk about it, e.g., closeted spirituality, or think it is a private matter—no one should bring up in school or work, i.e., not particularly relevant in education, especially “if you want to get a job at the end of this.” And who could blame them? Nobody wants to feel flakey, excluded, unintelligent, or as if their work will ostracize them. Fortunately, when I first began this work, the latter felt so irrelevant to my priorities as a woman in her late thirties doing this research for pleasure, that I considered it well worth the risk, and at times, perhaps even a calling, to carry on. In retrospect, however, I realize that I too hold many of these same fears.

Still, the connections between spiritual encounters and learning seemed so glaring to me that I could no longer sit on the side of the ineffable—these stories needed voice. As I started to do more research into the academic literature, I began to recognize that there is a significant amount of work being done in the areas of spirituality and learning; this was a legitimate field of education. I was hearing, in fact, that at other universities, such as the University of Calgary, courses about spirituality and education were full to the brim, with waiting lists. I was also encouraged by what was being done in other fields such as social work and occupational therapy (Farah & McColl, 2008).

Despite this boost in confidence, I needed to find my own place in this research, and ways of speaking to others about it. This started to happen in a most peculiar way. While preparing for a public talk I offered at the university pub—an informal research talk called a “Nerd Night”—I decided to use the example of *Nancy Drew* novels, which I had loved as a young woman and have recently revisited. While preparing my presentation, as a fun experiment, I found myself coming up with a list of imaginary titles for some of my own stories of learning through spiritual encounters for my slides: *The Case of the Missing Tooth*, *The Case of the Lost Keys*, etc. I used these examples to talk about how many stories of spiritual encounter do indeed have a certain quality of mystery about them, and I encouraged my audience to just sit with that

feeling. Here are twelve, I now share with you. Please note that while my own encounters are rooted in my own Christian beliefs and traditions, the responses and stories offered at different parts in this study will be far more diverse.

The Case of the French Exam

In this encounter I was about 18 years old, and I was taking a Grade 13 French credit at my high school. As I recall, I was having a very emotional time at that stage in my life as I had broken up with my first boyfriend and had recently lost my grandmother Lorraine, who I was very close to. This culminated in my not studying for the exam, which was going to take place after lunch during 4th period. I was incredibly worried about having not studied, and completely unprepared. At the time, I was also not one of those students who could say that grades didn't matter, because for me, they did. I was looking to go to university and had specific goals, and a bad score on this test would have deeply impacted my average and chances of being accepted. Given that I had not studied, it felt useless to do so at that point, so at lunchtime I ended up going to a local park instead, just a couple of blocks away. I was on my own, sitting at a park bench, with my lunch. And I decided to say a prayer. I said something like this: "God, I haven't studied for this French exam, and I'm very scared. I know I can't study now, so instead I need a miracle. I need you to tell me that everything will be OK, and to help me. I also need you to give me some confirmation of this because I am afraid and need peace." The next thing I knew I was surrounded by a circle of birds. I remember them as sparrows. They were fully encircling me in such an unmistakably distinct manner that my attention popped, and I immediately recognized this as my sign that my prayer had been answered. So, I said, "Thank you," and accepted it. I walked back into my French class that afternoon and took my seat at the back of the classroom.

I remember a feeling of resolve; nowadays, I might call it faith. I didn't know how, but I knew God would fix this for me. Our French teacher had a reputation of being very stern and strict—definitely not the kind who would give you a break—though I have sometimes wondered if that may have been skewed by my youthful gaze. Regardless, this feeling of complete calm

washed over me. I just thought *well, something will happen*. Anyway, she eventually walked in, and began to pace at the front of the classroom. Then she spoke very slowly and said: “This hasn't happened to me in 25 years of teaching... but today I have to cancel and reschedule our French exam.” I can't remember the exact reason now; I think it had something to do with her technical equipment for the oral component, and to be honest, I didn't care. My prayer was answered. I had a second chance a few weeks later; I studied, and I passed.

The Case of the Missing Tooth

A lesser-known fact about me is that I only have 20 adult teeth (most people have between 28 and 32). By my mid-teens, I had a few spaces in my mouth due to congenitally missing teeth (i.e., no big tooth underneath pushing it out!). This felt incredibly embarrassing for me as a young woman. As a result, I needed to have three small dental bridges made to fill in the gaps. While the orthodontist said they were likely to only last a decade, they have lasted twice as long. Two decades later, I still have these bridges and have not ever really been in a financial position to get new ones. I also have a great deal of fear and dread about going to dentists; they would cost thousands of dollars to replace, and I was not at all interested in getting implants. Occasionally, however, this has meant that they break and need repair and recementing from time to time. When one of them does fall out, it is always a source of worry and I usually get in for an emergency appointment when this happens rather quickly, once, or twice a year. Fortunately, this always tends to happen at home, except for one time on a walk in Canterbury, UK, where I'd been teaching on a working holiday visa that summer at age 26.

On that particular day, I was walking through a park in town we called Greyfriars Gardens, formally known as the Franciscan Gardens. Greyfriars Gardens has a small Franciscan Chapel in it, surrounded by a beautiful walled English garden with grassy areas, rose bushes, wildflowers, as well as many stone pathways along the riverside walk. This was a place I would come often on my teaching breaks to be able to think, or journal, or listen to music.

On this occasion, I was enjoying a chocolate Nutella crepe when my dental bridge came loose. I was disappointed but held it in my hand as I finished my crepe and walked all about the grounds. I was upset that it had come out, but certainly didn't want to miss out on my treat. But near closing time of the park, I realized that it was missing. I assumed that I must have thrown out the tooth with the wrapper or had dropped it along the way.

A feeling of absolute dread and panic overcame me. Whether it was in the garbage can ("the bin" as they might say) or somewhere along the garden path, finding it in this park was the equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack. Perhaps even harder. There were millions of pebbles throughout the park that looked exactly like my tooth. And the grassy areas would present a whole other challenge. Given that I only had half an hour before the gates closed, and there was a looming thunderstorm, my options were looking very limited. The garden was about to be locked. Not only was it embarrassing to be without my tooth, but now I also needed to have this bridge replaced, which would require finding a dentist abroad, getting molds, matching the tint, and possibly weeks of waiting and fittings, etc. I might even have to wait until I returned home to Canada. I certainly had no extra money at the time; in fact, my contract and pay had been unexpectedly halved when I arrived to teach at the language school, and I'd already borrowed from family. So given my circumstances, I did the only thing that I could do, I prayed.

I asked very clearly, specifically, and strongly for God's help finding the tooth and found myself repeating a scripture that had comforted me as a child; "*All things are possible for those who believe*" (*New Living Translation*, 2015, Mark 9:23). I just kept repeating it to myself over, and over, and over again as I scanned the pathways, and retraced my steps as best I could. I would add my own emphasis each time: "You said, not *some*, not a *few*, but *all things* are possible for those who believe." Within 10 minutes, my eye caught the shine of a tiny piece of metal along the pathway, and I found my tooth. The odds seemed so completely against me, that it was incredibly apparent to me that my prayer had been answered. From this experience, I

learned that I have a helper in times of need and to be more careful with the safe keeping of important items.

The Case of the Missing Keys

I had just been out with a friend for lunch at the university pub and was on my way home when I realized I did not have my keys. Losing things always causes me a great deal of distress, and my apartment, classroom keys, and entry fob for the Faculty of Education were on this ring. I feared that I had possibly thrown them in the garbage by accident when I was cleaning off our table, so my friend and I walked back to the restaurant and ended up checking the garbage and re-walking my route twice.

My friend called her manager to mention she'd be late back to the office and searched with me for another hour. I contemplated speaking with my landlord to find out if I could get an extra key made, but always hate to disturb her as she's in her late 90s. In my mind, this felt like an incredibly overwhelming task, and I dreaded having to speak to the maintenance staff at the university to tell them too.

As I walked my friend back to the office, a thought struck me, that I mentioned aloud: "You know, I could just decide to stop and pray about this. I'm so afraid and stressed right now that I don't have the energy, but if I were to pray to God right now, I know that He would help me." My friend expressed some hesitation on that point, mentioning that she wasn't sure if it was fair to put that kind of pressure on Him. But in my heart, I had been here before with other lost objects, like the tooth, and had a sense that it was my lack of faith and resistance to asking for help that was preventing me from finding my keys, not my circumstances. On my way back to speak to my landlady, when I was finally alone, I stopped on a street corner and prayed this prayer: *God I give up. I know that you would like me to find my keys, that you have compassion for me, and do not want me to go through the hassle of having to go and get another key cut, just because you love me. Can you please help me?*

Immediately, the response that I felt inside my heart was “Look around at where you are right now.” I looked around and I was stood outside of a French primary school. I said to myself “Well, they *can't* be at the school,” so I continued to walk. As I tried to carry on, two things caught my eye: first, there was a very friendly schoolyard monitor looking at me from the playground and she just “popped” to me. She almost seemed to beam, having a radiance and warmth that stood out in her smile in a distinct way. I immediately noticed her presence as significant—but I *still* didn't stop. I could almost feel the defiance in my own spirit. As I walked a little further, I noticed a paper heart on the ground, and it was this that finally made me pause. In that tiny moment, I looked over at the woman in the yard and said, “I lost a set of keys earlier today and have been looking for a couple of hours. I wonder if they might be here.” She smiled in such a warm, friendly, way and then directed me to the front doors of the school like a human arrow. I walked into the office of the school, and before I could even finish my sentence, “Excuse me, I am wondering if...” the receptionist just held up the set of keys as if she'd been expecting me. This experience taught me the value of slowing down and asking for help. It also showed me to pay attention to things that pop out, and reaffirmed earlier lessons about faith.

The Case of the “Lucky” Number

My favourite number is 365. For years I had an inside joke about it with a friend, which referred to a scene in the film *The Notebook* where the two characters Noah and Allie are reunited in a passionate scene in the pouring rain and shouting to each other on the dock. In the movie, Allie finds out that Noah had written her 365 letters (one for every day of the year) she had not received. I joked with my friend that I was going to have *that* kind of love. I often find symbolic gestures and rituals motivating, and when I lived in the UK, there was a 5km race being held in London, on the birthdate of someone I was in love with at that time. In fact, I'd kind of moved across the ocean *because* I was in love with him. It was only a fun-run, but at that time, it felt like a special way to mark some important milestones in my life, and I decided to participate in the race, not for a cause, but symbolically, for Love. In the process of preparing, I

did things like create a running playlist that had various inspiring songs from the previous few years. I planned my train trip. I trained by the sea. You can imagine my surprise when I got my bib in the mail, a few weeks before the race, and it was #365.

This experience of synchronicity affirmed my emotional and faith journey and provided tangible motivation, running and training for a 5km race. I remember it rained the whole day of the race, and my train was late, causing me to miss the start, but I ran it anyway.

The Case of the Gas Meter

I rented a flat above an Italian restaurant in Broadstairs, UK, which had the type of gas meter that required a card to be loaded with money to activate the heat and hot water. So, you would go to a local shop, load the card with money and then insert the card into the meter in the basement. Even on a teacher's salary, I was struggling financially at that time and often delayed that process. Sometimes it had 5 pounds emergency credit on it as a bit of grace, but one day I ran out of gas, *and* I couldn't find the card anywhere in my apartment. I also had no idea how to replace the card. It was also a statutory bank holiday, and hard to get a hold of anyone who might help. I had absolutely no clue where it was. Worried that I wouldn't be able to have a hot bath or use the stove to cook my food, I was feeling quite disheartened and foolish.

Feeling unsure of what to do, I turned to my faith. While I don't use them anymore, at the time, I had a deck of angel cards. I remember saying a simple prayer first: asking that whatever card I pulled might give me a clue as to the whereabouts of my gas card. And so, I drew one: the Angel of Marriage. When I saw this, the first thing that came into my mind was my grandmother's wedding ring. I allowed myself to free associate and saw a vision of the ring box in my imagination. Deciding I had nothing to lose, I went into my bedroom, saw the ring box on the fireplace mantle, and followed my gaze downwards in a straight line directly below it, where there was a pile of magazines. Sure enough, the card was found in between these, and I was able to use the temporary credit until the shops re-opened the next day, and I could reload the card. Grace, indeed.

The Case of the Love Song and the Open Window

On an Easter break from teaching, I once took a trip to the Basque region in Southern France at the foothills of the Pyrenees. While my plans to begin walking the camino to Santiago had been delayed, I still decided to spend one week in St. Jean Pied de Port, on my own, for a holiday. While walking along the main road in town, I heard a beautiful song playing in an open window that mesmerized me: I stopped in the middle of the street and listened for quite some time. All day, this experience stayed with me. Later, I went to a pub garden in a different part of town to write in my journal. Several hours had passed, but I couldn't get the song out of my mind, so I wrote: *I wish I knew the title of that song, and what it was about.* Just as I'd finished writing that sentence in my notebook, an older gentleman came up to me, sat at my picnic table, and said: "A few hours ago I saw you standing on the road, listening to a beautiful song, and I could sense you were moved by it. I wanted to tell you about it. It's Syd Barrett's 'Love Song'." We had a wonderful conversation, and I had a feeling that the song would be an important one in my life for years to come. I was extremely heartened by the thought that answers to our questions can come to us in serendipitous ways.

The Case of the Cardinal and Blue Jay

Recently I had an important decision to make, which had two components to it, so I asked God for a sign in the form of a cardinal and a blue jay. A couple of days later I attended an art workshop, and in response to a prompt, quite naturally found myself drawing a cardinal and a blue jay in a very specific formation with the one bird sitting on a branch, looking down at the other, on a lower branch of a tree. That was not particularly unusual because these birds had been on my heart from the prayer, but what was a little stranger, was that later that day I took a walk and saw a store window decal in town that had almost that exact design, with a blue bird, looking down at the red bird in a particular way that strongly resembled the image I had just drawn. I told myself that maybe I had simply seen that image before, that perhaps my brain had clocked it previously in my unconscious, and it just came to light during the workshop.

However, later that day, I logged on to a Zoom call with my father. He had been planning to do an online cooking date with my sister, and I was simply going to pop on to the call briefly to say hello. Much to my surprise, as he answered the call, for no rational reason whatsoever, he had a blue jay ornament hanging from his ear! It was so completely preposterous, that I couldn't explain it. I gasped, but before I was able to explain to him the significance, my stepmother entered the frame carrying a red wooden bird and stood next to him in the exact formation I had drawn, and then seen in the store window. This was incredibly significant to me because it was just so unusual and specific. I felt my prayer had been answered, and I was aware that I was going to be supported in both situations for which I had requested guidance.

The Case of “Groundhog Day”

During one of the early days of the pandemic I was praying and speaking to God, and I had the funny little thought, “Lord, I know you could do anything—you could probably even make a groundhog appear right now.” Then, almost immediately, I dismissed the idea as foolish, and perhaps even *testing* God, and put it out of my mind. After all, I had never seen a groundhog before in my life, except for on the news or in movies. Even more honestly, I doubted that God could communicate with me so specifically. The next morning as I had my tea on the balcony, there it was: the first groundhog I had ever seen in my 40 years of life, walking through the back lot of my apartment building.

This moment brought me comfort, and a sense of divine playfulness. It also felt like God was showing off a bit and reminding me not to doubt. Also, to trust myself; that perhaps even seemingly silly thoughts or requests might be important.

The Case of the Missing Library Book

This next story took place during my Graduate Studies as I was preparing for my first comprehensive exam. I decided I needed to find a copy of the book *Peripheral Visions* (1994) by Mary Catherine Bateson. I had come across it in some of the articles I was reading and felt it would be helpful in my literature review. I inquired about the book with our librarian. She

mentioned that the book was not available, and that it had been lost for quite some time. I remember feeling disappointed but figured I would try to find a way to order it online or from a different library.

Imagine my surprise, when only days later I got an email from our librarian, who wrote to say that someone had just dropped off a bag of books to the Education Library for donation, and inside was a copy of *Peripheral Visions*! She seemed just as astounded as I was. What was remarkable about this to me, is that this book did not appear to be a staple in our library, like some of the other books we frequently cite, for example Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* or even some of Maxine Greene's texts, for which there is considerable demand. The donated book also had no signs or markings on it that indicated it was a library book previously, though the timing of the return would have still been noteworthy. The librarian simply prepared it, added it into the system for circulation, and I had it within a few days. This encounter reaffirmed my belief that the right resources tend to present themselves at the right time, and that this work was something meaningful, important, and worth continuing. I also felt the story was encouraging and hopeful for my colleagues.

The Case of the Birthday Dream

In my twenties, I had a daily practice of writing three pages of stream of consciousness writing on paper in longhand every morning, before doing anything else. This exercise was meant to offer a place where you could park your creative thoughts, your feelings, your worries, and anything else that was on your mind at the start of the day and had been inspired by a practice called *morning pages* offered by Julia Cameron in the book *The Artist's Way* (1992). Part of this, was the idea that one was not really meant to go back and re-read their morning pages. But I have always been a little bit of a rebel in that regard. I found myself feeling rather reflective one birthday, so I began to look through some old journals and writings, some of which included my morning pages. Keeping in mind, that because this was stream of conscious writing, it was often just words and phrases hastily scribbled down on the page. That day, I

decided to go back to my birthday, March 15th, and see what I had written the year previous. When I did, I found that one year before, to the date, I had scribbled the remnants of a dream: ... *it's about carrying a mattress, talking with my friend Ron, and going to a Snow Patrol concert.* What struck me as incredible, and gave me the goosebumps, was that this very day, one year later, I had just had a new bed delivered, my friend “Ron” had just been in touch from the Middle East, and I was going to a Snow Patrol concert *that* night to celebrate my birthday. For me, this experience made me believe that there is something we can access in the dreamworld that is able to embody time and space in ways we don't yet comprehend. No part of me presumed or accepted that this was just a coincidence. It was too specific. I also did not typically write down my dreams, so this find was important. This occurrence deepened my faith and curiosity and made me more attentive to future dreams.

The Case of the Forgotten Wallet

I needed some groceries for an event that I was hosting but had very little money. Still, I wanted to try to make it special for my guests, so I budgeted \$25 and trusted that God was going to provide. In fact, in my prayer life, I had heard the message that I would soon receive *double blessings*. So, in faith I went to my local Metro, and carefully began to select items according to my budget. As anyone who has ever tried to entertain or feed themselves on a budget can attest, you must be much more thoughtful and deliberate in your shopping, so I spent maybe 45 minutes to an hour trying to pick things that I might be able to stretch. Anyway, as I got ready to line up to pay, I realized I had forgotten my wallet at home, and that it was not in my backpack. I was feeling *incredibly* frustrated but made a conscious choice to respond in a spirit of faith and trust God. Instead of angrily leaving my basket, as one might be tempted to do in this situation, I chose to take the time to gently return each product to the shelf where I had found it, so as not to be a burden on the staff. But as I was returning the last items, a dear friend of mine came riding into the store on his mobility scooter near the deli counter. We hadn't run into each other in a while, but I was always delighted to see him. I told him what had just happened, and before

I could even finish, he took a crisp \$50 bill out of his wallet and insisted I take it as a gift. Double for my trouble, as God had said. He went on to explain that he had no personal reason to be in the store but had felt strongly prompted by spirit to come inside.

The Case of the Old Coach House

The friend from the above story passed away in March 2021. A few weeks before he died, I ran into him on my street, again riding his scooter. I told him how nice it was to see him, that I'd been thinking of him. He shared that the week before, he had felt his time on earth was nearly up. He'd had some health problems over the years, but had always seemed so full of life, even in his early seventies. I told him that he had always been like an angel to me and asked if there was anything I could do for him. He said no but told me he would pray for me. He also said, "I love you," which was a first for us. I had a sense that it was the last time I would see him, given the feeling of our conversation, and the fact that within two minutes of seeing him, I ran into two other important people in my life on the street. One, right after another, in such an odd sequence that made the moment stand out to me even more. With him included, three of my favourite people in the world, in fact.

During the previous fall, he and I had met several times in the park to talk about life, and God. The stories I share in this chapter from my own life, were among his favourites. We'd known each other for about 5 years, having met in a creative writing group. He had supported this research greatly, and wanted to participate in my study, but decided to share with me more informally, as a friend. We spent those visits eating chicken salad sandwiches from a nearby food truck, admiring the leaves, laughing, sharing stories about our spirituality, having tea and coffee, talking about the most meaningful moments in our lives, rain, or shine. I remember one time, near Halloween we met our friend, a puppeteer, who brought us Tim Hortons, and a bag of Cheetos that were shaped in the form of bones. We laughed as we each arranged our own model skeleton on our napkins.

Anyway, a few weeks after our run-in on the street, I was sitting in Confederation Park and a man came up behind me in a very unusual way to read a sign that was just behind me. This caught my attention, and then I noticed that he had turned around and knelt, facing City Hall, in prayer. My senses became extra heightened; I heard the clinking of the chain on the flagpole beside me in such a distinct way that I remember noting: *This is a significant moment.* I can remember watching this man walk around the fountain and thinking *I wonder if I've just seen an angel?* This got me thinking that I was due for a good talk with God, so I physically tapped the empty bench seat next to me and said, "Take a seat," imagining I was inviting Jesus to sit next to me. It was in that moment, that my friend the puppeteer texted to tell me that our friend had passed away. I was not at all surprised.

That night I wondered if he would send me a sign. He had mentioned wanting to, that previous fall. Sure enough, that evening I had two remarkable dreams. In the first, I saw a scene of Shoal Tower, the Martello tower that was directly in my vision when I had heard the news of his passing; only this time, it was illuminated at night with such sparkle and magic, shimmering its reflection on the lake. It was bright, alive, as if animated or filtered through a heavenly lens. Just the kind of beautiful thing my friend would have wanted me to experience. The second dream was even more incredible; he took me on a tour of his apartment. I had always wanted to see the inside of his old stone coach house, and while it was just tucked around the corner from me, I had never been over, or mentioned my wish to him; but in the dream, it's as if he knew. Here I was, exploring his desk, his kitchen, his writing notebook. I noted word magnets carefully placed near the doorway that said *priest* and *poet* like a signature for this gift—he had at times, been both. I was also taken to a garden around the side of the house, that I did not know existed. Anyway, as fortune would have it, in the months that followed, I had the opportunity to go both inside, and around his home in real-life before the new tenant arrived—to discover, of course, that the vision had been stunningly accurate.

I was also struck by some other synchronicities related to his death. For example, a friend of mine had told me about a vision she'd had that previous fall, in the days when he and I were still enjoying each other's company in the park. During the vision, she saw a pair of hands, outside of my house, holding a paper heart with the day March 6th written on it. I later found out that this was indeed the night he died. What nobody else could know, was that evening (unaware of his passing at that time), I had also felt a sudden urgency to baptize myself. I had been baptized as an infant in the hospital when I'd had some medical complications, but had never made that active choice as an adult. While I thought of waiting for warmer weather to do this by a river or asking an ordained minister and friend after COVID-19, I felt a strong urge in my spirit to do it alone in a private ceremony that evening. So, I baptized myself in my bathroom. I set up a water jug, listened to the recorded hymn "Amazing Grace" played on the bag pipes, and reaffirmed my commitment to my faith as I gently poured water over my forehead in the sink. While I had no intention of sharing this intimate, sacred moment with anyone else, the fact that this all happened the night my friend passed, makes me feel quite certain he had a hand in it, and more comfortable including it here.

Mystery or Memoir?

There have been many others. Answered prayers for healing of injured shoulders and ankles, with instant results. There was a time I didn't have the funding to attend a writing residency at The Banff Centre, when the exact amount I needed to travel was provided for by unexpected tax returns. Times I was given very specific financial guidance in response to prayer that completely turned my situation around and helped pay off considerable debt from my studies and travels. Or praying fervently for my mom as a little girl, who the next day told me she was joining Alcoholics Anonymous—which, believe me when I tell you, was a miracle. Prophetic dreams about my husband, and children/stepchildren-to-be. Examples of times when I fasted with a specific intention and was given three dreams with information on the matter. Other fun synchronicities with the number 365. Or, at the height of the pandemic, when many of

us were experiencing loneliness, how an old friend of mine by the sea got back in touch and wrote to tell me that I had come to hold him in the middle of the night: *It was so real, Barb. You were here.* What this friend did not know at the time, was that for years, I had secretly wished to share that experience with him in real life too.

There were multiple occasions I felt too unwell to train for my first 5km race, and had a robin run ahead of me, and stop at every corner as encouraging company. Or a boyfriend I had a 5-year relationship with, which began when we instantly and mutually recognized each other from ‘a different time’ with such convincing familiarity, at first sight. I think of the time my Deaf grandmother who was in and out of consciousness (and at this point, out) heard what I said on her deathbed, and suddenly opened her eyes, to respond with an “I love you too.” Signs, guideposts, and lessons have also abounded in the form of roses and broken pottery, and in cloud shapes. And from saints.

A few years ago, I had one while in the bath, as I was asking God to help me with some intense emotions. I had asked out loud, in tears: “How will I *ever* be able to forgive?” Immediately I heard a crash in my kitchen. I jumped out of the bath, and wrapped a towel around me, to discover that a magnet had fallen off my fridge and broken in half; the magnet containing the scripture: “Be still and know that I am God” (*New Living Translation*, Psalm 46: 10). It had been holding a prayer card for Divine Mercy, which had also fallen to the floor. That evening, I had a profound visitation in a dream on the theme of mercy in which Jesus manifested himself to me—the only time I have ever seen Jesus in a dream). In the dream, I had been bitterly attending to my mother’s needs on a hospital bed, when her body slowly turned into his. The sense of overwhelming awe I experienced in the dream was blinding, causing me to literally drop to my knees in the dream and shout, “I see you, Lord!” A short time later, maybe only a few days, I had started to lose some of this lesson, and was walking on a street in my neighbourhood. I asked God for some confirmation that peace and mercy were indeed the way: I

looked down and found myself stepping on a matching copy of that same Divine Mercy prayer card, right underneath my boot.

Are these mysteries? Perhaps. But even more so, this is *my life*. These are my stories and my memories. These are the most intimate, important, sacred, and impactful moments of my life. How could anyone ever tell me that they don't have value in my learning? Do I have to fully solve the mystery to be deeply impacted by it? Transformed by it? While I recognize that this growth is on-going and new information could come to light, these moments have guided my decisions, allowed me to heal relationships, helped me choose and follow school and career paths, find lost objects, manage challenging emotions, led me in and out of romances and friendships, make better decisions for my health and wellness, and allowed me to keep the faith in circumstances where it was far more rational to give up. They have also taught me about grace and mercy. And healing.

Oral Storytelling & A Note on Methodology

It is interesting to note that when I began to record the stories in this chapter, I did just that: record them. I used the dictate function on Microsoft Word (Version 2201) and told these stories orally as a first step. I then went back and polished them up later. The process of speaking them aloud came far more naturally to me than typing them out, which felt restrictive, albeit a valuable exercise too. While in this context, I was speaking the stories aloud to *myself*, many of these stories have been retold several times amongst receptive friends.

The value of storytelling has long been recognized in wisdom traditions around the world; for example, the use of parables in Christianity, and increasingly so in teaching and learning spaces. In more traditional professional settings, Marques et. al (2014) offer that “Spirituality and spiritual concepts can involve emotional and other non-cognitive experiences which cannot be taught using traditional teaching approaches such as reading and lecture” (p. 210) and suggest that storytelling has had a revival in higher education contexts and workplace learning. They suggest that stories are often intuitive, participative, and facilitate holistic

thinking; they can be nourishing, multi-layered, and often include an element of surprise (p. 207).

Of course, the oral element of storytelling was also a key part of my research methodology. The 10 narratives in Chapter 5 were all audio recorded, with participants' stories generated from the raw interview transcripts (e.g., their own words, their ideas). The value of this process was long instilled in me; specifically, the use of a prompt or theme to spark improvised dialogue or monologue, which can then be used to generate scripted or written material, that may be later revised by the participant-creators, honouring their voices. In my case, this creative approach was deeply influenced by my work in dramatic arts. I worked at theatre companies and in inclusive community arts education for most of my career, which has in turn, impacted my approach to creative writing, poetry, and indeed narrative research. It proved a very rich method for a study on learning through spiritual encounters, as people were given space and time to reflect on their experiences in depth.

There is also significant consideration to be made here related to storytelling and legacy. For example, in McColl's (2021) *Cinq à Sept* talk titled "The Ten Stories: Intergenerational Conversations" held at Queen's University's Faculty of Health Sciences, she discussed her research involving the repeated stories of the aging. She described how she interviewed middle-aged adult children of aging parents, to find out what stories were most commonly repeated. Interestingly, she found that these stories were frequently re-told not as a result of forgetfulness or dementia, but because of the lessons, values, and meanings they contained. She also reiterated that rather than a preoccupation with factual details, the act of storytelling allows us to help shape our narrative identities. She and her colleagues discovered that aging people tend to share a group of about ten stories from their lives repeatedly, typically with easily discernible themes such as the importance of family, hard work, value of education, and speaking up in the face of injustice. Out of her work, she also identified some tips for listening to the stories; she recommended focusing on ten, writing them down, noticing the teller's role in the story, being

attentive to feelings, sensations, tensions, and discomforts. She suggested paying attention to emotional intensity regardless of whether positive or negative feelings were being shared. She also noted that these stories are told in the context of a *relationship*, curated for a particular audience—that there is a sender and receiver. While my research did not explicitly focus on the aging, though certainly contained many examples related to end of life or long-term care settings, the connections she makes to the storyteller’s desire to be validated, seen, heard, and remembered still seems relevant. It is also interesting to note her comments about the “magic” of the number ten. Coincidentally this volume contains ten participant narratives, each sharing a story from their spiritual lives.

Spiritual Autobiography & Memoir

Wakefield (1990) suggests that working with spiritual autobiography may be a worthy exercise both for people who identify as being spiritual or religious, and also for those do not, but who may wish to seek these dimensions. He talks about how spiritual memoir might even include other aspects of one’s life, for example the professional, psychological, and educational. He describes that starting from the “physical”, i.e., beginning with the *circumstances* in one’s life and then considering the deeper spiritual components may be one plausible means for exploration.

In his book, *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Memoir*, he defines spirituality as the “breath of life”—that which animates us, and reminds us of the deeply rooted historical aspects of this, from the cave to the modern age. Quite amusingly he quotes Bercovitch, highlighting a period in the seventeenth century among the Puritans of New England, which produced “countless testimonies, declarations, relations, even broadside manifestoes...” (p. 3).

He describes its powerful literary history as well, whether in texts such as *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* of the fourth century, or in the literature of T.S. Elliot, who according to his biography, he tells us, was heavily involved with attempts to weave his faith into his works and saw his life as a religious *quest*. He also highlights the theme of spiritual quest in

works of more modern twentieth century novelists such as Mary Gordon, or poet Alan Ginsberg, despite a period of resistance to spiritual writings immediately following the second world war. The fifties and sixties, he describes as a period of religious revival, and the return of interest in the spiritual and sacred. I would suggest we may have a similar renaissance in mainstream literature occurring right now.

He provides an example of Carl Scovel, a minister who offered a course titled *Religious Autobiography* presented at King's Chapel in Boston. Scovel described feeling weary of how often, stories of spiritual journey began to feel repetitive, e.g., people leaving the church, wandering around, finding something else that worked for them. While he recognized that these stories had truth, he had the sense that people were not revealing their deeper experiences: "What I wanted to know was what they thought they shouldn't say. I thought to myself, I bet that's where the interesting stuff is" (p. 6). Wakefield goes onto describe some of the practical activities and exercises attempted by Scovel and Bob Doss (minister of the First Unitarian Church in Wilmington, Delaware). He explains how Doss called together a pilot group of people who were encouraged to "get real" about their spirituality, personal development, and growth. This group borrowed from several theological writings. Scovel and Doss exchanged various ideas; here, Wakefield quotes Doss' account:

I had people draw a tree of their lives: roots, trunk, dead leaves, branches, springs that nourish it. I also began to have people bring in music that was meaningful to them. I have people bring in some object that is important to them and share it with the group, like a family album, a seashell, a favourite piece of jewellery. One woman brought in her pet raccoon. (p. 7)

From this chapter, you can see why it was necessary that I choose a research methodology that made space for my own experiences with the phenomenon, too. To have pretended to be neutral would have only been adding to a collective hallucination. While an in-depth history of spiritual autobiography is not the primary focus of this manuscript, the key

takeaways here seem to be in recognizing that this form of writing has a place in the discussion, in a variety of historical and social contexts, and that people's stories of spiritual encounter can be seen as inherently valuable. We have also identified that context and relationship matter. While these stories are always curated to a degree, the recognition that people seem to speak much more freely about their spiritual encounters when they feel safe to do so, will be a reoccurring theme in this work. This can occur through creative prompts and activities, many of which I have used in my work as a teacher, but it also has much to do with the *receptivity* of the listener.

Before I introduce you to the results from the study, including the questionnaire responses and narratives, it is important to take a closer look at how both the survey items on the questionnaire and the interview questions were developed. In the next chapter, you will learn about some possible sites of spiritual encounter previously explored in the academic and related literature. This body of work helped provide me with a valuable map, which in turn allowed me to better address the research questions and encourage meaningful dialogue on this subject.

Chapter 3: Sites of Spiritual Encounters

So far, we have defined terms, explored the conceptual framework of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness, and I have introduced you to some examples from my own life to emphasize why spiritual autobiography and memoir are a worthy way in. In this chapter we're going to focus on some of the key research that has already been done in this field related to sites of spiritual encounters. *Where* and *how* are people experiencing this phenomenon, and *why* is it something educators and social workers are looking at? My intent is that this chapter will give you a bird's eye view of some of the key areas people report learning in this domain, and that this will better equip you for reading the narratives in Chapter 6.

Illumination as Metaphor

Just as we can speak of sparks in romance, or indeed as Upitis (2003) did, in learning, spiritual experiences can also spark deeper understandings or awakenings. In a review of the scholarly literature that exists on the subject, metaphors of illumination are commonly associated with this topic. Jung's writings referred boldly to the numinous—a hint of the divine spark within—and conversations around spirituality have often involved metaphors of light and shadow. The academic literature reflects this, from Masters' level theses such as Olvet's (2009) on 'epiphany' which used terms like "Chiaroscuro," referring to the treatment of light, shadow, and spectra, to notions of 'shimmering' moments, offered in the introduction (Tisdell, 2003).

As I was reading through the literature in fields of education, social work, and psychology, I found it helpful, or dare I say even beautiful, or pleasurable, to use metaphors of light to group possible sites of spiritual encounters in the lives of adults; the inner and outer spaces which seem to be associated with this type of learning. It seems appropriate to note that this is not an exhaustive list, and as with light, these themes will often blend and flicker.

Candlelight: Spiritual Encounters Involving Pleasure, Beauty, Silence, Meditation, and Retreat

Pleasure (including sexuality). In an article on leveraging pleasure and learning, Dougherty (2013) presented surprise as one of six key sources of pleasure in adult learning. The others included the senses, humour, belonging to a group, meeting an achievable challenge, and owning something of value. Interestingly she suggested that because we tend to link the word pleasure to sexuality, and again see this good/bad, fearful dichotomy around the body, there is a tendency for educators to feel uncomfortable with it—though she noted that the world of advertising has certainly capitalized on it. This finding is reminiscent of Adler’s (2008) argument that surprise is inherently pleasurable. In keeping with my own curiosity about the topic centred around the suggestion that “most spiritual experiences happen by surprise,” (Tisdell, 2003) this was of great interest to my research, e.g., surprise as a site of spiritual encounter, which will be discussed in greater length at the end of this chapter.

Perhaps not-so-surprisingly, sex is indeed relevant to this discussion of pleasure, also discussed in Tisdell’s research (2003), and in a Master’s thesis offered by a colleague at Queen’s University. Davis (2000) devoted a whole chapter to women educators’ sexuality and spirituality. The study, which revolved around the spiritual experiences of six women secondary school teachers, identified five emergent themes. Of particular interest in my own work, and indeed to this discussion on pleasure, were ideas that emerged on humour related to sex, the pleasure in sharing intimate secrets with other women, the surprises involved in being a sexual being, and other meaningful spiritual experiences reported by participants. In addition to spirituality and sexuality, four other themes were presented, including those which had to do with recreation, re-creative ritual, physical activity, new learning, and personal relationships.

Beauty, Meditation, and Silence. In an article on happiness and education, published in an issue of Queen’s University’s *Education Letter* on the topic of “Spiritual Wandering as Educational Experience,” Noddings (2016) discussed the role of beauty, noting

the tendency to describe ourselves as being *transported* by it. Indeed, Noddings encourages us to consider “the receptivity that invites spiritual experience,” and suggests that silence and meditation may play a role in this (p. 5).

Silence and meditation are mentioned frequently in the literature (Bell & Taylor, 2004; Birnbaum, 2008; Groen, 2018; Tisdell, 2003; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Wood and Tribe (2016) conducted a qualitative study on Quakerism and communal silence, which suggested that silent spaces can help people develop greater awareness, both of one’s own life and of others. Newman’s (2008) article, which explored the effects of meditation on a self-proclaimed rationalist, provided relevant insights on the potential of learning through meditation, despite that his reflection was on secular meditation, which he refers to as a “nonspiritual” practice (p. 284). He listed four key doubts that arose during his encounter with meditation that hint at sites of learning. One of the most interesting included “absurd” and “moral” concerns in which he highlighted the ethical challenges in greeting thoughts that arise unbidden with neutrality, acceptance, or silence.

Silence was also discussed in an article on creative and spiritual education in human development by Portuguese researchers Azevedo and da Costa (2009), who provided a discussion of Silence Education as a pathway to creativity and spiritual experience. Here, silence was seen as a place to listen to our own inner world, words of others, and bring attentiveness to the word of God (p. 1332).

Retreat. Retreat is a common theme in the spiritual literature and has also been recognized as one of the most fruitful sites for spiritual surprise in workplace learning. People tend to value the opportunity to get away and do something that takes them outside of their ordinary routine. Naturally, this process lends itself well to heightened perceptions, as we understand from the research on surprise that people experience heightened awareness in new surroundings. Retreats may also provide participants to be creative and try new things. For example, Bogdan (2003), Professor Emerita in the Graduate Program in Philosophy of

Education, Department of Theory and Policy Studies at University of Toronto, discussed her experiences with Jungian retreats for women, describing them as a place of healing and transformation through meditation, prayer, painting, dance, movement, poetry, mime, drama, voice, dream, and mask-making (p. 91). More of her writing will be highlighted when discussing music as a site for spiritual encounter.

Groen (2017, 2018) provides reflective autobiographical accounts of two different kinds of retreat experiences, involving extended silent meditation, such as a 9-day Vipassana retreat, and an 8-day Jesuit retreat on eco-spirituality. The latter included some of the challenges encountered with what is typically referred to as the “monkey mind” (e.g., the surprising thoughts that arise during meditation).

Lamplight: Spiritual Encounters Involving Guides, Adult/Higher Education, and Soulful Spaces

A Guide. The theme of a guide comes up frequently in the literature on learning, and is valuable to our discussion. Adler (2008) advocated for a guide or teacher to maximize the effects of learning from surprise, lest it be left to luck (p. 168). Themes of *relationship* are emphasized across the literature and are relevant to Wickett’s (2000) work on “The Learning Covenant”, which explored the notion of teaching that includes a *spirited epistemology*—a term used by Vella (2002) in her work on honouring the adult learner. She explains that adult educators who facilitate learning often work in relationships that have the potential to encourage spiritual growth and development. She provides a summary of professor, writer, and theologian Henri Nouwen’s ideas, and the connections to hospitality, which are relevant for this study.

In considering the usefulness of a guide to help navigate spiritual surprises, Lauzon (2001) implied an ethical responsibility here too, suggesting that we need to be “companions through the ecstasy and grief that may arise” as adult learners experience spiritual awakenings (p. 5). The idea of teacher as midwife, involved in the ‘birthing’ of new ideas (Vogel 2000, Giordano 2010), is also an embodied image repeated in the literature.

Higher Education. Higher Education classrooms are among some of the most fruitful places for spiritual growth according to studies conducted by Reymann et al. (2005), and Lau et al. (2014). These sites are seen as rich with possibilities for awakening and represent the first-time leaving home for many; prime locations for people to take risks, encounter new people, schools of thought, and form new identities. In essence, the undergraduate experience is full of surprise. Stoppa's (2017) narrative study on spiritual identity formation at university concurs with this, suggesting that university *intensifies* the exploration of spirituality over time.

Specialized courses may offer similar opportunity. A study by Groen and Hyland-Russell (2010) explored the experiences of non-traditional learners enrolled in entry level humanities courses for low-income adult learners. Groen and Hyland-Russell described the program as being transformative due to its reflexive nature, dialogic process, and ultimately because of the openness and insight this type of learning fosters. They suggested that programs like this may lead to increased engagement and more active citizenship, though acknowledge that institutional barriers and stereotypes around what a "non-traditional" learner looks like need to be addressed alongside the economic aspects. They also recognized that students' past educational experiences, as well as their self-concepts as learners play a key role (pp. 78-79).

Traditionally, the type of learning which has been called *transformative* is associated with Mezirow's theories (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), but this is evolving in the field. Lawrence and Dirkx (2010) acknowledge transformative learning as a form of imaginative engagement which is inherently spiritual, while Newman (2012) observes that it is, essentially, just "good learning" (p. 37). Generally, Mezirow's theories have been critiqued for positioning the unit of analysis as individual, excluding some key social and spiritual considerations (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Indeed, Abalos' (1998) ideas on claiming a sacred face were used as an alternative by Tisdell and Tolliver in their study involving 31 multicultural adult educators (22 women, 9 men) which explored how spirituality informs teaching in the field of cultural emancipation, e.g., educators working in racist, feminist, disability contexts, etc. In this case, Abalos' ideas were

seen as a better fit for addressing the cultural nuances and spiral nature of spiritual learning. Out of this work emerged a list of seven possible practices for a spiritually grounded and culturally relevant pedagogy which make room for surprises and awakenings (Tisdell, 2003, p. 212).

Similarly, in her work on practical wisdom, Basset (2011) made ten recommendations to foster and encourage wisdom in adult education. The first suggestion on her list also involved an element of surprise, proposing the use of a perplexing problem or confounding quandary—a theme also discussed in the cognitive literature on surprise. Indeed, moments of complexity are worthy of consideration, and spiritual encounters can emerge from life’s problems: “spirituality can be tied intricately to mental health challenge, boredom, downturns, lost dreams, and transitions” (English & Cameron, 2016, p. 25).

Soulful Spaces in the Workplace. There has been increasing conversation around spirituality in secular workplaces that hints at spiritual learning. Groen’s (2004a) study on this theme suggested that in creating “soulful spaces” at work none of the facilitators “deliberately set out to create these moments and nor could they anticipate when these moments would happen” (p. 20). In another article, Groen (2004b) described her research involving five adult educators incorporating spirituality into their workplaces. At times, participants reported slipping into “spiritual moments” or having “break-throughs” and while factors such as a sense of community or seeing work as a vocation were seen as contributing factors, all participants found they could not predict when these moments would occur, though they “intuitively” felt the difference (p. 86). Groen (2010) also presents a more explicit example, reflecting on her own experience teaching a graduate level course on spirituality at a Faculty of Education, in which she discusses issues such as instructor authenticity and reflexive practice, offering an “insider view” (p. 339).

Farah and McColl (2008) took an in depth look at the use of prayer as a modality in occupational therapy. They recognized that prayer may take many forms, for example spoken,

sung, silent, communal or solo, and acknowledged that spiritual care was indeed a founding value of their field. From their own exploration of the literature in medical and allied health journals, they found that prayer may have many advantages, for example it may fill a need for a client, allow for greater authenticity and a deepening of the therapeutic relationship, expanding the options for a client, and play a role in health and healing. They also identified some of the disadvantages, such as the possibility of prayer to evoke a negative reaction which could jeopardize the therapeutic relationship, a lack of training, or concerns from the employer, and made a series of recommendations for consideration of its appropriate use in practice.

Fire: Spiritual Encounters Involving Birth and Death, Religion and Ritual, the Arts, & Storytelling, Language, and Metaphor

Birth and Death. Tisdell (2003) reported birth and death among the most common sites of spiritual experience, often involving a sense of surprise, awakening, or “cosmic jubilation” (p. 76). Participants’ experiences involving the death of a loved one, and indeed their own close calls or near-death experiences, had powerful effects, with phenomena such as clairaudience (hearing a voice) or a visitation from a deceased mother bringing wisdom in a dream. Descriptive words such as “mystery,” “awe,” and “wonder” were often included in these accounts. This has certainly echoed in my own study. She also offered the example of one participant who considered the conception and birth of her child an “unexpected gift,” since she was over 40, and had not used birth control in several years of marriage (p. 76). In *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (2013), Battiste also notes the capacity for reciprocity in that parent-child relationship when she writes in her introduction, “My spiritual story began on the other side when I chose my parents, or maybe they chose me, or maybe together we chose each other” (p. 19).

Religion and Ritual. In an article examining social justice and spirituality in the workplace, English and Cameron (2016) acknowledged that there has been a tendency to

remove religion from conversations of spirituality in adult education but notes that when it comes to social change and action “ironically, nothing could be closer to our field” (p. 20). People’s religious beliefs are deeply intertwined with their culture and are often influential to their spiritual beliefs, even if they have moved away from them. As such, it is crucial that we do not remove it from the discussion. Vogel (2000) also emphasized the need to not overlook religion’s influence and opportunity for awakening. While she acknowledged that some people have concerns about religious institutions due to difficult histories and systemic violence, she advocated that these abuses be called out and addressed directly, rather than wholly dismissing religious experience.

Tisdell’s (2000) research involved 16 women adult educators teaching for social change, who were informed by religious traditions and rituals that they were re-negotiating as adults. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and written documents created by participants, analyzed throughout the study, and coded and recoded using constant comparative method. Five themes emerged in the study including: (a) spiral processes of “re-membering”; (b) life force, interconnectedness and wholeness; (c) perceptions of higher power that facilitate healing; (d) development of authentic identity; and (e) a new way of life needing inner and outer (social) action. Participants described moments of spiritual experience including blessings, synchronicity, a sense of a ‘life force’ or higher power, love, cultural connectedness, healings, meditation, a sense of connection to wilderness, etc. Many described how their spiritual practice allowed them to make better decisions, experience a more authentic sense of self, keep ego in check, promote calmness, and encouraged listening with “heart” (p. 326). The educators also discussed how their spirituality had shaped their overall sense of morality and justice, and motivation to work for personal and social change.

Tisdell (2010) suggested that many who define themselves as spiritual-but-not-religious do indeed still draw from a multitude of traditions “from mindfulness meditation practices (that originated in Buddhism), to Yoga, to various meditation practices that might have their roots in

Christianity, Sufism, or other contemporary spiritual movements that were once connected to more formal religions (p. 93).

The Arts. The arts have long been acknowledged as sites for awakenings and transformations as advocated by Greene's body of work and that of countless others, including Wuthnow (2001) in *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*. More recent research in adult education has revolved around writing, including "I Know Down to my Ribs," a qualitative study which examined embodied writing practices (Tobin and Tisdell, 2015). Strong contributions around poetics and arts-based methodologies (Leggo, 2018), and work discussing stories as gifts (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011) are also relevant to the themes in this study. There are also practices such as "close reading" that make room for surprise and deeper meaning (Gallop, 2000).

The literature on music and musical improvisation has a great deal to offer our discussion too. In an article on meditation and music, Sussman and Kossak (2011) described meditation and music as "doorways of self-reflection and provide opportunities for aspects of self-realization that may never been found through the language of concepts and ideas, nor through the workings of the outer world" (p. 55). They introduced research demonstrating that musical activity makes changes in the brain related to time sense, body image, enhanced imagery, and the release of beta endorphins (p. 60). They cited a dissertation by Burrows (2004) proposing that improvisational musicians can experience "achievement of a higher consciousness" or "state of ecstatic being in the moment which transcends the person's everyday experience of the world" (p. 140). They also offered a fitting quote from an improvisational musician, that speaks to the paradox of surprise; "I prepare by not preparing, and that takes a lot of preparation" (p. 62).

In *This Too is Music* (2019), Uptis offers that she has never met anyone who disliked music:

While we may have strong individual preferences for the styles of music we enjoy most, we have all been deeply moved by listening to music or by making music in some way. I also believe that those people who enjoy music the most have somehow learned to *make* music, whether by improvising, composing, performing, singing, or playing an instrument in private or by listening attentively to music, savoring every sound they hear. How, then, can we give teachers and children this kind of musical power? We have one strong factor working for us in taking on the task of helping people become better musicians: all of us are already musicians. (p. 9)

Likewise, in Bogdan's (2003) article on musical spirituality and aesthetics, she acknowledged the interdependence of spirit and body in her own autobiographical account revolving around musical listening experiences. She described this as an involuntary journey and discussed how her use of the term *aesthetic* was, to her, almost indistinguishable from spiritual transformation akin to mystical or religious experience. She describes this process of learning more about her identity as sacred, like an "Aha!" response to a universal truth, citing Greene's (1986) words: "this is just how things are, and I didn't know it" (p. 85).

Metaphor, Symbol, and Language. Closely connected to the artistic is the symbolic, including the use of metaphor. "Metaphors actively forge connections between our inner, personal meanings and the outer contexts in which we live our lives" (Fraser & Highland-Russell, p. 29). Language can touch us in deeply transformative ways, delighting, surprising us, and bringing us to deeper understandings and emotions. The research emphasizes the importance of stories and narrative in explaining spiritual phenomena and experiential learning—it allows us to speak about intangible, personal experiences in ways that help us to connect. In sharing these ideas, other people may also experience inspiration or glean meaning.

Tisdell (2003) wrote extensively about the tendency to slip into the symbolic/metaphoric when describing spiritual experience. Language and spiritual experience are particularly relevant when considering connections to culture, such Indigenous worldviews which, as

Battiste (2010) explained, are deeply linked to language, and its preservation. In an article on adult education, metaphor and spirituality, Hill, and Johnston (2003) commented on the startling use of metaphor and emphasize the need for attentiveness to the ways in which language can be militarized (and I might add, dichotomized). They cited O'Reilly's (1998) observation; that to address oppressive cultural myths, we need "to have that conversation with a pain in our gut," (p. 34) affirming that learners need support when navigating the gaps between their own feelings and beliefs, and those of the dominant culture. They encouraged us to "mind our metaphors and language" (p. 24). This certainly aligns with Giordano's (2010) research on critical moments, which recognized how brief, inadvertent remarks can change lives.

Sunshine: Encounters Involving Nature, Walking, and Pilgrimage

Nature. Tisdell (2011) argued that mostly, we pay no attention to earthly rhythms, but that occasionally something "catches us off guard...and we find ourselves agog contemplating the wonder of nature" (p. 5). Swartz (2011) suggested that ideas of wonder are most often discussed in relation to nature, and indeed we have seen literature emerge on this topic ranging from the importance of land-based education (Cajete 1994, 2015, 2020) to the benefits of forest bathing (Li, 2018).

In Kotera & Rhodes' (2020) discussion of the benefits of the Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku ('森林浴'), i.e., forest bathing, on people experiencing addiction. They summarize various related theories on the benefits of spending time in nature, including Attention Restoration Theory and Stress Reduction Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), as well as the Biophilia Hypothesis, which suggests that humans have an inherent need to connect with nature (Kellert & Wilson, 1995). They also cite evidence from Gross (2013) and Richardson et al. (2016) to suggest that spending time in nature can assist with affect regulation, which they describe as a key factor for wellbeing and mental health.

Themes related to the natural world are deeply interwoven into the writings of Indigenous education scholars such as Battiste (2013) who discusses the importance of affirming Indigenous knowledge, including spiritual and ecological practices such as planting, gathering foods and medicinal plants, as well as the preservation of other traditional activities. In offering recommendations for Reconciliation, Battiste argues for the protection of the land, water, forests, and environment for future generations (p. 171). A renowned botanist, Kimmerer also gained great attention with her works such as *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013, 2020) which emphasize humans' reciprocal relationship with the land, and the wisdom of plants and other living beings through her storytelling. In this work, she advocates that plants and animals are both teachers. She describes, for example, how sweetgrass is both "medicine and relative, its value both material and spiritual. She also notes the disconnect she has seen within academia, as an instructor, specifically in her students' capacity to recognize beneficial relations with the land: "Perhaps the negative examples they see every day—brownfields, factory farms, suburban sprawl—truncated their ability to see me good between humans and the earth. As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of their vision" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 5).

Walking and Pilgrimage. Walking and pilgrimage are also sites of spiritual encounter in the scholarly literature of Im & Jun (2015), who also draw upon unpublished dissertations by Gower (2002), Hames (2008), Katsilometes (2010), and Salwicki (2010). Im and Jun (2015) conducted a study on the embodied spiritual experiences of travellers on the 800 km trail along the Camino de Santiago. In this study, participants expressed enthusiasm at the opportunity to depart from the everyday and embark on adventure. Some of the more surprising discoveries on their journeys involved the body: the pain of cracked feet, disorientation, and the unexpected kindness of a companion offering to carry their backpack or waiting for them to catch up along the trail. One participant said:

When we are 1 km apart due to the difference in steps, he just stands there and waits for me without a word. I follow him with courage. He goes ahead of me and waits, over and over again. It's like he reads my mind. (p. 345)

This example reminds me of Quinn's (2010) suggestion that in being hospitable, we are "called to wait for, and wait upon the other" and perhaps, as Im and Jun contend, "The new experience of awakening restructures the previous experience and makes them different" (p. 336).

Tisdell (2010) described a much shorter, yet equally compelling account of a pilgrimage, in an autoethnographic excerpt about her travels to Ireland on sabbatical (p. 98). She called it "the hardest physical thing I've ever done" and described the surprising lessons she learned along the route. In particular, she found herself reciting old prayers and contemplating the rosary while walking: "I found this surprising at first, but these earliest vestiges of my spiritual development and of what I was taught in Catholic grade school nearly 50 years ago are sometimes very handy in a time like this!" (p. 99). She credited what "bubbled up" as helpful, when ultimately, her pilgrimage was cut short, and she returned home to attend to her dying father (p. 100).

Starlight: Encounters Involving Dreams, Synchronicity, and Serendipity

Dreams. Dreams are among some of the more common ways people report learning through spiritual encounters, through unconscious processes discussed by Fowler (1981, 2000) and Jung (1966). Tisdell (2003) describes how dreams can assist with decision making, direction, and problem-solving. Writers, musicians, and inventors often speak of gaining information (e.g., song lyrics or melodies) in a dream too, such as Paul McCartney, who in multiple public interviews has credited his song "Let it Be" to a dream which involved a visitation from his deceased mother. Other examples purported to have been created through dreams include Google, as described by Larry Page, in a commencement speech he offered at University of Michigan in 2009, and according to the website of the New England Historical society, the sewing machine, by Elias Howe in 1845. Charles Dickens' works are another

example cited in the literature (da Mota Gomes & Nardi, 2021). There are many others. While these above accounts do not necessarily represent a *spiritual* encounter, several people in Tisdell's (2003) study did report receiving surprising artistic inspiration, healing, or visitations from deceased loved ones who provided love, information, or comfort. Dreams and visitations from ancestors are also widely discussed in Indigenous worldviews (Cajete, 1994).

Synchronicity. The term synchronicity was introduced by Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung to describe meaningful coincidences; two experiences not causally connected, which have significance to the person experiencing them through recognition of cultural symbols and archetypes, i.e., Jung's classic golden scarab example. By his last 1951 Eranos lecture, Jung refined the theory to include external events corresponding to the psychic state and recognized this connection could happen outside viewers' direct perception, or even in future occurrences, and therefore, in some scenarios, only be acknowledged retrospectively (Main, 2007, p. 16). While Jung's ideas are often criticized by statisticians, the potential influence of synchronicity in creating meaning schemes remains worthy of consideration. Tisdell (2003) shared the story of one interviewee who, in response to asking for a sign regarding his romantic relationship, experienced several uncanny run-ins with his wife-to-be. For this participant, the experience of synchronicity was directly aligned with his Muslim beliefs, and he labelled it comfortably as a religious experience. While Tisdell acknowledged that most people involved in her studies did not explicitly refer to God when discussing the phenomenon, they did tend to comment on how the experience led to a greater sense of the "Oneness" (p. 75). In fact, she says that many of the people described synchronicities as among their most significant spiritual experiences.

A mixed methods study on coincidences conducted by Griffiths and Tannenbaum (2007) connects in interesting ways to Bandura's (1982) work on chance events. Griffiths and Tannenbaum introduced a definition of a coincidence as "an event which provides evidence for an alternative to a current theory, but not enough evidence for us to accept that alternative" (p. 214). They tested three predictions in a course of five experiments that manipulated changes in

odds and ratio and traced the evolution of thought from coincidence to evidence. In their findings, they discovered that “the same events seem to be involved in both our most grievous errors of reasoning and our greatest causal discoveries” (p. 214). They argued that the utility of attending to coincidences depends on our current state of knowledge. In their discussion section, they offered what felt like a rather bold claim:

If our understanding of the world is accurate, then coincidences can only be false alarms... for anybody with a less than accurate account of how the world works than a modern adult, such as an early scientist or a young child, coincidences are a rich source of information as to how a theory may be revised and should be given great attention.
(p. 215)

While they acknowledged that coincidences may have utility, overall, this comment assumes that there is one fundamental Truth. When adopting a spiritual worldview hospitable of other ways of knowing, this position may be too rigid. I side with Tisdell and Tolliver (2001) in their beliefs that “it is EQUALLY necessary to engage people on the affective or ‘heart’ level” (p. 14). The capitalization is theirs, but I concur.

Serendipity. As Merton and Barber (2004) noted in *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity: A Study in Sociological Semantics and the Sociology of Science*, from its introduction into the English lexicon, the term serendipity has been a curiosity. The word was first coined in a letter by Horace Walpole to Horace Mann in the mid-18th century (p. 2). Words and phrases associated with serendipity throughout its history include, *felicitous, fortuitous, chance discovery, coincidental sagacity, unexpected find, and happy accident*—all suggestive of surprise. The authors discuss that the term has also acquired a variety of newer, vaguer, romantic meanings in its diffusion across time, social context and popular culture and is often used interchangeably with fate. Historically, in scientific contexts, there has been a tendency to emphasize the centrality of the “discoverer” and define serendipity as a personal attribute or quality (a faculty, aptitude, or ability):

The accidental discovery was conceived as complete in and of itself. Among those with humanistic interests, that diverse group... composed of bibliophiles, lexicographers, humorists, antiquarians, historians, and the like, the fact of accidental discovery was accepted as the beginning and the end of an experience. Whether it is due primarily to chance, to sagacity, to a “sixth sense,” or to providence, was not, ultimately, of very great concern to them. “Accidents” and “coincidences” might generate amazement, even awe, but not research into their genesis (p. 58).

According to Princeton University Press’ website, this book has an intriguing history: while the book was written in the 1950s and “occasionally and most tantalizingly cited,” it was intentionally never published due to battles over research and funding.

Lightning: Spiritual Encounters Involving Surprise and Novelty

Surprises vary in magnitude, direction, intensity and domain, and may include the realm of core belief (Tsang, 2013). In embracing surprise as a cognitive emotion, Tsang (2013) reminded us that “if the surprising event takes place in the domain of one’s core beliefs or can be identified as pertaining to ontological and existential issues, the resulting feelings can be intense and lasting” (p. 59). In this section, I will present a definition of surprise as a cognitive emotion, some key related processes in learning through spiritual encounter, and discuss its use in teaching and learning for reflexive and culturally relevant practice.

Surprise as a Cognitive Emotion. “To seek adventure is to position oneself for surprise” (Adler, 2008, p. 151). Surprise is a cognitive emotional response to the astonishing or unexpected. This definition is supported throughout the literature, by Scheffler (1986, 1991) and Adler (2008) who both identified it as a cognitive emotion, but differed slightly in their interpretation of what causes it. Scheffler defined surprise as a cognitive emotion that rests on the supposition that what has occurred defies our expectations. Adler made a distinction and suggested that surprise occurs when an event is contrary to our expectations.

Scheffler (1986) provided a colourful discussion of cognitive emotions, insisting that the separation of the cognitive from the emotional must be challenged, and not split into “two grotesque parts” in education—arguing that all spheres of life involve *both* fact and feeling. He opened Chapter 8 of *Inquiries Philosophical Studies of Language, Science and Learning* with a rather tongue-in-cheek description of the tension traditionally found around this term:

The mention of cognitive emotions may well evoke emotions of perplexity or incredulity. For cognition and emotions, as everyone knows, are hostile worlds apart. Cognition is sober inspection: it is the scientist’s calm apprehension of fact after fact in his relentless pursuit of Truth. Emotion, on the other hand is commotion—an unruly inner turbulence fatal to such pursuit... (p. 347)

In the chapter, he clarified that he was not attempting to be reductive, i.e., to reduce emotions to cognitions or cognitions to emotions, nor was he advocating wishful thinking or suggesting there is a higher truth to be found by following the heart, though we may disagree on those last two points. Instead, he highlighted surprise as a prime example, classifying it as a cognitive emotion, but used the term “specifically cognitive” to describe how surprise “concerns the nature of the subject’s cognitions” and is often of epistemological relevance. He further described it as an emotion of a certain kind, “specifiable by its cognitive reference” (p. 354).

With the publication of *In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions: And Other Essays in the Philosophy of Education*, a revival of 14 of his previous works, Scheffler (1991) reaffirmed this, emphasizing the connections between emotion and reason. He argued that how we respond to surprise is of critical importance. He claimed that openness to surprise involves vulnerability and the risk of epistemic distress. The possible reactions and responses to surprise will be discussed further at the end of this section.

While a more thorough discussion of the characteristics of surprise, and its links to learning in the spiritual domain will be presented shortly, to proceed, it is essential to note that researchers are increasingly accepting of the interplay of emotions and cognition. In an article

on the presence of surprise in social work education, Tsang (2013) offered a thorough exploration of surprise, its key features, associated cognitive and emotional responses, and possible responses to surprise. This paper examined the use of surprise as a pedagogical tool in social work education and focused on the interactive nature and context of surprise in reflexive training and practice. Tsang devoted a large section of the introduction to explaining how surprise is understood as a cognitive emotion. Tsang argued that we have traditionally seen education as a cognitive process rather than an emotional one, but identifies many researchers who have begun to explore the role of emotions in learning and reflexive practice, including Ingleton (1999), Zhu and Thagard (2002); Johnson et al.,(2005); Lazarus (2006); Pfister (2008); and Schutz and DeCuir (2010). Tsang also cited scholars who are becoming increasingly aware of the interplay between cognition and emotion (Reisenzein, 2000; Gendolla and Koller, 2001; Pezzo, 2003; Pezzo & Pezzo, 2007; Lorini & Castelfranchi, 2007; Mueller & Stahlberg, 2007).

In fact, Davidson professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at University of Wisconsin, and founder of the Center for Healthy Minds, described the separation of emotion from cognition as one of the seven deadly sins in the study of emotion (Davidson, 2003, p. 129). Additionally, Storebeck and Clore (2007) outlined various hypotheses and dominant theories related to affect and cognition, and presented an argument aligned with Bower's (1981) perspective that the cognitive can be used to understand emotional phenomenon.

Interpretations of Surprise: Probabilities and Sense-Making. There are two primary camps of research in the field of surprise; one emphasizes the probabilities of the events themselves (i.e., the lower probability, the more surprised we will be) and the sense-making interpretation, which acknowledges the influence of human experience and subjectivity. It is the sense-making perspective that is most relevant to my research, as while a surprising event in someone's life might be dismissed statistically (note the quantitative tendency to downplay or ignore the significance of chance event), a surprise may still be of relevance in the domain of

core belief. I share Tisdell's (2003) opinion that spirituality, is fundamentally about how we make meaning in our lives and that many adults view it as a "major organizing principle that guides their life choices" (p. 31).

Bandura (1982) acknowledged that psychological theories of human development have "not devoted much attention to the fundamental issue of what determines people's life paths" (p. 747). He argued that chance encounters, do in fact, play a prominent role in shaping the course of human lives. These can include symbolic, inter-personal, and seemingly trivial occurrences. From his perspective, these experiences may lead to both positive and negative consequences depending on one's susceptibility to external influence. He suggested that while psychological theories cannot foretell or predict the nature of chance encounters, they do provide some foundation for understanding the potential scope, strength, and nature of the impact (p. 747). He also argued that chance encounters touch all of us, differing only in magnitude of experience: "Some chance encounters touch people only lightly, others leave more lasting effects, and still others branch people into new trajectories of life" (p. 749).

A paper by Foster and Keane (2015) rooted in the field of Computer Science, provided an overview of the metacognitive aspects of surprise. In this article, the authors sided with the sense-making school of thought and argue that surprise seems necessarily linked to explanation. In a series of eight experiments, consistently, they found that some surprises are more surprising because they are harder to explain. Furthermore, they suggested that surprise is dependent on a person's metacognitive sense of the amount of cognitive work required to interpret the surprise, suggesting that surprise is "a graded experience. It's not all or nothing" (p. 75). They described various theories of surprise and its role in human cognition: directing attention to a discrepancy, assigning cognitive resources to resolve the problem, and marking it for future retrieval; emotions assist with this.

Surprise in Adult Learning. Adler (2008) advocated for the role of surprise in teaching and learning. He argued that we experience surprise when something encountered is

contrary to our expectation or current schema. This experience can be informational and motivational (Reisenzein, 2000, Tsang, 2013). Adler believed that while our reactions to surprise can be neutral, indifferent, mixed, or negative, surprise has something inherently pleasurable about it. He suggested that a neutral or even unwelcome experience still has the power to delight, e.g., running into an acquaintance by chance on the other side of the world. He offered the idea that surprise is intrinsically welcome, even when we're wrong about something. We prefer to be correct but can still find pleasure in being surprised. He discusses the example of humour and described how jokes often require an element of surprise (as does magic) and reminds us: "You can enjoy a good practical joke, even if it is on you" (p. 151).

We can also experience surprise when someone *explains or describes* something to us. Adler used the example of a sporting event, describing how this can occur when two friends—one novice, one more experienced and knowledgeable—are watching a football game, i.e., the novice might not understand the achievement or complexity of a play until it is explained to them or understands the context of the season.

As Adler suggested, understanding the ethical and educational value of surprise is important. He argued that the most valuable surprises for educational purposes are those which perplex or puzzle. He also advocated teaching through, and *about* surprise explicitly, and for the usefulness of a guide, a theme echoed in the spiritual literature, but recommended that this be applied sparingly and in a way that does not burden teacher or students. While it is clear that Adler's work favoured rationality and good common sense when he described surprise as "a concept that closely relates to topics of probability, consistency, observation, explanation, and reasoning" (p.172) and speaks rather mockingly of "strange phenomena" (p. 160), he also acknowledged that surprise can help build intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness and an awareness of our own fallibility, particularly around cultural assumption, to which, I might reiterate, spiritual belief is often intricately tied.

According to a study by Filipowiz (2006), feelings of surprise may be associated with an increase in creativity in learning. Participants were presented with surprising content before a cognitive test, with results demonstrating that the positive affect appears to play a key priming role in creative tasks. Interestingly the dose of surprise seems to matter. In a study conducted by Reggev et al. (2018), while novelty was recognized as being pivotal in cognition and improved memory, this was only up to a point. They suggest that it can also be associated with impeded response which is cognitively more taxing. When encountering novelty, the Goldilocks rule, i.e., just the right amount, seems to apply.

Surprise and Spirituality in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. As we have referred to already in some depth, Tisdell's (2003) book, *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education*, based on interviews with 31 adult educators working in cultural and emancipatory education, suggested that surprises can lead to spiritual experiences and understandings for some adult learners, and are considered part of "a spiritually grounded approach to a culturally relevant pedagogy" (p. 41). Specifically, in her discussion on surprise, she acknowledged that spiritual experiences, as identified by her participants, involve "catching a glimpse of the wholeness of life, the interconnectedness of all things, and one's more authentic self" and generally cannot be planned; but that how this occurs differs from person to person and comes as "an unexpected gift" (p. 35). She did, however, identify certain activities that might welcome adults to experience this type of learning through engagement with cognitive, affective, and symbolic domains:

For example, an educator might incorporate critical reading and engagement of new ideas (cognitive domain), consideration of how such ideas relate to one's life experiences (affective domain), and a space for celebrating and integrating new learning through the use of original or available music, art, poetry or metaphor (symbolic domain). (p. 35)

Tisdell argued that there has been very little discussion of the role of spirituality in culturally relevant education in formal and informal settings—but explains how intricately

linked culture and spirituality can be. For example, she discussed the ways in which women's social action efforts are often deeply grounded in feminist theology in certain cultural groups (e.g., Mother Mary, Divine Feminine energy, Mother Earth, etc.). I consider this an essential reminder, especially in Canadian contexts where not only do we know that spirituality plays a key role in the lives of the majority of women, but also as we become increasingly dedicated to equity, diversity, inclusion, and re-integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Battiste, 2017; Cajete, 1994).

Battiste (2010) described the “holistic, lifelong, purposeful, experiential and communal” nature of Indigenous learning (p 15). She acknowledged the erosion of spirit in Indigenous communities after years of trauma, abuse and colonialism, and the lasting impact of residential schools, but noted a growing resurgence of interest in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. While she recognized that the Eurocentric worldview is still dominant, she also argued that society is “becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of modernity and technological knowledge, of the possibilities and potential of Indigenous knowledge” (p.16). She advocated for two-eyed seeing, the idea that both ways of seeing the world (Indigenous and ‘conventional’) should be acknowledged, and together, enrich the curriculum. She described how this is particularly relevant for scientists, ecologists, and social activists who are beginning to understand the negative consequences for the planet when Indigenous perspectives are ignored or dismissed. As we move forward in our discussion, it might be helpful to keep in mind her discussion of Indigenous perspectives which honour the “learning spirit,” and individuals’ emerging gifts, interests, and talents. Indeed, Battiste described how these gifts “often manifest themselves in surprise and joy” (p. 15).

Possible Responses to Surprise. Tsang (2013) described five key possible responses to surprise including hindsight bias, radical skepticism, epistemic apathy, dogmatic denial, and curiosity, learning and modesty. While each of these responses have potential value and implications for education, the last point “curiosity, learning and modesty” (p. 61) is the most

relevant for our current focus. My research suggests that surprise can be intricately linked to spiritual experiences and understandings, and that attentiveness to these phenomena makes room for personal and social change.

One such response, is the idea of hospitality, which appears in the literature of Derrida (2000, 2002), Quinn (2010), McIntosh (2014), Vogel (2000), Wickett (2000), Bennett (2003), among others. In the chapter ““No Room in the Inn”? The Question of Hospitality in the Post (Partum) Labors of Curriculum Studies,” Quinn (2010) articulated the need “to let ourselves be overtaken, surprised by the unanticipated other we are not prepared to receive” (p. 106). She asked us to reflect on the hospitality of our institutions, the mystery in the world, and consider “radical openness to other” in all areas of our practice. In Quinn’s view, the body and pleasure are central to this, and certainly suggestive of the spiritual. She argued that hospitality “highlights the divine delight of being-(in-our-body)-in-the world-heartily laughing and loving our way through it in a full-bodied embrace of (being-with) others” (p. 108). A discussion of hospitality is particularly relevant in spiritual encounter. It is this spirit of openness to each other that makes room for deep listening to each other, but also highlights the vulnerability and risk involved in sharing these types of stories. In the methodology found in the next chapter, Wilson’s (2017) concerns about surprise and encounter are highlighted, as researchers must be thoughtful about the ways in which power relationships are always present in these exchanges, particularly when encounters themselves becomes sites for social experiment.

Surprise as a Spiritual Component of Reflexive Practice and Research. It is important to note that in my phenomenological-narrative study, I am not looking to prove a hypothesis around the causation of specific spiritual phenomena, but rather to better understand how adults learn through spiritual encounter. I have also employed a heuristic approach, which allows me to reflect on, and incorporate new learnings into my own life. Taber et al. (2010) did some very relevant and connected work on understanding epistemological identities through reflexive inquiry. Through purposive sampling, they began with a series of

open-ended interviews exploring the ambiguities and experiences faced by adult educators.

They used the following questions to guide their research:

- What are the significant experiences of our participants as adult educators?
- How are the experiences of adult educators reflected in adult education literature?
- What are the implications of adult educator experiences for adult education as a field?

What began originally as a study on the practices of adult educators, evolved into a work exploring researcher subjectivity in collaborative narrative research. As Taber et al. identified their own subjectivities, they were able to reconceptualise their data into three new themes, noting: “by locating our presence within the inquiry process in a more intentional manner, we were able not only to attend to our participants' stories, but to forefront how our own various perspectives informed our findings” (p. 46). Relevant to our current discussion of surprise, they emphasized the lived experiences of learners and educators, the ongoing nature of lifelong learning, and participants’ recognition of the blend between personal and professional.

As highlighted in the previous section, Tsang (2013) described how surprise has also been used as a pedagogical approach in social work as a “gateway” to reflective learning (p. 61). Tsang highlighted the use of surprise as heuristic tool for practitioners and service users. In this framework, the subject is asked to recall a surprising incident and reflect on the following topics and a list of exploratory sub-questions, verbally, or in writing; Why are you surprised? How did you respond? What have you learned from this incident? While this approach has not been formally tested, the author describes it as “potent” in their own teaching practice, promoting self-awareness and understanding.

Likewise, Tisdell (2003) has also developed a series of questions she uses to guide her own teaching practice with adult learners in her classes and workshops. These questions ask subjects to reflect on meaningful symbols, sources of inspiration, personal historical events, etc., and can be widely interpreted, e.g., “When do you feel most alive and authentic?” (p. 91). Indeed, I have used these questions in my own teaching practice and have found them to be a

generative and accessible tool for exploring key themes related spirituality, as well as informing my approach to this study.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This dissertation is rooted in qualitative traditions, combining a narrative approach and heuristic inquiry to explore a phenomenon: how self-identified spiritual encounters can lead to learning in adults. Specifically, I explored the conditions around spiritual encounters, how qualities of spiritual discernment such as attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness were present in spiritual encounters, the extent to which surprise and emotional intensity played a role in this process, and the implications of this type of learning. Due to the timing of my research, it also became necessary to address the impact of COVID-19 on the spiritual lives of Canadians as the data for this dissertation were gathered in 2020-2021.

Why Qualitative?

My own experience as a poet, arts educator, and teacher of creative writing gave me an appreciation of the great richness and power of stories to convey meaning and depth. As I shared in Chapter 2, I sensed, based on my past work, that I had the capacity to design a study which mirrored some of the deep work I had seen being done in the community, namely in the areas of creative writing and memoir. I felt confident in my capacity to ask questions of participants which allowed them to call to mind details (e.g., sensory, emotional, etc.) of their stories in such a way that the learning might be made evident and explicit. This, I felt, would not only be beneficial for the participants themselves in that they might feeling safe to share with a receptive interviewer, but also to highlight the key aspects of their encounters in a manner that even readers who found themselves skeptical or hesitant about the topic of spirituality might find themselves able to connect.

In my own thinking about educational research, and other social sciences, I strongly advocate that the knowledge obtained through subjective, or anecdotal experience is worthy of study even if it does not meet the traditional requirements of the scientific method, i.e., repeatable, controlled, and testable. An experience can have a deep impact on a person even if it happens only once, though it has equally been my experience that in the realm of spiritual

encounter, lessons often do repeat themselves. Still, based on my review of the literature and my experiences at various adult education conferences—and given the most likely target audience for my research, i.e., adult educators and administrators who have been embroiled in rationalist systems, or learners who have often felt de-legitimized—I also recognized the need to use multiple means of exploration and representation throughout the study and dissemination of work on this topic. I therefore proposed to frame my study as grounded in qualitative methodology, complemented by some quantitative elements gathered in the first phase of the research, where I developed a questionnaire to find out more about the phenomenon on a large scale and collect data that gave me a better understanding of the ‘big’ picture. During the second phase, in-depth interviews with selected participant volunteers from across Canada who had experienced the phenomenon intensely provided the basis for more detailed narratives. Both phases of data analysis involved validity checks, such as inter-rater reliability (Phase 1) and member-checking (Phase 2) alongside other suggested strategies for validation offered by Creswell and Poth (2018) such as triangulation, clarifying researcher bias, engaging in reflexivity, collaborating with participants, and debriefing of the data with my research committee. These methods served to triangulate my findings and offered some balance to the heuristic element of my work.

While my work is intentionally rich in stories—both my own and the participants—including some quantitative items in my questionnaire has allowed me to speak about this topic in a way that might be more accessible to a wider audience. This is likely to include adult educators, administrators, and policy makers, who have come up through systems which place value on rationalist perspectives that often de-value the body as a valid place of knowing, and whom, therefore, may not immediately recognize the value of spiritual encounter as learning.

Why Phenomenology?

Phenomenology looks at the nature of a phenomenon, “capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it,

remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). This study’s research problem was best addressed through this approach as I sought to gain several individuals’ experiences of learning that comes as result of spiritual encounters. While these individual experiences may take many different forms as evident throughout this study, previous research had suggested some shared themes and commonalities worthy of deeper investigation.

There are different forms of phenomenology, including those which focus on the transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic. Although, according to Patton (2002), they have in common a desire to explore how human beings “make sense of an experience and transform it into consciousness,” (p. 104) both at individual and shared levels. Parts of my work, such as my emphasis on surprise as a cognitive emotion are also grounded in psychological research for which these methodologies were designed. I anticipated that these branches of phenomenology would significantly overlap and intertwine, and indeed they did.

In exploring the essence of this phenomenon, I used both questionnaires and in-depth interviews, which also included the collection of artifacts. In Phase 2, I interviewed 10 participants who had volunteered from the first phase questionnaire. In this way I adhered to Polkinghorne’s (1989) recommendation that researchers interview between 5 to 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. In this process, Moustakas (1994) recommends asking two foundational questions to participants: (a) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and (b) what contexts have typically influenced or affected your experience of the phenomenon? In the interviews, I asked participants a range of questions about their experiences in these two areas and other open-ended questions regarding the lasting impact of the phenomenon in their lives to better discern the nature of the learning.

Heuristic Inquiry in Phenomenology

Heuristic inquiry was first introduced formally by Moustakas in 1961 (Sultan, 2019), though there has been some reasonable debate regarding the personal versus transpersonal dimensions of this methodology which has raised questions about the classification of this

methodological approach (Mihalache, 2019). According to Patton (2002), heuristic inquiry is a form of phenomenological inquiry that asks the foundational questions, “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (p. 107). Sultan (2019) describes heuristic inquiry as both “art and science” (p. 3). She identifies several attributes of the approach including a “systematic though flexible framework,” and “self-searching and reflexive self-dialoguing,” and offers that honouring felt sense, relationality, and integration are also key components (p. 3). She also presents several qualities associated with this methodology which, she argues, are traditionally less emphasized in the professional literature:

- Exploratory, serendipitous, and discovery-oriented
- Process- and content-focused
- Intuitive, introspective, and reflexive
- Experiential, embodied, and holistic
- Existential and humanistic
- Culturally embedded and emancipatory
- Relational, authentic, and participatory
- Imaginative and creative
- Nonlinear, fluid, and flexible (Sultan, 2019, p. 3).

Sultan (2019) describes heuristic inquiry as “phenomenologically aligned” and notes that it is process and content focused, culturally emancipative, non-linear, and includes elements of autobiography (pp. 4-6). Given these rich qualities, their suitability for the research topic at hand, and the fact that I had my own intense, direct experience of the phenomenon, I believed that this approach was the most appropriate for my study. Central to this decision, was that heuristic inquiry honestly addressed my own experience with the topic in a more authentic and meaningful way by acknowledging my own positionality clearly, as opposed to employing other forms of bracketing, which may feel forced or artificial in this process.

Indeed, Patton (2002) tells us that in heuristic inquiry, the researcher must have personal experience with the topic, and the level of *intensity* of experience between coresearchers must be similar. This was certainly the case in my study, illustrated in part by the stories I relayed in Chapter 2. This methodology was also a more appropriate choice for my work as “it challenges traditional scientific concerns about researcher objectivity and detachment” (p. 109). Moustakas (1994) suggests that when the researcher has first-hand experience of the topic, it can also help build rapport—that personal experience with the topic encourages an openness to the subject (Kenny, 2012). Even prior to my interviews, this had certainly been the case more informally as people frequently came to speak to me after a public talk or presentation on this subject, seemingly the result of my own willingness to share my personal experiences with the phenomenon.

Typically, a phenomenological study focuses on “common meaning” (Creswell & Poth, p. 75), but this heuristic branch differs from other forms of phenomenology in that it focuses on connectedness and relationship, as opposed to more detached approaches to research. It emphasizes essential meanings and *personal* significance, rather than definitive explanations or descriptions, makes some space for intuitive and tacit understandings rather than a “distillation of the structures of experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 108). Lastly, this type of phenomenology allows for the persons involved in the study (e.g., the participants themselves) to remain more present in the study, rather than simply just a re-telling their experiences. This was very important due to the strong narrative component of my project, as throughout the writing process I sought to provide rich context regarding the lives of the participants.

Why Narrative?

As I emphasized in Chapter 2 on spiritual autobiography, stories were a central component of this research. “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 50). According to Chase (2005), narrative research has its roots in literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics and education and various other fields which have adapted it for their

own purposes, including interdisciplinary work. In a review of the current literature on narrative research Creswell and Poth (2018) identified key features which help explain its boundaries:

- the centrality of stories whether told, co-constructed, or performed
- stories focus on individuals' life experiences and how they may see themselves/identities
- stories occur within specific contexts of time and place
- narrative stories are gathered through many different forms of data and may involve interviews, observations, documents, pictures, etc.
- narratives are analyzed using various strategies which may include theme, structure, dialogue, visual elements, among others
- narrative stories are often shaped by researchers into a chronology even if the participant does not tell the story in this way
- stories often feature turning points, interruptions, tensions, and transitions, which may come as result of telling the story to the researcher

My work meets all these criteria, and my study had a strong basis in narrative at all stages from recruitment to dissemination. From the very beginning, examples of stories were essential in communicating the types of encounters and experiences I was looking to study and were included during the call for participants on social media, and in the questionnaire, where participants were invited to share their own. During the interviews in Phase 2, participants shared these sacred life stories with me in their own words, and much of these conversations were used verbatim to create the narratives in between interviews. Narrative, in this sense, served multiple purposes in my study: it is a methodological approach, a research method, and a form of presentation. Through the process of re-storying, I was also able to gather valuable insights, as the process of collaborating on the narratives also sparked further discovery.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to these stories as “field texts” and describe narrative studies as “fluid inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013). As is typical of this methodological approach, various types of information were gathered to create a rich account, which is one of

the reasons I kept the number of participants manageable and on the lower end of the 'phenomenological' spectrum. In between the interviews themselves, artifacts were also used or offered by some of the participants, which were helpful in triggering or further elaborating on the stories. For example, some participants referred to their journal to jog their memory for more detail or a date.

Narrative research was also a suitable fit as my interviews largely centred upon stories that revolved around a specific place and time, while recognizing that the learning often occurred retrospectively, and was contextualized and situated within participants' personal, cultural, and historical contexts. In Phase 1, I asked participants to choose one of their most intense examples of the phenomenon to focus on in detail. In both phases I also asked participants about their earlier experiences with spirituality and/or religion, and the circumstances of their lives before and near the encounter, as well as other similar experiences. This type of contextualization is considered an essential component of narrative research (Czarniawska, 2004), and is also an important element of phenomenology.

As part of creating these narratives, transcripts and audio recordings were examined for emerging themes, and used to help capture the essence of the learning. In this study, participants' direct first-hand accounts were used verbatim, with only minor restructuring or editing on my part for readability. Following the typical procedures in phenomenological research, both the creation and analysis of the narratives involved looking for significant statements, sentences, and quotes in a process Moustakas (1994) calls horizontalization and finding clusters of meaning. These included textural, structural, and contextual elements. This was essential given my choice of methods, as I had asked participants to focus on one primary story, but they may have situated that story alongside others that inevitably came up. Looking at participants stories side-by-side was also an essential part of the process of coding for emergent themes. Also relevant to this type of narrative research is that I was looking for stories that were likely to have key turning (and "learning") points both in terms of plot and content, and to some

degree, I also recognized that at least some of this would be happening in real-time, as participants engaged in the process of recounting them (Denzin, 1989).

Methods

Ethics Clearance

After receiving clearance from our Faculty's Education Research Ethics Board (EREB), I submitted an ethics proposal for my study to the General Research Ethics Board of Queen's University (GREB) in March 2020, unbeknownst to me, only days before the rapid onset of the pandemic and university closure. While some of the methods would need to be revised significantly in the months ahead, my study was approved in June 2020, and I began Phase 1 of my data collection in September 2020. Active recruitment and data collection for Phase 1 took place from September to December 2020, though the survey was left open throughout the duration of Phase 2. Phase 2 interviews began at the end of December, concluding in mid-April 2021 with the final drafts of the narratives completed at that stage.

In this section, I will describe the methods involved in each phase of the recruitment and data collection, as well as describe my process of analyzing the data for each phase of the study, and outline how I attended to other issues such as researcher bias, power relationships, and giving back to participants.

Phase 1

Developing and Piloting. Items used in the questionnaire were informed by the academic literature highlighted in the previous chapter, including other guides such as the Spiritual Experience Index (Genia, 1991, 1997) and the revised version with 23 items by the same author (Genia, 1997), as well as questions and criteria used in previous studies such as those by Tisdell (2001, 2003), and Tsang (2014). While a full pilot study did not take place, on more than one occasion I received detailed feedback from an expert panel of educators at the Faculty of Education including those with specialties that ranged from arts education, second language acquisition, special education, belonging, fairness, Indigenous land-based education,

agriculture education, and sustainability. During these conversations I sought informal feedback regarding response rate, accessibility of the questions, and other variables that might need to be changed to enhance the value and utility of the research tool moving forward. Using knowledge I gained from the professional literature and these sessions, the questionnaire was created using Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT, September 2020).

Recruitment and Sampling. People seem to want, or perhaps even need, to talk about these stories. Anecdotally, I have attested to the fact that after every talk I have given on this topic, people have come up to me, wanting to share their own stories or end up following up with an email to thank me or invite me to lunch to chat more about the topic, or collaborate in some way. As such, when I first began this work, I did not anticipate any major concerns with recruitment, and originally believed my primary challenge would be of funding and logistics as prior to the pandemic I had intended to meet face-to-face with as many participants as possible. I didn't expect a global pandemic. As a result, not only did I need to adjust my methods for Phase 2, but even in Phase 1, recruitment did become somewhat more of an issue as people across the country scrambled to adjust to new lives virtually in so many categories (school, work, worship, etc.) and were facing other issues such as unemployment, sickness, mental health concerns, and Zoom fatigue. I felt cautious asking them to commit more.

Participants for Phase 1 were recruited across Canada on three social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, which involved a naturally embedded level of purposeful, snowball, and convenience sampling as various personal and professional networks helped spread the word. I also directly reached out to offices for faith and spiritual life at various universities, as well as writing groups, yoga studios, hiking and outdoor groups, multicultural organizations, public libraries, dance and art groups, coffee shops, and inter-faith organizations. Organizations were private messaged via these apps and were invited to participate or share the call as they deemed fit. Please see samples of my recruitment materials in Appendix G. I also happily provided links and information about the study in any special interest groups I was a

part of, and the few conferences and workshops I attended virtually during the pandemic. The recruitment ads were created by myself using Canva software, with samples approved by GREB and my supervisor. I also created a page for the study on these three social media platforms and continued to share posts to actively ask people to participate in the questionnaire from September to December 2020. Typically, I would include a few sentences in the description of the post asking, “Have you ever had a self-identified spiritual encounter that taught you something?” and usually provided a few examples of the types of encounters people had reported in past research to give perspective respondents a little more information about what I was looking for. The ‘self-identify’ piece was crucial. Allowing participants to decide for themselves if they had a spiritual encounter was one of the most liberating and valuable aspects of the recruitment and seemed to help greatly. Due to the challenges in past research around defining the term, this allowed me to forfeit the role of gatekeeper. I was much more interested in speaking to people who felt quite certain that they’d had one—and that they personally recognized and defined it as such. This study was less about strict definitions, and more about *experiences*. I knew that ultimately, I wanted to speak to people who *did* use the word. This study is about people who *do* identify as having had a spiritual encounter. It was my position, that by speaking to people about their encounters, we may indeed learn something about how people use the word, too.

This being said, I did not wish to exclude anyone from the opportunity to participate in the survey and in fact, believed that there was value to be gleaned by leaving it open to people who might have never had a spiritual encounter, or who had one and were unsure if they had learned something from it, or those who might still be curious or processing their feelings on the subject. For this reason, on the recruitment ad, I often noted that I was also interested in people who answered the No option. The Qualtrics survey did have a set of questions for people who responded in this manner, and I believe it was an insightful addition to this work.

The Phase 1 Questionnaire. Participants were able to follow the Qualtrics link or QR code directly to the Qualtrics survey, where they landed on a page containing the Letter of Information and consent form which had been approved by the Graduate Research Ethics Board. Here I provided an overview of the study, with all necessary details about matters such as anonymity and data collection and storage, as well as a section on wellbeing which includes important ethical considerations due to the sensitive nature of the topic. After completing some demographic information, participants were then provided with some examples from past research, and asked if they had ever had a spiritual encounter that taught them something. Depending on their yes or no answer, the survey then branched in two directions containing 2 items for those who responded no, and 12 items for those who responded yes, including questions related to frequency of encounters, nature of the learning, spiritual identity, emotional intensity, level of surprise, comfort levels speaking about spirituality, and impact of COVID-19. For a full list of survey questions, please find a copy of the online questionnaire in Appendix D. The questionnaire was designed to address key elements related to my research questions and, as previously indicated, was created using the findings of my literature review. The survey contained qualitative and quantitative items, e.g., Likert type questions, open ended and closed items, etc.

As previously stated, while I was looking to collect stories from participants who did indeed self-identify as having had a spiritual experience as my primary source of data, I did not want to lose valuable insights from people who might fit into the other scenarios I highlighted. Phase 1 of the research was used primarily in two ways: to collect descriptive statistics on the phenomenon, and to recruit participants for Phase 2. Participants were able to participate anonymously during Phase 1 unless they opted to participate in the interview process for Phase 2, in which case they entered their email address at the end of the survey. Even at this point, participants had the opportunity to use a pseudonym if they wished.

Phase 2

Phase 2 Recruitment. Out of the 75 participants who submitted stories, 57 people agreed to be contacted for a Phase 2 interview. As 5 of these participants self-reported that their spiritual experience was drug or alcohol related, and outside of the bounds of this study, this brought the list to 52 stories and potential participants. In the original research proposal, I had intended to meet with Phase 2 interview participants in person across Canada to get to know more about their spiritual encounters in depth. Having been inspired by a journey I had taken from Kingston to Vancouver on Via Rail the previous year for a conference, my plan was to apply for a travel grant, and take the train to visit each person at a mutually agreeable public place in their own hometown. On that inspiring trip to Vancouver in 2019, I'd been deeply impacted by the other travellers I had encountered, conversations I had overheard, and by the changing vistas from my window. I thought it might be a fascinating experience to do a large portion of this writing on the train. I had also hoped to show my participants that their stories were worthy of someone travelling hundreds, if not thousands of kilometers to hear them. I also looked forward to the opportunity for written collaboration and in-person connection with each participant as part of our creative process, before getting back aboard. Understandably, however, I had to change my plans and move Phase 2 online as the university mandated that no in-person research was to be conducted. Although, regardless of how I was planning to meet participants, I still had to decide who I was going to speak to.

From the list of 52 potential interviewees, I used intensity sampling to narrow the list of potential participants, using the following criteria as a guide:

- participants who had a score of at least 7/10 combined on both surprise and emotional intensity scales
- narrative intensity (e.g., content, tone, arc, etc.)
- strong examples of learning articulated

- reader response including the intensity of my own response, and that of my committee members made up of educators and researchers, as I asked what stories “popped” for them, too
- conflicts? drugs? (i.e., the study did not include drug-related spiritual encounters)
- a diverse range of voices from across Canada, different ages, genders, and religious identities—not to be “representative”—but to show that this type of learning can occur in a wide variety of contexts

After considering these elements, I narrowed the list to a possible 22 participants I could approach for an interview. I e-mailed them in batches of 3 to 5 or so at a time to determine response. I conducted my first interview in late December 2020. Then in January 2021, I reached out to 8 people, and 3 said yes. In February 2021, I reached out to 10 additional people, and 5 of them agreed to be interviewed. In March 2020, I was then approached by a contact from a community group who expressed interest in the study. She completed the questionnaire in March 2021, and met the criteria for an interview, which was held later that month. Possible participants were sent an email to ask them if they were interested and provided with a link to a Letter of Information (LOI) and consent form. Once our time was confirmed, participants would receive a link to a Microsoft Teams call and told what they could expect, i.e., audio-recording, nature of the questions, length, bring a cup of tea! A total of 10 interviews and 10 check-ins were conducted between late December and early April.

Interview 1. In the first interview, I used my interview guide (see Appendix E) to get an in-depth picture of participants’ spiritual encounters and the learning that had taken place, with particular attention to my research questions. When participants logged onto the call, I greeted the participant with the camera on at first, introduced myself and told them a little bit about the study and what to expect. When we were both ready, we turned off our cameras, and began audio recording. I read my opening text/preamble, and then we began the process. I had the participants’ survey responses in front of me, as well as the semi-structured interview questions

that had been developed out of the literature review, through discussion with my committee, and cleared by EREB/GREB (see Appendix A). During the first meeting, I made use of this interview protocol and semi-structured interview guide, and asked participants questions about the nature of their spiritual encounter, the context, and their feelings, to get a deep understanding of what occurred and the circumstances of the encounter.

During this interview I also collected information regarding the sensory experiences (e.g., sights, sounds, touch, etc.) related to the spiritual encounter which were essential in creating the narratives and a sense of how the body was present in the learning experience. I also gave participants the opportunity to tell me the whole story in their own words without interruption. Other question items asked them about similar encounters, their spiritual/religious upbringing if any, who, if anyone, they shared the encounter with, and about the learning specifically. Throughout the interview, I took some notes by hand, but found the type of deep listening required more of my attention than I had anticipated. The first interviews typically lasted one hour. At the end of the interview, I asked participants if they had any questions, told them how the narrative would be created, and mentioned that they would receive a copy of the text within approximately 3 weeks. I then turned off the audio recording, turned my video back on and thanked them again, ending with some well wishes. The full conversation was recorded and uploaded on Microsoft Streams, which generated a raw transcript.

Between Interviews. After we signed off the call a debriefing email was sent to participants thanking them for their time and offering contact details for counselling support if required. A raw transcript was generated electronically and used along with the audio recording to create the first-person narratives directly from the interview text. After the interview, I would be sure that the copy had been uploaded to the database and ensured that I had a copy stored on a USB. In between the two interviews, I engaged with the data and narratives through a process of re-storying, which I will describe further in the analysis section. In essence, I used the raw transcripts from our interviews as the basis for creating the narratives, using their own words.

Approximately two weeks after our first meeting, I would e-mail participants a copy of their narrative, and book a check-in meeting to discuss their response to their story.

Interview 2: Check-In. This second interview was often a rich source of data collection and was beneficial in the analysis and as a form of member checking. In practice, this check-in typically lasted about a half hour, though some did go significantly longer. The same initial steps applied, we met on Teams with our cameras turned off, and audio recorded the calls. In the second meeting with participants, I asked them about their reactions to the first draft of the narrative, and conducted a more informal, semi-structured interview to collect information regarding participants' response to their story, what they connected to, what they might want to change, and provided opportunities for the participant to offer any new insights into the material. I asked a series of questions (again, included in the interview guide provided to EREB/GREB) about their feelings about the narrative, things that popped out, sensory details, accuracy of the timeline, anything that should be excluded or included, who they wished would read their story, and about any learning that they'd done as result of participating in the study. I also used this opportunity to ensure that I had accurately understood what they had learned from their own encounter by repeating it back to them as I had understood it. Based on this feedback, I e-mailed a summary of the agreed upon edits to the participant. Half of the participants offered to make small edits directly on the document themselves for ease and clarity, but otherwise they were made by me. Most of the changes were either to further anonymize or to remove details that they felt were repetitive or interrupted readability. All final drafts were approved by the participants within 1-2 weeks by e-mail for inclusion in the dissertation and any future publications. Transcripts of these second interviews were also a part of the data set uploaded to the qualitative research software for analysis.

Research Design Summary

Table 1 highlights the two phases of my data collection and also provides an overview of the analyses that were undertaken. In the next section, I describe my analysis methods.

Table 1*Research Process*

Phases of Research	Description of Phase and Recruitment	Data Collection and Methods	Data Analysis and Connection to Research Questions
Phase 1	<p>Questionnaire (designed on Qualtrics) distributed across social media platforms Twitter, Facebook and Instagram</p> <p>Purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling to reach widest number of participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative and quantitative items • Closed and open response items • Likert scale questions • Includes a Yes/No pathway in response to question: Have you ever had a spiritual encounter that taught you something? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics • Pre-figured and emergent coding • Inter-rater reliability for validity • Questionnaire addresses all research questions
Phase 2	<p>10 interviews (1 hour) and check ins (30 mins.) with participants who have completed Phase 1 and volunteer to participate in Phase 2</p> <p>Intensity sampling used to select participants from volunteers in Phase 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heuristic phenomenology and narrative research • Semi-structured interviews • Artifacts, audio-recording, transcription, field notes memoing throughout interviews and writing process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-figured and emergent coding • Significant statements. meaning units/clusters • Process of re-storying, writing vignettes • Member-checking for validity • Interview directly address all research questions, i.e., the nature of the encounter, surprise, emotional intensity, and lasting impact

Data Analysis

In this section, I will describe how I analyzed these data and various issues that arose during the process. There were essentially three primary methods of data analysis, or as I might put it in more human-centred terms, *exploring meaning*. In essence, the first was quite straightforward: I used the data from reports generated by the Qualtrics software to glean information about participant responses to the Phase 1 questionnaire, using descriptive statistics. You will read about these results in the next chapter. There were two additional stages of data analysis I will highlight in greater depth; the first during the re-storying process, and the second through a process of coding using NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018), which took into consideration the data set as a whole, including:

- Survey data (including 75 stories of spiritual encounter shared)
- 10 interview 1 transcripts
- 10 interview 2 transcripts
- 10 completed narratives
- Other data such as memos, artifacts, earlier drafts, etc.

Re-storying. This stage of data analysis occurred during the process of co-creating the narratives. As I touched upon briefly in Chapter 2, the writing process involved listening intently, taking notes, reading over several pages of raw transcripts, and engaging in the process of re-storying, which in and of itself, is a form of analysis. My primary goal at this stage was to create compelling first-person narratives which were true and accurate to participants' experiences and clearly addressed the details of the spiritual encounter, its context, and any learning that took place. Perhaps even more so than I had anticipated, the words of the participants were extraordinarily clear and articulate; they told their stories beautifully—and I used large sections of them, *verbatim*. What you will read in Chapter 6 is *their words, their ideas*. The primary challenge when working with the transcripts was deciding how to shape the re-telling in such a way that the absence of my voice and my interview questions did not interrupt or confuse the reader; and of course, to preserve the integrity and flow of the sharing. As noted previously, I believe it was my background in Theatre, and experience in monologue writing, and collective creation that were my strongest assets in this process—years of working with individuals and groups, to help create and shape performances through improvised dialogue, which were often then used as the basis for scripts.

In this re-storying process, I would copy the raw interview transcript in a new Word document, and remove my “voice” (i.e., the interview questions) from the story. I would re-read the text and highlight sections that were relevant to the conceptual framework of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness, and the research questions for the study. This process ensured that I maintained the integrity of the context. I did this both by hand, and electronically. I left

most details in such as pauses, slang etc. in the first draft. Having been quite astounded by the quality of descriptive details offered by participants, I found myself not having to do nearly as much editing as I'd expected.

This material was used to help create a sequence related to chronology, narrative, theme, and structure. In this way, I was drawing upon approaches used by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) combining various common elements and steps of narrative analysis including collecting stories through interviews and conversations, retelling the stories using the three-dimensional approach (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This highlights personal/social interaction, continuity of past, present, and future, and the situation, as well as the five elements of plot structure (character, setting, problem, action, and resolution) by Yussen and Ozcan (1997).

While the narratives did often have some sense of a clear 'beginning, middle and end' the meaning of these stories to the individual experiencing them and those reading them is not "fixed" in time. Anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) reminds us of this in *Peripheral Visions*:

Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some nascent truth. This approach applies to all the incidents of everyday life: the phrase in the newspaper, the endearing or infuriating game of a toddler, the misunderstanding at the office. Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories. (Bateson, 1994, p. 11)

Indeed, through the lens of phenomenology we understand that the essential nature of these experiences is that new discoveries or insights may come at any point along the way, often by surprise—and indeed even as part of the research process itself. As Bateson suggests, this can happen through "peripheral vision." I found during the process of data analysis and presenting

my findings that I too, relied on metaphors and ‘insights’. These also popped out when reading the narratives.

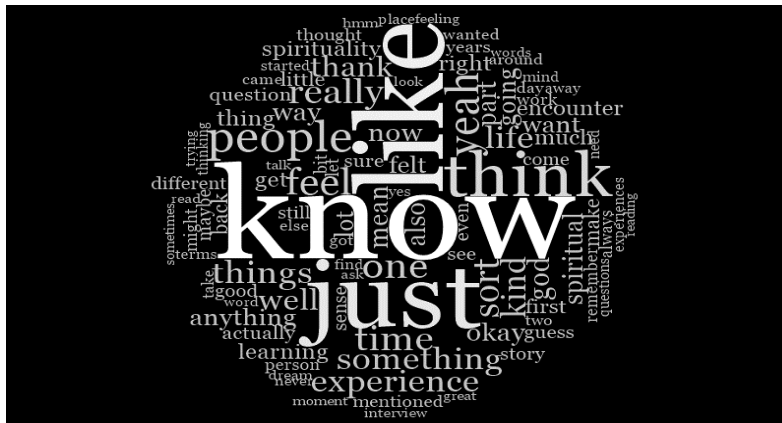
At the top of each narrative, I would pull out one quotation that “popped” to me which seemed to encompass the participant’s definition or perspective on spirituality. Parts that were not used in the primary narrative, such as details that did not seem directly related to the encounter, would still be available for context and subsequent data analysis and uploaded to NVivo for coding, so nothing felt lost. As a form of member-checking participants were asked in the second interview if anything should have been included/excluded, and we had much opportunity for revision.

The act of co-creation with participants, both in the writing, and indeed the follow up process of checking in and editing the story together, sparked valuable conversations, both between myself and the page (or inwardly), and indeed with the participants during the second interview check-in. In hindsight, this process provided much depth of meaning. In shaping the narratives between interviews, I had used the research questions to help guide me. Through the embodied processes of listening intently, writing and co-writing, sitting with the stories with pencils and pens and notepads, and cups of tea, deciding what to highlight, emphasize, exclude/include, all led to insight and learning, as key themes and significant statements began to emerge. I found myself noting words and images that resonated in, and *across*, the narratives—including how they felt in my own body. This process was immersive; a great deal about *experiencing* and to a certain degree, also intuitive, as any creative writing process inevitably is.

Coding. The second method that was used to analyze data, after the narratives were written, was a combination of *a priori* and *in vivo* coding (Saldaña, 2016). I used the Qualitative research software, NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018), and the tools it offers, to take a deeper look at the data, as a whole. At this stage, the use of technology was an asset given the quantity of the material I had gathered.

While I was originally a little resistant to using a computer program to better understand spiritual encounters, I found it to be a generative exercise in many respects. For example, I find it remarkable that in running a simple query across the data, the word *know*, or *knowledge* comes up 2066 times. The word *know* is, by far, the most frequently used word in these collective conversations—the questionnaire, story texts, and interviews. Given that the type of learning that can happen through spiritual encounters has rarely been considered a valid form of knowledge in many educational contexts, this felt deeply affirming for this study—and offered an insight into this conversation that I would not have easily spotted had I not had access to this software.

Figure 3
Word Cloud



Note: This image was taken from a word frequency query using NVivo Pro 12 software.

The qualitative software was also essential for coding the data. My first step was to ponder how my conceptual framework for this study, indeed that Quaker inspired notion of *spiritual discernment* and the qualities of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness might be present in the data, and helpful during analysis.

In doing so I wanted to use *a priori* coding to start, that is, a set of codes that I had pre-identified to help me sort and make sense of the data. As such, I used items from the literature and those original sources of illumination in the literature review, to prepare a codebook to help

guide me (see Appendix H). For example, I might code for “silence,” “prayer,” or “surprise.” In my own mind, this felt very much akin to the process of creating hashtags on social media, in that one excerpt of an interview could have multiple codes associated with it.

I also, however, wanted to leave room for discovery and new thematic insights in the research, and therefore also incorporated *in vivo* quoting, either using the text directly when a phrase jumped out as a significant or meaningful statement, or by adding a new emergent code. I found *in vivo* coding most akin to the creative writing process, as it draws upon what speaks to us, pops, stands out, etc. Understanding that creative, natural impulse is a gift in narrative research as it helped to pull out important moments. You may notice, for example, as you read along in the pages ahead, the imagery of tomatoes in Maggie’s account, which also helped me to re-discover the tomato seeds metaphor in Father Frank’s story. The process felt organic, and had its *aha* moments, such as when I would identify a new code, and then go back to see where this new code might have been applied to the material I had already explored. These meaningful statements often led me to discover a new lens or a poetic aspect of the encounter, or sometimes added depth to a code or theme that had already emerged but was often said more beautifully than I could have managed otherwise.

As I returned to my conceptual framework, I began experimenting with coding the data under the headings of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness. I started with attentiveness. I sat for several months coding the data, re-listening to sections of stories, making short memos and used some of the tools available in NVivo Pro 12. For a while, this was fairly straightforward, and a fun exploration. It was only as I began to incorporate the other qualities of willingness and responsiveness, and consider how they might correspond to the codes, that things became much more complicated. During this process, I found that many of the codes overlapped. For example, one can be attentive to the senses, but also respond to a spiritual encounter with their senses and this may happen willingly or unwillingly. I often found myself playing around with the words or ideas, trying to grasp the subtle differences. This interweaving

and braiding of these concepts felt, at times, frustrating, other times enlightening. But ultimately, I came to believe that trying to artificially force them into one distinct category or another, or cover up this paradox with wordplay, was futile. Instead, I needed to embrace this ambiguity. While this coding was somewhat challenging to do at the micro level, in the end, as I stepped back and looked at the data as a whole, clear themes had emerged over time. In that process, I found that overall, 12 key themes emerged out of the data, which I highlight in Chapter 7. While recognizing the overlap, I used attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness to help group or conceptualize the data, in the ways I saw being used in these stories most typically. Throughout this process, I remained fully aware that this does not represent a universal “truth” about learning through spiritual encounters, but rather a pathway to better understanding the encounters shared here.

Attending to Researcher Bias

A Heuristic Methodology. One of the most frequently discussed issues or challenges with this type of phenomenological study lies within the issue of epoche and bracketing, and concerns researcher subjectivity, in the sense that traditionally researchers have been expected to be neutral and unbiased. To address this, as outlined earlier, I used a heuristic approach. This was apparent not only by my sharing with participants that I had experience with the phenomenon, but also allowed me to be explicit in describing my own examples of learning through spiritual encounters in my writing, primarily in Chapters 2 and 8, and speckled throughout the body of this work. As is encouraged in this methodology, I see this as an asset to the research in terms of building rapport with participants and remaining open-minded, and I feel that I could have embraced this even further, if I was a more experienced and confident researcher. The methodology itself makes much room for genuine connection, creativity, and co-creation.

An Emphasis on Co-Creation. It is important to reiterate that there was a collaborative component to this creative process, and I wanted participants to feel they were not only contributors, but that they were also given something back; that this process was useful for them, special, and as if the stories we created out of this process were also a gift for themselves. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, in this type of research, active involvement of participants is central.

The narratives were co-created in two primary ways in this study. The first way that this happened was in the literal sense. Participants shared a story with me, it was transcribed, and I worked with their words and ideas to create the first draft, which they would then offer me feedback on during the check-in. Based upon our discussion in the second interview, we would make edits and participants would approve the final draft. As I mentioned previously, sometimes participants were involved directly in making edits on the document during our e-mail correspondence.

The second way that this occurred was in that notion that the inclusion of epiphanies, turning points, or disruptions are vital to this work. As the research process itself was a shared experience, and given the heuristic nature of this research, inevitably the participants and I both had the potential to learn something throughout the interviews and data analysis and to be shaped by this experience. One of the ways I saw this happening during the interview was through my questioning when a participant may not have identified right away that what has taken place might be considered learning. This, I came to see, is a nuanced process. For example, as you will read in the chapter ahead, in Anusree's account, I had noted that learning had seemed to occur not only in her realization that she wanted to have children, but also in her interaction with her husband in the aftermath of the car accident. As an experienced educator, I had wondered if my probing questions, such as in the example I used above, might potentially influence participant response, but at the same time recognized that this line of questioning could bring a richness to the discussion that otherwise might not be present, offering the

participant another opportunity to reflect and learn during the interview process itself. To be able to explicitly address these instances and interweave these learnings into the narrative, both on the part of myself and the participant in some way during the process is essential to be transparent in the work, but also to connect to the literature, which emphasizes the role of a guide in exploring these types of experiences. I found that the check-ins were very useful for directly addressing this—for example, in this case Anusree was able to clearly identify that the learning about her husband’s communications style had indeed taken place, but that the stronger lesson had still revolved around her desire to become a mother.

Member Checking. While there was a recognition that the stories were co-created, and that I had personal experience with the topic of the study, it was still important to me that I allowed the participants to share their own accounts and interpretations as accurately as possible without my influence. In the first interview, though I did identify that I too, had an experience with the phenomenon, I used an interview guide which allowed me to have some consistency between the different participants I spoke to, and also increased the comprehensiveness of the data. This was particularly helpful in the early stages to ensure that I was asking the key questions and could identify logical gaps in the data (Patton, 2002). Another way I addressed this is through validation and member checking in the second interview, after I wrote the narratives. Not only did this important step provide a means of checking for accuracy in my understanding, interpretation, and attention to detail, but as a writer, I also recognized that it is a respectful step to take when someone shares such an intimate experience with you.

As previously shared, heuristic inquiry doesn’t shy away from bias, but rather, addresses it explicitly and directly, as researchers and participants are both understood to have had direct, intense experience with the phenomenon at hand, and the researcher openly reflects on their own learning throughout the process. That being said, due to the nature of the collaborative process, it was still important that I find ways to keep track of the participants ideas and learning, and my own, and when necessary to differentiate between the two.

The fact that I was able to continue the conversation with participants via e-mail when I sent them a draft of their story, and in our check-in, allowed me to make sure that the story I had generated and shaped from the transcript was accurate to their experience, and pleasing to the participant. In the research world, this would be considered a form of member-checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but as a writer I simply would consider this an act of respect. In our meeting, I also took comfort that even if we made an editorial choice together, for example, to remove a detail for readability, I was not going to lose any data because the interviews and check-ins, in their entirety, would be preserved for data analysis in the next stage of the project. Participants were given ample opportunities to provide feedback or request changes in their narratives, though generally speaking, very few changes were made. Those that were requested, tended to be for increased anonymity or readability, or even due to a transcription error. Given the fact that people were seeing their own words reflected back to themselves, our conversations were often less about concerns related to accuracy, as they were about their feelings and reactions to reading their own story.

Challenging Expectations. Another way I attended to researcher bias, was in accepting that things didn't always turn out the way I hoped or expected to. For example, while I had anticipated that participants would learn a lot from our interviews and time together, only a few participants reported any kind of learning from the process itself. I think three factors impacted this in unexpected ways: the first being the pandemic, and the fact that the interviews were conducted online created a certain barrier between myself and participant, which sometimes felt awkward, and at other times like a 'confessional'; secondly, some participants described having already worked with the encounter at great length in other areas of their lives. Thirdly, my own novice as a researcher, not knowing how much I could comfortably share, or probe added a degree of hesitancy in my approach.

Another example where my expectations were unmet or changed, had to do with the literary form. At the onset of this study, my aim was to take some inspiration from the literary

form of parable, in that the vignettes would have a strong focus on the teaching and learning elements, e.g., the knowledge, wisdom, or learning that occurred as result of these encounters. While it may seem provocative to use a word such as parable, which can have religious connotation, I am intentionally using language which grounds itself in the spiritual domain to assert the value of these perspectives. I believe deeply in using language and form intentionally to shape the direction of future research and to counter-balance rationalist language that dominates the current climate. However, while parables are used across cultures to share lessons learned from spiritual stories and encounters, I found myself veering away from this once the writing and co-creation experience began, particularly given the diversity of participants in my study, some of whom had no religious affiliation, and I did not imagine would be comfortable with the idea.

Field Notes, Memoing, and Artifacts. While I attempted to keep my own field notes, and memos and recognized they could be helpful for this process, I found it difficult to do this in a way that was ‘formalized.’ As researchers, writers, or educators, we do not simply think in a linear, scheduled ways, e.g., during our “work-day” but rather discoveries come on walks, in the bath, in dreams, seemingly out of the blue. It is very important to me that my own approach to this research reflects my belief in other ways of knowing, that are more spirit-centred and life enhancing. While I had wished to keep more detailed records, in practice my notebooks were comprehensible only to me, notes on pieces of paper, on envelopes or notepads, or short words and phrases stored in the electronic Memo book on Nvivo.

One area that is a little more formally documented was my own personal creative writing process, apart from these narratives, as I have specific poems that I wrote throughout this process, including pre-pandemic on that train ride from Toronto to Vancouver to speak about this research at my first academic conference in 2019. I believe that stories such as these, that were inspired by the unexpected events that happened “along the way” are just as crucial to this process.

I did collect some artifacts as part of this. In this particular study, the artifacts helped to provide contextual information regarding the stories such as Ben, who provided me with a written historical account, an essay he had previously written about the ritual. This was helpful to clarify details; Maggie also provided me with a book of haiku poetry that she had created with her participants. As much as these were helpful for me in practical ways, there was also an element of them feeling like gifts.

Verbatim Transcription. When I started this process, I think I overestimated the role I would play in writing these stories. What helped me keep my voice separate from the participants is something that happened far more instinctually. I used participant's words verbatim and literally erased mine. It had been so engrained in my practice as a writer and theatre maker to use the participants' own words and ideas, that I physically removed/deleted my own voice from the raw transcripts as a first step, as I began working with them. The entire process of working on these narratives reminded me again, just how rich people's words are when you just give them time and space to speak. I also have access to my e-mails; the various drafts between participants and I, that provide further insight on this process. A key indicator to me, that this bracketing process was effective is in the diverse range of stories presented, and how different some of them are to my own personal beliefs and experience.

Other Relevant Issues

Relationship Building/Power Relationships. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), this issue of power relationships is a crucial one in narrative research. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) discuss several relevant questions regarding ownership of participants stories, which Creswell and Poth (2018) summarize in their discussion of challenges in narrative research; "Who owns the story? Who can tell it? Who can change it? Whose version is convincing? What happens when narratives compete? As a community, what do stories do among us?" (p. 73). In reflecting on my research, some emerging work on the allure and dangers

of organized encounter has come out of the field of geography and is relevant to this discussion. After all, even the act of interview and co-creating narratives is itself, an organized encounter, and the topic of study deeply connected with emotion, memory, and personal history. We sometimes see this approach being taken in educational and community settings, where the assumption is that you can put a bunch of diverse people into a room and make something magical happen for a cause or creation, but this seems an important consideration in one-to-one discussion too. Indeed, Wilson (2017) describes how in the social sciences, there is an assumption that “being together, co-presence, dialogue, and intermingling can, under the right circumstances, inspire social transformation” (p. 606). She reminds us, however, that encounters are always “politically and pedagogically charged” and raises two concerns revolving around the demand for outcome, and the idea that something inherently unpredictable has become the site of intervention. Wilson reiterates that we must be aware of this important reality, pointing to the shadow side of surprise, and the ‘unplanned’, especially in organized encounter:

For those in a position of power, a willingness to put ideas at risk may undoubtedly lead to a desirable reflection on normativities, status, and privilege. But in focusing on those in a position of power, there is a danger of romanticising risk. Encounters are never equal, and for some, the possibilities of encounter can be less convincing and far riskier. (p. 614)

She reminds us that encounters are not always positive, and they come with risk and vulnerability. She argues that in too many contexts, facilitators are operating with prescribed outcomes in mind, the demand for knowability and the illusion of equality.

Drugs and Mental Health. The issue of both drug use and mental health was also something I considered deeply when exploring this research. While participation in the questionnaire during Phase 1 was open to anyone and participants could choose to self-identify as having a mental health issue and/or report substance use as a factor in their spiritual

encounter, In Phase 2, I made a personal boundary to not interview anyone who had a spiritual encounter involving drugs. While there are other people working in areas of consciousness and psychedelic drugs (e.g., The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies affiliated with University of British Columbia and the newly formed Psychedelics Advisory Committee out of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Queen's University, etc.) and a small number of people in my study did report spiritual encounters of this nature, the primary focus of my work centred upon non-drug induced encounters. While I couldn't control for all environmental factors in my study, I chose not to explore that area of this work for ethical, legal, and personal reasons. Similarly, mental health issues may involve spiritual themes or in some cases be misattributed as such, and depending on the personal and cultural context, the links between spiritual encounter and mental health can be triggering. This needed to be deeply considered in preparation for this study. It was important that a person with a mental health issue still be welcomed to share their personal experiences with spiritual phenomena, and I recognized that sometimes the boundaries between what we consider illness and spiritual experience are blurred by our education and healthcare systems in ways that can feel too restrictive. To alleviate some risk, and ensure the comfort and safety of my participants, I provided the contact information for a counselling service on the Letters of Information, and on a debriefing letter e-mailed in between sessions. In the study, mental health came up frequently. Many of the participants described being in therapy and using the information gleaned from their spiritual encounters to support that process. This seemed to be experienced as a positive, productive, and healthy response.

Giving Back to Participants. It was my strong wish that research participants in all phases of the study felt as if they were participating in an important and enjoyable process, particularly those who agreed to the two interviews and co-writing process. I think for some of them it was, and I have tried to highlight some of those meaningful exchanges in the main body of this work and to highlight their wishes for the work in the concluding chapter. Each

participant was sent a final draft of their own narrative for approval and as a keepsake, and I would ideally like to give a copy of the book to each participant once it is published.

Ultimately, I share their hope: that these stories will be used meaningfully to help shape future perspectives in adult education and validate spiritual encounters as meaningful and important forms of learning. And that they will be treated respectfully.

I also think there was something to be said about our simply spending a couple of hours together during a time of great social isolation for so many of us. One of the greatest challenges in this study, for me, surrounded navigating the ethical boundaries with those participants with whom I did not previously have a connection: one invited me to tea in her garden. Another wanted to keep in touch and shared my reading interests. I had to say no, not only because of COVID-19, but because that type of connection might have crossed an ethical line in academic research.

This aspect of the study has made me deeply aware that as I move forward in my life's work, that I cannot do a job that will not allow me to meet with someone to share our tomatoes. And that knowledge, is a gift they gave *me*.

Chapter 5: Learning Through Spiritual Encounters (The Questionnaire)

In the previous chapters, we explored the rationale and purpose of this research, considered the value of spiritual autobiography and memoir, explored key sights of spiritual encounters cited in the literature, and I detailed the methodology and analysis methods I employed in this study.

In the next few chapters, I will be sharing the findings from the study I conducted across Canada from 2020-2021 on *Learning Through Spiritual Encounters*. In this chapter, I will introduce you to the results of Phase 1 of the study, the questionnaire asking adults residing in Canada about their spiritual encounters. Next, I will introduce you to the 10 participants whose co-written narratives follow, and offer you an invitation to explore the stories on your own. In Chapter 7, I will share a thematic analysis of the data, that emerged from the coding of the data set as described in Chapter 4.

Phase 1 Results

Demographics

There were 140 people who agreed to participate in the survey including 126 participants who completed the demographics section; 24 identified as men, 102 identified as women. The age breakdown was as follows: 15 participants were in the 18-24 range, 16 participants were 25-34, 29 participants were 35-44, 16 participants were 45-54, 24 participants were 55-64, 23 participants were 65-74, 2 participants were 75-84, and 1 participant identified in the 85 and up range.

Geography

While the vast majority of respondents were from Ontario, there were respondents from all regions of Canada except from Newfoundland, Labrador and the Northwest Territories. The breakdown across the provinces and territories was as follows: 99 participants were from Ontario, 9 from British Columbia, 5 from Prince Edward Island, 4 from Quebec, 3 from Nova

Scotia, 2 from Saskatchewan, and 1 participant in Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and the Yukon, respectively.

Education

Participants in this study tended to be highly educated; 39 people had completed a graduate degree, 36 had Bachelor's degrees, 11 had professional degrees, 27 were college graduates, and 13 people reported having completed high school.

Spiritual/Religious Identity

In terms of spiritual/religious identity, the majority of participants identified as having a spiritual practice but did not consider themselves religious. A third of all respondents did indeed identify as being religious. Specifically, 40.8% said they had a spiritual practice but did not consider themselves religious, 33.6% said they were religious, 10.4% reported being Agnostic or Uncertain, 4% Atheist, and 11.2 % Other.

Of those who expressed a religious belief, and who chose to identify (it was not a requirement of the survey), responses included: Hindu, Quaker, Anabaptist Mennonite, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic. Among those who completed this section, over 10% chose the "Other" box, which may fit with the research revolving around the challenge of language and spiritual identity, particularly around labelling oneself at all. In the text box provided for this question, some people elaborated on this choice, the most telling perhaps, a comment which read: "like all pre-programmed questionnaires, this misses the mark." Other responses offered in the text box included: *a belief in meditation and self-awareness, Unitarian, humanist, a love of life, spiritually connected to the land people and non-living relations, but not interested in a higher power, and open.*

Most participants said religion had played a very important role in their childhood (30.1%), followed by moderately (23.8%), slightly important (22.2%), extremely important (13.5%) and not at all important (10.3%).

“Have you ever had a spiritual encounter that taught you something?”

After reading through the examples provided, 118 people chose to respond to the next question: Have you ever had a spiritual encounter that taught you something? 82% said yes, and 18% said no. Of the 18% who said no, 21 people provided more insight into their experience below.

No Respondents. Of the 21 people who said they did not have a spiritual encounter that taught them something, 16 people believed that while they did not think they had personally learned from a spiritual encounter, they believed it was possible to do so. 4 people said that it might be possible (maybe), 1 said No (they did not believe that learning through spiritual encounters was possible).

In addition, 8 people said they had a spiritual practice/belief but had not had an experience of this nature, 5 people said they’d had a spiritual encounter but weren’t sure that learning had taken place, and 4 people did not have a spiritual or religious belief. Other comments included, “I don’t have a spiritual practice but am open to an encounter,” and “I’m not sure if I’ve had an encounter; I experience the power of nature, the universe and mind daily, however, I never considered them spiritual. I have just left it to being loved, lucky and lots of ‘ah-ha’ moments.”

Yes Respondents. There were 97 people who said Yes, they had a spiritual encounter that had taught them something. Below you will find a breakdown of their responses to the question items, though it is important to note that of the participants who said yes, 17 chose to stop here.

Types of Spiritual Encounters

Please note that for this question, participants could choose more than one answer. Participants were asked to select the types of encounters they had experienced as *spiritual*. Of

the 97 who said Yes, 80 people responded to this question. For example, from the list below, 52 out of 80 people had experienced nature as spiritual as indicated in brackets.

- nature (52)
- dreams/premonitions (51)
- synchronicity (46)
- meditation/silence (42)
- epiphany or sudden insight (41)
- answered prayers/miracles/blessing (32)/Artistic or Aesthetic experience (32)
- healing (28)/ an immersive activity/project hobby or FLOW state (28)
- visitation from a deceased loved one (27)
- a divine intervention or supernatural experience (21)
- childbirth/adoption or experience related to children (19)
- sexuality/romance (15)
- physical activity (14)
- Near Death Experience or close call (11)

Pilgrimage, Reiki, an act of service, psychedelics, out of body experience, and a structured ritual were also listed in the “other” box. From looking at this data, we can see that of those who responded, more than half of people reported experiencing nature (65%), dreams and premonitions (64%), followed closely by synchronicity (57%), as being among their most common spiritual experiences. These were followed by experiences of meditation, and epiphany, or sudden insight. Nearly a third of all participants reported an answered prayer or blessing. Remarkably, 27 out of 80 people reported a visitation from a deceased loved one, and 21 people had a divine intervention. That 11 people reported having had a close call or near-death experience is also quite staggering.

Learning

In the next part of the survey, participants were invited to focus on one key spiritual encounter to consider any learning that had taken place. Of the 79 people that moved on and completed the remainder of the survey: 43% chose an experience that had happened in the last 2 years and 34% chose an experience that happened over a decade ago. Tied at 11.5% were experiences that happened within 3-5 years or 6-10 years. While further research is needed, one hypothesis for this gap could be that this is linked to memory, processing, and integration of these experiences, i.e., that we may retain the most recent experiences, and those in our distant past, but there may be gaps in the middle for events that we are still in the process of integrating.

Surprise and Emotional Intensity

Participants were also asked about their levels of surprise and the emotional intensity of their experiences. As noted in an earlier chapter, Tisdell (2003) suggested that most spiritual experiences happen by surprise, and indeed, participants related high levels of surprise in their encounters. Surprise can be described as a cognitive emotion, and based on my findings in the literature review, I did wish to highlight it specifically. Overall, however, participants ranked emotional intensity as being higher (keeping in mind surprise may be a component of this). In this section of the study, participants were asked to rank their emotional intensity related to the encounter on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 representing the most intense, or strongest.

Surprise. In considering the level of surprise in their encounter:

- 40.5% ranked their surprise a 5/5
- 21.5% ranked their surprise a 4/5
- 26.6% ranked their surprise a 3/5
- 7.6% ranked their surprise a 2/5
- 3.8% ranked their surprise a 1/5

Emotional Intensity. In considering the level of emotional intensity in their encounter:

- 58.2% ranked their emotional intensity a 5/5
- 24% ranked their emotional intensity a 4/5
- 12.7% ranked their emotional intensity a 3/5
- 5% ranked their emotional intensity a 2/5
- 0% ranked their emotional intensity a 1/5

Indeed, in addition to these scores, the written text responses included in this study, as well as the in-depth interviews in Phase 2, seem to confirm the primary place of emotions in these experiences of learning through spiritual encounters.

Nature of the Learning

When asked about the nature of learning that took place in their encounter, collectively each option offered in the questionnaire was selected at least 10 times. Participants could choose more than one, and the number in the bracket indicates how many times each option was selected. This demonstrated that the content of the questionnaire was relevant to participants, and reflective of previous findings in the literature. The most common types of learning reported were increased peace, deeper spiritual understanding, increased awe and curiosity about the world, and a reaffirmation of beliefs:

- brought peace or reassurance (54)
- deepened spiritual understandings (49)
- increased sense of awe/wonder and curiosity about the world OR reaffirmed personal beliefs (41)
- learned more about who I am (37)
- made me more attentive or alert (27)
- prompted action on an issue, i.e., related to personal life or social justice (26)

- made me more compassionate (25)/received guidance to a specific problem (25)
- changed personal beliefs (22)
- sparked a new creative idea or innovation (16)
- brought peace or resolution to a relationship (13)
- learned more about another (10)

(Learnings about the nature of time, dealing with death, emotional healing and processing, the value/importance of faith were also listed under “Other”).

The majority of respondents (65%) reported that their spiritual encounter brought increased peace or reassurance. 32% of respondents said that the spiritual encounter prompted them to take action on an issue related to their own personal life or social justice. Similarly, about the same number reported increased compassion, and/or receiving guidance to a specific problem. Over one quarter of participants said that they changed their personal beliefs because of the encounter, while 20% of participants who answered this question talked about the spiritual encounter as inspiration for new innovations or creative projects.

In the “Other” box, many new ideas emerged. One theme that came up here, and repeatedly in different ways throughout the survey, particularly in the text responses, was the idea that the spiritual encounter helped participants deal with death. Other responses included: *gave me an insight, influenced my beliefs about time, helped with emotional healing and process, confirmed that faith is a gift.*

Factors That Influenced the Encounter

The survey also invited people to reflect upon any factors that they felt may have influenced their spiritual encounter. Out of the 79, 15 people spoke of stress/trauma being a factor, 6 people reported a medical or mental health issue, 5 people reported drugs as being a factor, 5 cited fatigue and 1, hallucination. Again, the “Other” box provided more detail, where people self-reported other influential factors including *grief and sadness, intense study, deep spiritual retreat, agitation, searching, emptiness, shame, peace, calm, removal of stimulus, no*

technology, a liver cleanse, deliberate practice, anesthesia, sadness, grief, and loss, physical or mental exertion.

Spiritual Beliefs

I also asked participants about their spiritual beliefs more generally, using the items from Tisdell's (2003) definition, and they were asked which of the elements below played a role in their spirituality. Again, people could choose more than one belief that resonated, and the number of responses (again, out of 79) is indicated in the brackets:

- spirituality emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things (62)
- spirituality helps make meaning (55)
- spirituality involves a sense of mystery (47)
- spirituality helps me feel more authentic (44)
- spirituality is always present with me in the work or school environment even if I don't publicly acknowledge it (41)
- spiritual experiences often happen by surprise (40)
- spirituality involves a faith practice or religion (32)
- spirituality involves symbolism, art, ritual, or culture (29)
- none of the above (2)

Again, we gain valuable insights here as we learn that 78% of the 79 people who answered this question reported that they experience interconnectedness as a component of their spirituality, with 69% sharing that their spirituality helps them make meaning. For the purposes of our exploration, it is also interesting to note that 59% of respondents believed that their spirituality involved an element of mystery, and about half reported that these experiences often happen by surprise.

Frequency of Encounters

Generally speaking, these encounters were not frequent for people. 26.6% of respondents said they happen rarely or infrequently, and 40.5% said sometimes; one third, however, still reported that they were quite common (26.6% said they happened often and 6% extremely often).

Comfort Levels Discussing

When asked if participants felt comfortable speaking about their spiritual encounters, 76 people answered this question. Of that group, 47% of participants were comfortable, followed by 18% slightly comfortable, 17% who were neither comfortable or uncomfortable, 10.5% who were slightly uncomfortable, and 6.6% who were uncomfortable. Three people chose not to answer this question. The richness and depth of the text responses provided further insight. Here are some phrases offered by participants related to their feelings about sharing spiritual encounters:

- *with persons with similar beliefs and experiences*
- *fear of what others will think*
- *comfortable to share with those close to me*
- *with folks I know are receptive to the idea of spirituality*
- *people have always seen me as outside the box...I am often approached by people who have these types of experiences and share them with me, as a safe and understanding person*
- *if they are interested*
- *amongst people who also acknowledge their spiritual sides*
- *interested in sharing my experience publicly*
- *I am fully comfortable sharing the experience I am choosing to share here in this survey*
- *open about my experiences but only share if I think it is relevant*
- *with my very close friends that I know will be able to understand the sacred side of it*

- *judgement may be some baggage you carry until you learn your journey is lighter & easier without it*
- *depends on who it is...my safety is in this history of who I am with...predominantly due to the CP I was born with*
- *I feel like people may think I'm a bit crazy*
- *depends who I am talking to...I believe it mostly has to do with fear of ridicule and rejection...diminishing over time though*
- *difficult to explain the connectedness that occurred without sounding unauthentic...the lived experience is difficult to explain in terms that others will understand*
- *I often feel like I 'other' myself when I talk about spirituality*

Impact of Pandemic

I also asked participants if they felt their spirituality had been impacted by COVID-19. 15 people responded definitely, 22 responded probably, 15 maybe, 17 probably not, and 10 said definitely not, demonstrating the wide range of experiences.

Text Responses

At the end of the survey, participants were invited to share a story about the spiritual encounter that they chose to focus on for this study. A total of 75 stories were submitted. Stories ranged from moments such as being struck by lightning, angelic encounters, or confronting a past life in Scotland, to a quiet moment in nature, or an answered prayer for a sister's broken car. Many of these will be highlighted as examples in Chapter 7.

Follow up

80 people completed this question, meaning that one person had not responded to the other questions in the Yes section, but was still willing to be contacted for an interview. Not everyone who agreed to be interviewed chose to share a story in the questionnaire, and vice versa. Out of the 75 participants who had shared a story, 57 people were willing to be contacted

for Phase 2. Out of the 5 participants who did *not* share a story, 1 person was still willing to be contacted.

In the next chapter I offer the ten narratives that play a central role in this work.

Chapter 6: Learning Through Spiritual Encounters (The Narratives)

Choose Your Own Adventure

Now that you have had an opportunity to learn about the methodology, and initial survey results, in the following pages, I will be inviting you to go on your own journey of exploration—a Choose Your Own Adventure of sorts. Shortly, I will provide you with a description of each participant including some key words chosen by each, and demographic information. In this section, I would ask you to read through these narratives at your own pace and explore them in the order that you wish to, perhaps in more than one sitting. You may find you allow yourself to linger in places that you want to, or to return to the same story again and again. Trust these impulses. Reading all of the stories will be essential before moving onto Chapter 7, where I will offer insights that relate back to the themes in the stories. You may wish to contemplate (or even take notes on) the following questions in your reading:

- Why was I drawn to this particular story?
- What words, images, or ideas popped to me when reading it?
- What emotions did the participant describe? How did this story make me feel?
- What if anything could I relate to in this story? What did I resist?
- What learning do I think took place in this encounter?
- How does this spiritual encounter fit my current world view? How might I respond to someone who shared it with me?
- What research have I already encountered in this book that might help contextualize or better understand the account?
- How are the qualities of *attentiveness*, *willingness*, and *responsiveness* present in these narratives?

The Participants

A Note on Names

Participants in this study were given the opportunity to use either their real first names or a pseudonym of their choosing, with several opportunities to change their minds. In respecting the arrangements we made as part of the study, I will not be identifying who chose which option. It is noteworthy to recognize that while uncommon in an academic study, given the personal nature of this research, using a real first name was important to many.

Participant Biographies

Anusree (Ontario) is a female in the 35-44 age bracket, who identifies as Hindu and religious. She has a graduate degree. Her encounter happened within the last 2 years and revolves around a car accident that resulted in a sudden epiphany that she wanted to have children. She discusses the details of the accident, her response in the short and long term, as well the courage it takes to navigate life and these goals, placing trust in timing with her God. Three words that came to mind for her when she described her spiritual encounter were baby, her husband's name, and God. She describes both the emotional intensity and level of surprise from the encounter as a 5; "I had a horrific car crash. My car turned and went into 4 lanes of oncoming traffic. Unscratched, I came out, completely calm at the centre of my being, and knew I needed to have kids."

Poetry (Ontario) is a graduate student in the 35-44 range who described religion as "extremely important" in her early life, but identified on the questionnaire as agnostic/uncertain. She typically feels uncomfortable discussing spiritual encounters. In the interview, she described moving away from her own religious beliefs 3-5 years ago, towards a state of nothingness and openness to all. In her story, she compares her process of moving away from God to a break-up. In re-imagining her Creator, she discusses some of the gifts and challenges encountered along the way. The words Poetry chose were heartbreak, emptiness, and kindness. She, too, ranked both her emotional experience and surprise a 5/5: "My spiritual

experience enabled me to distinguish between religion and God. It also made me realize that when it comes to God, I know nothing. This state of knowing nothing/nothingness enables me to perceive myself and the world around me with much greater clarity.”

Ben (Ontario) is a man in the 45-54 range. He identifies as agnostic/uncertain and has completed a graduate degree. He describes an experience that happened over a decade ago, participating for many years in a ritual Pagan festival, held outdoors. He described the nature of the ritual and its value to him in the long run, and how it has impacted his sense of spirituality, and desire to mentor other men. He stated that these experiences happen to him infrequently. He ranked his level of surprise a 3, and the emotional intensity a 5 out of 5: “A festival I used to attend hosted an event for men...based on a variety of ancient pagan faiths. It was a contest of mental and physical challenges against other men. The winner of the contest ritually/theatrically slays the previous champion. The new king is the spiritual leader of the community until it is their time to be ‘slain’.” His three words were perseverance, strength of spirit, and enlightenment.

Josee (Nova Scotia) is a woman in the 35 to 44 range employed by the Canadian military. She says she has a spiritual practice and beliefs but does not describe herself as religious. In our interview, she described an experience of emotional release during a self-administered Reiki treatment as a spiritual encounter, which occurred within the last two years while she was on leave from the military. She talked about using this knowledge to support her therapy, and how she has integrated it into other areas of her life. She described her surprise a 3 out of 5, and the emotional intensity a 5. The three words that came to mind when she thought about her encounter were love, pain, and release.

Father Frank (Prince Edward Island) Father Frank is a Roman Catholic, has a Graduate degree, and is in the 65-74 age bracket. His encounter details a very specific moment of hearing the voice of God calling him into the vocation of priesthood on Christmas Day in 1973. He details his journey with this decision, navigating it with friends and family. He

described many aspects of his spiritual life and philosophical underpinnings as a priest, and the impact that this call has had on himself and others. He says these types of spiritual encounters “often” happen to him and ranked both his surprise and emotional intensity a 5. Three words that Father Frank used to sum up his encounter were: **Positive Life Transforming** (he requested they be written in bold, as they appear here).

Peter (Ontario) is a man with a Bachelor’s degree, who identifies as Religious (Anabaptist/Mennonite), described religion as “very important” in his early years. The encounter he described happened within the last 2 years. It involved an archetypal dream experience which contained detailed symbolism, and which provided insights into his own life during a period of major transition professionally. His three words were: interesting, visitation, and meaningful. He ranked both surprise and emotional intensity a 5 out of 5.

Celia (British Columbia) identifies as a Quaker, and describes herself as Religious. She is in the 55-64 range and holds a Bachelors’ degree. She describes an encounter from her late teens in which she left the mountains of BC and went many miles away to board with a Quaker family. She details a moment of deep loneliness where she called out for Jesus, not having previously had a spiritual connection to him, and described the feelings of peace and comfort that followed. She ranked her level of surprise a 5, and her emotional intensity a 4 out of 5 and says these types of incidents infrequently/rarely happen to her. She also described her current practice as a Quaker in Meeting for Worship and some of the insights that that tradition has brought into her life. The words surprise, faith, and peace came to mind for her when describing her encounter: “At a time when I was feeling great loneliness, I asked Jesus for help and immediately felt a deep peace. This surprised me because I don’t believe in Jesus. I learned that we are never really alone, and that God doesn’t care which names we use.”

Jan (Quebec) has a graduate degree, and is in the 55-64-year age bracket, working as a Spiritual Director. She describes herself as “Religious” (Christian). After a period of great sadness and feelings of wanting to die, Jan fell on icy pavement in Montreal, and described an

out of body experience that felt like an angelic encounter. She discusses her experiences with traumatic brain injury, and how her spirituality has been impacted by the learnings from her accidents, and the kindness of others. She uses the words: grace, mercy, and love in describing her encounter and ranked both her surprise and emotional intensity at a 5.

Wendy Luella (Ontario) is in the 55-64 range. She has a graduate degree and identifies as Universalist Unitarian. In her account, she describes a 6-week period of her life during her twenties, in which she experienced a profound sense of heightened awareness and interconnectedness, while studying the writings of Meister Eckhart. She talks about how this phase opened up a space in her life for healing and embodied learning, and ultimately impacted her practice as a song writer, minister, and facilitator of community singing. She describes her encounter as: Yes. Wow. Yeah.

Maggie (Ontario) has a graduate degree and is in the 65-74 age bracket. She described herself as having a spiritual practice and beliefs, but would not say she is “religious.” Spirituality was moderately important in her upbringing, and she says these encounters happen to her “often.” In this encounter, she ranked both her level of surprise and emotional intensity as a 5. She details her work as a chaplain in a long-term care residence, working with adults with dementia. Specifically, she discusses a clairaudient experience she had, which led her on a path to learning more about liminal space, which in turn, provided deeper insight into some of the groups she was running with her clients at the time. She describes her encounter as cryptic, provocative, and funny: “I worked with seniors with dementia in a long-term care setting. In group time, I was getting some extraordinary responses of deep connection but could not figure out how they were happening. I had a dream one morning and heard a voice saying, “It’s liminal space Maggie.”

The Narratives

Anusree

It doesn't add up. It's just not possible. I didn't hurt myself or anyone else. I think my life would have changed had I accidentally took somebody else's life. I didn't hurt anyone else in the process. How did that happen? Everyone was like "Oh my God, you're so lucky."

And that's one word people use. I don't.

It's not luck.

As I was driving away from my friend's baby shower, I had a thought in my head: *Oh my God, what if I get into a car accident?* But that's an intrusive thought. Many people get those types of things. I get them all the time. So those thoughts come and go. But I remember thinking, *I've got a feeling a car accident is coming. What if I get into one?* Or something along the lines of that, you know? And I got on the highway and started driving. As I was going 100 kilometers an hour, a car came from my right side and tried to cut me off. And in my instinct to get away from the car, I turned the steering wheel. My hand on my steering wheel moved to the left to avoid the car. Everything happened very fast. I obviously overturned to get away from this car that was cutting me off in a very sharp way. And he was about to hit me. I did not want to get hit. On an instinct I went left.

I realized my wheel was completely out of control. And the car just started to spin. I tried to go the other way to get control of the wheel. But I couldn't. It was completely spinning...and my car spun... and went to the opposite direction and started to travel into oncoming traffic. Four lanes of oncoming traffic—and hit the guardrail. The airbag went off. And I felt and I smelled burning flesh instantly. And then I remember thinking to myself: *Oh my God, I'm alive. I did not have a baby. Shit! I did not have a baby. I should have had a baby with my husband.*

Then I heard music. And I was like, *where is this music coming from?* I realized my phone was playing music was somewhere at the bottom of the car. And I yanked it out with the white cord because it was plugged in. I pulled out my phone, I held my phone. And then I realized that the entire car was completely totaled. And the seatbelt had burnt my skin. It yanked me so hard that it burned my skin in the front of my chest, because I was wearing a spaghetti strap blue and white dress that my mom had given me.

I remember saying to myself, *I am alive. I'm alive. Am I hurting? I'm not hurting, I'm alive. Everything is fine. I remember thinking, why am I so calm? Like why am I not freaking out? Am I in shock? What's going on?* And then I thought, *okay, there's nothing to freak out about because I'm absolutely fine! I don't have a scratch on me. I am here because God wants me here. Because God wants to use me to fulfill my destiny, because that hasn't happened yet.*

Of course I'm not dead. Because this has God's hands all over it. I am constantly watched; I am constantly protected. I'm constantly taken care of. That was a huge reaffirmation. That's what happened. I knew what I knew.

I was surprised by the two people that helped me out of the blue, that pulled up their car, you know, pulled over and checked, asked how I was doing. I was surprised by their kindness. I was surprised by the tow truck guy's kindness. I was really surprised by how fast fast fast fast fast it happened. I know that sounds ridiculous. It's a car accident. Of course, it's going to happen really fast. But the whole thing was under two seconds. I would say five seconds. It was so fast. And before I knew what was going on, it was done. No, that's not true. I knew what was going on. I was like, I'm in a car accident. And then it was done. Boom, finished. And I was suddenly like, Holy fuck, okay.

I learned that my husband and I are very different people—with our reactions. I had anger towards my husband for sounding so casual when I called him. Later when we discussed it, he was like, "I genuinely thought you got into a fender bender at a parking lot. I genuinely thought that's what you were saying." He is very, very practical in how he takes care of me. By the time he showed up to the hospital, he himself had eaten and he brought food for me. He's very calm. He can be very calm under pressure. His way of taking care is by asking: does she have food? Is she warm? Does she have her medication? He showed up thinking of all those things because he knew I would need them. But I don't think like that. I show up hysterical, screaming. And that's not me putting myself down. That's just my reaction. To me that is love, but that type of reaction is a little bit useless to the person that's in trouble.

I remember later when we were talking about it, I said, "Who the fuck eats before they show up to their wife?" But in his mind, he was like *you're in an ambulance. I knew you were safe. I knew you were traveling, and I knew I had to make food for you because I did not want you hungry, because you get really sick when you're hungry—and I knew if I didn't eat, I would be useless at a hospital when I had to talk to the cops. So, while your food was heating up, I'm shoving food down my throat and talking to insurance while you were traveling because I knew I could do all of those things at the exact same time.*

It's so funny, I cannot believe I even say this. But I feel like there's something to learn from his way of executing. If you just take a step back and calmly evaluate what needs to get done. I don't think like that at all. It doesn't come naturally to me. You know, I'm not somebody that's going to be like, what are the practical things somebody needs? And I think it's very strange when people think like that, but there's an admiration that came from it. And it does pay to just take a

step back and go, what needs to get done? It's worth it to think that way, you know. Even though it made me very mad. But after our conversations, I was like, okay, I get you. I see why.

I also learned that I get tired while I drive. It could be the arthritis in my eye. It could be. I don't know. But I learned about putting boundaries on how much I am willing to hustle bustle. And how long I should be doing it for. But 100%, kids. That was the biggest realization, beyond a doubt. I was just a bit like, whoa, holy shit, because I was slapped in the face with that information.

We spoke about it yesterday. This is our consequence for living courageously—things are a little bit later. It's the same with me and my marriage too, right? I would have wanted to have been married a long time ago; it didn't happen. But I also chose to be particular with the type of person I wanted to marry. I could have had an arranged marriage. My culture celebrates that. I could have done all those things. But I chose to find the person that was right for me, that aligned with my soul. And I chose to trust God to execute that. As a result of all those choices, it came way later than I would have liked.

We both want it. Just timeline wise, the way our lifestyle is, where we want to be in our life, and the amount of space we want... it hasn't happened yet. But it's definitely present. I know people are like, “just have the child and it'll work out for you” and that's great for them. But I want to make sure my child has a standard of living that I feel comfortable with. In my faith, the timing of God is above all, and I have left this to God who knows the things I want and need to feel safe. Like I always say to my husband, what else can you do when you're choosing a life of bravery?

Poetry

I inherited a lot of my beliefs and practices from family, from the religious culture, and a lot of what others have to say. It wasn't only a part of my life experiences, but also a part of my personality, who I was as a human being, my entire belief. Not only my belief system, but my morality, my values, and my principles, were all affiliated with my religious beliefs and practices. But I have moved away from that.

My grandfather passed away in 2016. And after he passed away, I started wearing the hijab, and I started trying to go closer to God. Instead of going closer to God in that process of being more religious—and, maybe trying to be more legal and fundamental about the whole thing—I realized how much I changed as a person. And it wasn't a good place to be. So, it's ironic because I started the journey thinking that it would bring me closer to God, but it took me away.

I hardly ever did my own reading and research about religion. But when my husband and I started reading more, to understand more, that's when we started to find out things that didn't exactly sit well with us and the kind of people we were. It was, I would say, a gradual sort of move away from religion because of everything we understood when we started reading more about it academically, not only based on a stubborn belief that *no, whatever my belief is, it's right!* So, when we sort of took a more critical perspective, that's when we started moving away from it. It happened over a period of a year, that we realized we cannot live like this anymore.

And I just decided that this is all crap. I don't want to believe it anymore. After moving away from religion, it was a lot of emptiness. It was like a heartbreak. It certainly felt like one of the biggest heartbreaks I'd ever had. I was angry. It was like when you're still in love with the person, but you cannot live, cannot stay, with that person anymore. You know you just have to move away, break free, let go; for your own sake.

But then the transition away from religion, into the place where we are right now, took another year. And that year has been the hardest—when we had nothing to find support from. I didn't know where to go. And the knowledge that I'm not going to turn upwards anymore was devastating to me. I kind of felt like I have nothing to protect me anymore, nowhere to turn. Real longing, sort of. The sadness in that state of nothingness at first. I would often experience guilt. I had this feeling of letting God down for not connecting and believing the way I used to. So, what I did (and this is something that I'm figuring out now), is that I blocked myself completely from feeling anything. I sort of crossed the bridge and burned it. I did that intentionally. I didn't want anything to have to do with my religion anymore.

It was very surprising that it was even possible. I used to say that I will always be on God's side. Sometimes it feels as though perhaps, I don't know, maybe God intended for that to happen, for me to move away. And I don't know if I'll ever be returning or not, but it sometimes used to feel as though God wanted my perception of God to change. To bring me closer to the truth, maybe? I don't know. In the period of transitioning away from God and religion, I was devastated as a human being. I had no self-confidence. I had no happiness. I had no peace of mind; my mind and my entire body were full of stress. I went through a lot of medical and psychological complications because of that. But last year, in summer, when I came back from my medical leave, I faced some academic changes that brought a renewed sense of direction. After that happened, it felt like a divine intervention, as though God was telling me: *You know, I'm there. You may have all your windows and doors closed. You may be angry with me right now. You may not want to have to do anything with me right now. But I'm there.* You know how stars are there in the sky, even when there is the sun? I may have all my doors and windows closed, even today. But God, is there, I was being told. I don't know how else to explain it. So, it's as if you've been in love with someone, and that person breaks your heart. But then that person comes back and tells you they really love you. You're not saying I love you too, but you're just taking comfort in the fact that the person is still there. I think I'm doing much better overall. I think I'm becoming me again, slowly but surely.

This experience, my journey away from religion, has created the opportunity for me to really know myself; it has, and is still, educating me about how to go closer to my truth. There's this saying that learning is not the filling of a pail, but it's the lighting of a fire. But to me, it kind of feels like it's neither. It's not the filling of a pail nor the lighting of a fire. It's basically about having the pail and knowing how to fill it. And having a match and knowing how to light it. Learning is something that I must do on my own. If I'm not receptive or open to learning, I cannot be taught. I had to empty my mind of everything I was previously taught and told by others to start looking for my pail and filling it myself. And that is the path that I am on right now. That is the best lesson ever.

I have moved away from religion and that is helping me understand myself and my truth, and maybe even God better. If I were religious, I think I would have taught my daughter about the dos and don'ts prescribed in the book, or by the authorities. And I don't do that anymore. I guess I would say that the understanding of right and wrong—good or bad—and the way I explain it to my daughter is broader; a broader perspective than it would have been if I were involving religion in my parenting. Since I'm not doing that anymore, I think I have the courage to tell my daughter that we celebrate everything, and we believe in everything. And we love everyone, and we think

everyone is equal. But if I were religious, I wouldn't have been able to do that with a whole lot of integrity.

There's always, always, this perception of how a grad student should be coming from my culture. But now I sort of see that doesn't necessarily have to be the only standard. And I've tried to fit into different academic molds too. But I can be whatever kind of a learner I want to be. And that should be okay. As long as learning is taking place and the learning is being applied. So that's something that I've discovered, you know, that I don't need to be validated by somebody else.

I recently lost my grandmother as well. That was in November. And that was right before my research proposal defense. I would spend my nights staying up working on my proposal. Just a couple of days before my grandma passed away, I sort of had a vision of her telling me, just this one word, that I could, that I can...it still rings in my ears. She said, *Believe*. That's all she said. And then she passed away two days later back in in my home country. When my grandfather passed away in 2016, I was devastated. I was in total shock. I didn't know how to handle myself. But this time around, I kind of feel like with her passing away, it made me a lot more mature in the way I think and handle myself. She left me with a lot of confidence, a lot of calm. And I don't know how that happened. But I can feel the huge difference.

I think I'm doing better academically. I am making a conscious effort not to stress myself out. I'm trying to get better. I'm trying to make my relationships better. I'm trying to help people more and I'm trying to let go of bad memories. I'm basically trying to work on myself and become a better me. Right now, it's all very quiet and calm within me, because I only look to myself for everything that I need. I started making journal entries recording my changes, just so that it would allow me to go back and read and kind of think about where I've come—how far I've come. I do want to write a poem about it, or maybe do a painting. I think I'm holding myself back. But I have written pages and pages about it.

My biggest learning would be how insignificant, yet important, I am. I'm equally as significant as a tree outside my window. Or maybe a squirrel sitting on the top of that tree. I think I am more connected to everything around me. Everything in nature. And I mean, everything. I'm a part of everything. And that's something that I teach my kid as well. If we are a part of everything, the same energy flows through all of us. So just because you can stand and walk on two feet does not make you any more important than a plant that's growing in a pot on your window. I haven't seen me, in life, like that before. But I do now. I can see myself doing things differently, looking at things differently, talking about things differently. And that's how I know that the learning was instilled. I think I'm being able to walk in other people's shoes a little more. That's something I always said I should do. But now I can see myself doing it. When I think about the whole journey

that is still ongoing, I kind of feel that the biggest thing that I've learned is to be kind to myself, and everybody and everything around me.

My daughter, my husband and I, we do this exercise often: we sit down with pens and paper, and we try to draw how we imagine our Creator. And my husband and I find our drawings changing all the time, but my daughter's stays constant. I often wonder if believers ever try to imagine God at all. If they do, what do they imagine? How do they imagine God? I try not to use the word God anymore. I try to use the word Creator to describe something that I haven't seen but is present in me and everywhere in the universe. I kind of feel that I am part of the universe, *and* the universe is a part of me. God, the Creator, is in this universe, or multiverse, or the many dimensions. Creator is all of it, and in me, and I am in it. We are entwined. I don't know. That source of light, that source of my spirit, holds the entire universe and everything within it. And that is also within me. This is currently how I feel about my Creator, the source of my creation, or the source of love, or whatever it is that is changing me to be kinder and kinder.

Ben

So, you know, someone decides to attend some type of event that they normally wouldn't. Say they're going to the opera. And they think, oh, the opera is all just pomp and circumstance, a bunch of rich people sitting around in a room, and some person screaming on stage in some language they don't understand. But then they go, and they actually have that emotional moment where it's like, Oh my God, I can actually see the beauty in this, I can actually connect with this. This is now something more than I ever thought it was. It's that type of thing that crosses over a threshold that maybe you knew was there, maybe you didn't know was there, but in that crossing over, your eyes just opened in a way that they hadn't previously.

I attended the festival for many years prior to participating in the ritual. Then I competed for a couple of years and won. Part of what happens when you win, is that you then go on to become part of the group that organizes the event, helping to run and judge some of the competitions. The ritual itself has its origins in this pagan festival, adopting elements from a variety of spiritual paths ranging from age-old tribal ceremonies to contemporary heathen and pagan rites, and fusing them with contests of strength, martial prowess, and will. Generally, this included a men's ritual and a women's ritual—a celebration of that gender. I've heard that it now includes non-binary and other elements. But years ago, there was that stronger divide: this is the ritual for men, this is a ritual for women; not in an exclusionary sense, but in a celebratory sense, exploring and glorifying the divinity in each gender.

One year, there wasn't going to be a men's ritual because the person who was leading it either failed to attend or decided to opt out. Someone I know decided that didn't sit well with him, and so he kind of just threw together a competition for the men. It was very loosely based on historical Celtic and European cultural traditions, whereby, you know, the best of the men (who wasn't the ruler, but one of the younger, stronger men) would live a good life for a year and be an example. At that time, basically he was being prepared to be a literal sacrifice to the gods—*we give you the best of us*—the idea being that the payment for them laying down their life was year of good living. Plus, they were doing quite a service for their community, at least as they viewed it. So in that first year, this was leveraged into a series of physical challenges, and the first person that won was deemed to be the Stag King. The concept was that the winner of the current year would, in a theatrical sense, slay the previous King, and that was where the sacrifice happened. Some people got very interested and very involved and tried to exert some influence over the community for the better; others viewed it strictly a ceremonial title, and never did a thing with it, which was fine, because there were no preconceived notions as to what to do about it.

The only way to witness it was via participation. People were told it was not intended for the larger audience, because there's no intent for this to be showboating and showing off how great you are. This is about you showing your worth, but also competing against yourself to some small degree. Being observed might make people self-conscious or cause them to start doing that sort of peacocking which was not the point of any of it.

The heat of the day never seemed to fail, always no clouds, lots of sun, no rain, it was all just hot, dry, and punishing. It really added to the whole experience of it being a very draining event. The event is held remote from the rest of the camping area, basically a field that was unused for anything else. On the edge of that field, there was a wooded area, where typically only the individual stuff would be done. At the start, there would be a general cry to get the men together who wanted to join. A couple of people would be sent through the campground to yell "This is now happening, please congregate at the meeting point!" Whoever was there would then be spoken to by the person presiding over the event to let them know what they were getting involved in, whether they felt up to this. Then there'd be a general procession, with a foot race to the place where the events would be held. And that was part of the competition.

It was very unique in my experience. Well, you know, they're going at it tooth and nail, but nobody gets hurt. It's not strictly the results of the contest, but the behaviors and attitudes you observed during the contest that would inform who you deem to be the best competitor. From the outside to the people who didn't participate, this would just look like boys' club shenanigans, people running around in a circle playing grab ass and being silly, but there were a lot of people that were very moved by it. Really, you get as much out of it as you want to. Some people did treat it no differently than a sports day at the Boy Scouts. But for other people, there was a lot more to it. There was an active attempt to make it more contemplative. One year, a musician I know was the reigning king, and he asked people to write a poem, and that was part of that competition. Essentially you get to design the event if you so choose. There are a lot of repeated events from previous years, because you don't need to reinvent the wheel every single time. But a lot of people try to put their own spin on it.

A simple question can be asked: Why do you think you deserve to win? It's interesting, because there were people asked who didn't know why they got involved, and they felt a bit overwhelmed by it. They came to answer that they didn't think they deserved to win. They had that realization in the moment. I feel there's a lot of value to that when they have that type of insight. Once I suggested to one of the men that his 9 or 10-year-old son be the one that asked the question. For this reason, the men were led to a place apart from the larger group and then blindfolded so they wouldn't spoil the game. And then they'd have the blindfold taken off and were

presented with a young boy saying, “Why should you be my Stag King?” A couple of guys broke down crying over that.

It really is run in a manner where the space is intended to be transformative. Whether that’s purely spiritual thing, or whether that is a more of a psychology matter, I don’t tend to put a hard line between those two things. Friends of mine follow a druidic faith. And when they cast circle, that space, for that time, is a space apart from regular physical space. They don’t think they go to the moon or anything crazy, it’s just a matter of during the ritual, this space is sacred. We have cast this circle, and this circle is for us to do the work that we’re doing. These are our prayers, these are our offerings, so on and so forth. And when the ritual closes, they disassemble that circle. Again, almost all of it is a metaphorical one, where they make certain acknowledgments. Then they say thank you to whatever attending gods or spirits they’ve called upon. It’s that same kind of thing. The event is very much building a ritual space. The ritual occurs within that space. And then afterwards, you return to the real world. It’s actually not unlike the sweat lodges I’ve attended, where the space inside the sweat lodge feels like a whole other planet, and then you come outside, you’re like, *Oh, yeah, the rest of the world is still here, too*. But you feel very out of step with it for a little while until you come back to yourself.

I know people that participate in what they call ecstatic dance. Basically, they come together, and they will usually have someone DJ the music, and they will actively not partake in any mind-altering substances—no alcohol, no drugs are allowed. And they’ll just simply try and lose themselves in dance, and the flow that they feel, and do what they like. That could be an expression of spirituality. Whether they’re aware of it, or whether that’s their intent, I feel to a degree that that’s what is happening there. It’s just the notion of keeping an open mind. You know, wearing the correct vestments, and being somber doesn’t make you more or less spiritual than somebody wearing a sarong dancing under the solstice sun.

This is learning because it is that deeper understanding of oneself. It is hard to define the ephemeral elements when you expect one thing and then encounter something very different. I probably had the same realization that many other people had after their first participation. You can do research, you can read up, you can try and do and know everything around it—but until you actually go skydiving, you don’t fundamentally know what that feels like. And you don’t know how you were going to react, not genuinely. It’s that kind of a thing, where it’s just that *aha* moment.

Mostly, it was down to being able to facilitate that type of realization for people. Understanding that “Oh, yeah, that was the day I realized that this. This meant something more than just fun and games in the woods.” To set it up in such a way that it gives them the opportunity

to have that personal understanding, so that they could go to a place where I had been previously. It was very gratifying, being able to do that. To get people sort of over that hurdle. It's like helping someone who's been unsuccessfully meditating, when they say; "Yeah, I just sit down for 10 minutes. And all I do is think about the laundry I've got to do, what I'm gonna have for dinner, and it never does anything for me. Meditation is baloney," but then you're actually able to take them through a guided meditation, and they are actually able to get to that place where they can free their mind from being constantly nagged by those other thoughts. If you've done any meditation, you know it's almost impossible to quiet that entirely, but being the person that's able to facilitate that transcendent moment—where even if it's only for a few seconds, even if it's only for that day—there is that deeper understanding. That, I think, has bigger echoes through their life. I hope they had that.

More contemporarily, it's less based on that competition or holding that role, but continuing to talk to, and help guys through situations is something that I make myself available for. I don't know, it feels a bit grandiose, but to be able to act as an elder and specifically to other men. Especially with the notion that there are lot of pitfalls in modern society where groups of men are like, *Yeah, come hang with us*. Then you find out they have certain far-right leanings that are distasteful and unfortunate. There's a specific issue of that in the pagan community whereby a lot of white supremacists are co-opting Norse symbolism and Norse theology out of context. It's something I'm painfully aware of, that there are people using faith to basically preach hate. But on occasion, I was asked by people entering the competition, or just generally, by younger men in their 19-20s, that sort of range, for advice, or insight and things, which was fascinating and gratifying.

My current spirituality has been augmented through some of the practical tools of therapy. The notion of attempting to practice meditation on a more regular basis and attempting to engage in cognitive behavioral therapy where you are more aware, and more conscious of how you're feeling, and what you're feeling, and what you're doing. And not doing that in a format whereby it'd be deemed, you know, a ritual. I don't light a candle, I don't ring a bell. It just makes me stop and think.

Josee

The spiritual aspect of life is not something that's comfortably talked about. I would just like to see that change. It's such a huge part of my life. And I know it's a large part of other people's lives, and I see it being integrated more and more. But a lot of the time, people are just so uncomfortable talking about it. Even I hesitate to talk about my spirituality because people interpret that as me being uber religious, and I don't associate with any given religion.

Spirituality, if I were to put words to it, is just kind of in line with faith; believing in something that I can't see, that's not necessarily tangible. It's what sparks my soul. I kind of go with it. I just do what feels right in the realm of the intangible. I remember feeling like I needed to label what I believed in, and I tried for a long time, but nothing ever felt right. And for a little while, I was in the closet, so to speak. I always have a hard time describing my spirituality because there always seems to be a requirement for a label. And I don't have one. Some things that I've experienced that I would associate with spirituality, at least in my life, are things like knowings. I've often "known" things. My intuition is super strong. Sometimes I experience what I guess you would call déjà vu; I've had experiences with that, just stronger. In those times I can tell you exactly what's about to happen in great detail, just before it happens. I always feel weird saying this, but sometimes I also get something like deliveries of information—an information dump—something I needed to know and was searching for. This particular experience was the first time I've ever been given information I was not asking for in this moment. It was completely unexpected.

I'm in the military. I've been in the military for 18 years. But I'm on long term sick leave right now, so at that time, I hadn't been working for a few months. I recently went through a very dark period in my life, and coincidentally, this is when Reiki was introduced to me. It really changed my life. I wouldn't say it saved me, but it really, really helped me get through this. And it has only enriched my spirituality. It's not a religious practice. It's a spiritual practice. In the last three, four, maybe five years, spirituality has become more solid and ingrained in my life. Definitely, in this last year, it's become part of my every day. I'm at the point where it's very difficult for me to not just give everything up and somehow live that life, if that makes any sense.

I fell in love with Reiki the minute it came into my life. When I'm doing self-treatments, I often do my Reiki after supper in my sacred room/library. It's just technically a third bedroom but I use it for my spiritual practices. One wall is filled with books. I'm a bibliophile. I have tons of books. All different kinds of books. And crystals. I love crystals, stones, and bits of Mother Earth. I have lots of crystals. I have bits and pieces from around the world from my travels. I have

a dark blue upholstered chair, and my altar. It's a part of a tree trunk. It's huge! I found this tree that was cut down not too far from my home. It was cut into segments and oddly enough it was also stripped of its bark. It was just so friggin' beautiful. It's whitish gray. And it has all these beautiful patterns on it. It probably weighs about 500 pounds. But I got it into my house. I took three segments. One is in the front as a decorative piece. One is in my sacred room as my altar, and the other is in the back outside, and is my outdoor alter.

In Reiki, when you do a new level of training, it's highly recommended that you do a Reiki 21-day detox which is self-administering Reiki treatments every day during that time. I had just completed my level one, and I would say this was maybe a little past the halfway mark in the detox. I don't know if it was the Reiki itself, or if it was a separate type of spiritual experience that happened while I was doing Reiki. It could have been something else. I was doing my treatment, and sometimes I put out an intention of what I want to focus on during the treatment. I didn't have an intention that day if I'm not mistaken. Shortly before that session, I'd had sort of an epiphany. I realized that when I was doing the self-administered Reiki treatments that I was trying to be just the practitioner in the moment. In reality, I was both the practitioner and the patient, and I needed to allow myself to be both during those sessions. I needed to stop disregarding the fact that I'm also the patient. Like, *Hey, you're also the patient. You're the practitioner, and the patient. Allow yourself to experience whatever you need to while you're doing the session.*

I am recovering from a burnout and post deployment difficulties. The burnout has been physically, emotionally, mentally difficult on me. I'm not used to being like this. But despite that, especially since the Reiki was introduced into my life, I was doing good. I was feeling very grateful for having that introduced into my life, at that particular time. I'm also in therapy, you know, partly because of my deployment. When I was doing that session, that night, my mind started to wander. I started to have... go down... a spiral of thought with regards to some things that happened in the deployment. And I tried to shake it off. Then I realized I wasn't quite going down the same thought spiral that I usually do when I'm struggling with it. I just decided...allowed myself to think the thoughts and feel the feelings. I have a hard time describing what happened. I was still doing the Reiki treatment on myself, and when I allowed myself the freedom to think and feel, all of a sudden, I just started hearing...something talking to me. I still don't know if it was myself, but not like my physical self, obviously. I guess my soul or my spirit, whatever you want to call it, or something else. I don't think there was a gender if that makes any sense. But if I have to "stick" a gender to it, it leaned more towards the feminine; gentle, soft, but firm in the sense like, "Hey, pay attention to what I have to say. This is important."

It's hard because I can't say specifics about the deployment. But it was like "Hey, not *this*—but *this* and *this*, and *this*." You know? Sort of talking to me about things that I hadn't been realizing entirely about the deployment that were so painful to me. All of a sudden, something was telling me what those things were. And I was so shocked because I had never even thought about that. It hadn't even remotely occurred to me until this voice was saying, "Look at this. Look at this. Look at this. Look at this!" As the voice was saying these things I was just bawling. It was like this enormous release—not a healing—but like an enormous release. And yeah, I couldn't control it. I couldn't. I just let it happen. When it was over, I journaled about it and obviously talked to my therapist. And it very much changed the course of things in my career, my emotions, my thoughts, my therapy. Would I have come to the realization of those things? Maybe, maybe not. But it would have probably taken me forever and a day to figure it out. Even my therapist. It's not things I had necessarily talked about in therapy, because I didn't think to.

Being handed an understanding: *here's what you need to look at. Here's what your trauma is, what your pain is.* And not just in that moment, but that led to a lot of work in therapy and in my own personal life. It's only been a few months, so the healing is still happening. I'm still trying to figure out and come to terms with that information. I'm still trying to heal. But lots of learning has happened on a practical and emotional side. There are some tips and tricks that we're working on in therapy. The information being imparted in and of itself was a huge learning experience. Like I said, it's not something that had occurred to me. So, I was learning about my pain and trauma. And I don't know that I would have figured that out anytime soon.

That knowledge is still very present. I don't know how to describe it. It was not sad. Not the right word. It was difficult. But at the same time, I guess I could have snapped out of it, if I wanted to. But it just felt like such a gift. Like I was being a given gift, like "*Hey, let me help you out in your healing.*" It felt like my guts were being ripped out. What was being said was very difficult, and the feelings associated with those revelations were very difficult, but the experience itself, if I remember correctly, felt like such a deepening of resonance with my spiritual practice. It was just such a strong spiritual encounter that I was feeling very grateful, very thankful, and almost a deepening of love for all of that. I was so deep in that moment that it wasn't out of the blue. It was just perfect. The perfect time for that kind of encounter. I didn't feel surprised at the encounter. It just felt right. There have been other encounters where I was like, "Whoa, hello, what's up?" But not this one. This one was beautiful. It was soft. It was gut wrenching because of what came to me, but the experience itself was beautiful. Shocking in the sense that I had not even looked at that in my head at all. Maybe it was buried like deep, deep, deep down in there.

Thinking back, I realize the more I let go, the more freely these experiences happen. I'm a little bit of a control freak. And I guess part of this spiritual journey, especially in this last year, has been about letting go and just having faith. I learned that when you let go and just let things happen, things happen, and it doesn't have to be a friggin' miracle. It's just you open up, and let go. The divine is all around. I also have an energy therapist and I've had this conversation a couple of times with her. It's funny because I have all sorts of faith. And I rely on my intuition quite a bit, and more as time goes on. But my relationship with the divine, I've often questioned. I don't know that anybody's paying attention. Or to me, specifically. I don't know if Spirit or the Universe will have my back if I really need it. And I'm often trying to control my life. I have a lot of fear with regards to security and survival. And every time I have an experience, it just reinforces the fact that the divine is in my life. In everybody's life. It's just there, whether you believe in it or not, or whether you think it'll be there for you or not. It's just there. Sometimes it's sort of like a smack upside the head like, *Hey, I'm here. You know, I'm here for you. I'm here. Period.* When things like this happen, the more I integrate it into my life, and the more I develop my relationship with it, I notice it more. Like I just have.

I'm not 100% sure why I haven't been more open about my spirituality, but I have some thoughts on it that I think are part of why. This is going sound weird, but it almost feels like ancestral wounds. Like an irrational fear and that's part of ancestral wounds. If that makes any sense. Nobody's going to *fucking burn* me at the stake. But there's this weird fear like this is something I shouldn't talk about. It's like smoke in the background. I still feel that a tiny bit, but it has lessened over time. Setting that aside, in the past, it was just more of a personal thing. It had to do with my partners in those years. My first husband and my second husband were definitely not spiritual, to say the least. And I was very young. I didn't understand what would happen to my relationship if I was more open about my beliefs and my spirituality. Especially my second husband. He was very Christian; not like we'd go to church every Sunday, but his beliefs were very Christian. I got that weird fear. I just kept it hidden. Shame, fear. Fear of loss. I didn't want to lose my husbands or be ridiculed. I didn't want my spirituality ridiculed. I know that would have caused a huge rift. It's one thing to hide it. It's another thing for someone to reject it and give you a hard time for it. I couldn't have come to terms with that in my relationship. I feel like my kind of spirituality is becoming more and more accepted. Not that acceptance matters anymore. Though I recently realized that I did a disservice to my son in that I didn't integrate it. I mean, we've had discussions here and there. But I didn't integrate spirituality in his life. And that makes me sad. Very sad. Thankfully, he does believe in something. He doesn't know what that is. I mean, do any of us? But at least that spark is there and that makes me very happy.

I have tried to journal many times over the years. And I am always an epic failure at it if that's a thing you can fail at. Now I journal a little here and there. It's not an everyday thing. I just journal when I feel compelled to do it. I guess it's spiritual journey journaling that I do, things that I don't want to forget. I've tried to draw, and it was just a lack of privacy that stopped me. I don't want anybody to see my whatever, whether that's writing, journaling, painting, drawing. I'm just a super private person. There is some writing I do that is part of a process, and then I burn it. Just to release that energy, I guess. I still don't consider myself creative, but apparently, I am. I recently started writing a book. I mean, God, I don't know how that's gonna turn out. I just I felt compelled to write. I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. But I'm doing it. I'm essentially writing letters to Mother Earth. I feel a very big connection to Mother Earth. I am writing letters to her. And I'm going include ways to honor Mother Earth and ways to honor ourselves in relation to that, and maybe add a few fun or cute things, like a recipe that's in season. I do a lot of gardening when I can. I like growing things. I feel free when I'm gardening; when I'm in nature. When I'm away from the military. Or when I'm traveling for personal reasons. When I'm with my son, always. I feel most alive when I'm practicing what I love to do. When I'm allowed the freedom to practice Reiki, or anything spiritual. When I'm learning something new, that doesn't have to do with work.

The military is such a harsh environment. They don't even care about you, you're entirely disposable in the military. To be honest with you, I don't know it would bring me anything good to talk about my spirituality. I mean, I wouldn't be opposed to it, if, let's say, I felt like a person was trying to have a conversation about it, or needed to have a conversation about it. Especially now that I have Reiki in my life. I have a feeling that I'm going to maybe be a little bit more open about my spirituality. But I'm very careful with that. Because, like I said, the military is a very harsh environment. Even just something like crying is like a nail in the coffin. I'm not ashamed. I love my spirituality. It's just not a good environment. The closer I get to retirement, the less I'm going to give a fuck!

Father Frank

My sister thought it was a great idea, but she was very young at the time. My father knew I'd always make that decision to become a priest. He was extremely supportive. My mother was concerned because her brother was a priest. My mother's biggest concern was that she'd have to become a priest's mother. And because her own mother was a priest's mother, she figured she'd have to become some old lady with a cloth over her head who prayed all the time. And my mother wore Bruce Springsteen t-shirts.

Worship begins in awe. You feel the presence of God. You know the voice of God when you hear it. It wasn't like I was a stranger to God. I would pray, go to Mass, and read my Bible when I was a teen and into my twenties. I come from a very religious family—a long tradition of religious people. So it wasn't like St. Paul, who was a total stranger to Christ. This was just another step forward. But you know you're in a holy place when this happens, kind of like Moses taking off his shoes on Mount Sinai. God told Moses to take off his shoes because God wanted Moses—his human feet—to touch the holy ground, nothing between the human and the Holy. That's what these mystic relationships and experiences of God are. There's no mediation. It's God speaking directly to their child, to their son or daughter. It was not unfamiliar. It wasn't a scary experience. It's a very comforting experience. I was in a very safe place. It wasn't like getting knocked out on the road to Damascus.

I was called initially to the priesthood at an extremely young age, at the age of four, so I've always wanted to do what I'm doing right now. Of course, a four-year-old boy would look at the priesthood like a four-year-old boy looks at being a fireman. When I was 18 years old, I was heading to the door to the rectory to sign up for the seminary. Then I got about 50 or 100 feet away from the door, and I veered off and went off and had a pizza instead and said "Good. I've been accepted to university. That means God wants me to go to university and go to the seminary *after*, in four years." But when I was in university, I was still struggling in how to live and what to do about all these different things. On the absolute worst possible day, Christmas Day 1973, I was in church. Everybody goes to church on Christmas. I'm in my home parish, and the priest got up. I don't know who the priest was. I was a Junior in university, so I didn't know who the priests were in the home parish anymore. Anyway, the young man, a young priest, got up and began to do a sermon on Christmas Day, and he did the absolute worst sermon I ever heard in my life. Terribly bad sermon. It was awful. I've heard thousands of sermons. I've given thousands of sermons, but this was the absolute worst sermon I've ever heard in my entire life. Anyway, I was sitting there 20 minutes past 10 after this horrible sermon on Christmas Day, and I'm saying to

myself, you know, I could do an awful lot better than that. And then God spoke to me and said, *Be a priest*. And I said, “No.” Then God said louder: *Be a priest*. And so, at 23 minutes past 10, on Christmas morning, December 25, 1973, I said, yes. I said, “Yes, I’ll do it” out loud. I was in the middle of the church and the people sitting beside me were looking at me.

Then I spent three days going through the Scriptures. There are different places in the Bible that say, “*If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.*” I was doing a Flip & Read and came across all of them. This was on Christmas afternoon. I said, “This can’t be happening,” and I remember tossing my Bible over to the side of my desk in my room, then just quietly thinking for a couple of days if I should make a move on this. Then on the 28th of December, I walked over to the rectory, and I talked to a priest I knew from back when I was in high school. And I said, “Father, I want to be a priest.” And he said, “Sit right down.” That got the ball rolling to start the procedure towards priesthood, though it took me 10 and a half years to be ordained from that point. It was quite the session, but I’ve never forgotten that mystical experience, that religious experience that I had at the age of 20.

I had never heard God speak so clearly, in words. And then you’re thinking, because Christmas is a very emotional day, it’s not necessarily a good day to make such a life changing decision. St. Ignatius wants us to be kind of balanced before we make some of these decisions. But of course, I have an Augustinian spirituality, not an Ignatian spirituality. And St. Augustine had a very similar experience when he heard the voice of God to change. For my kind of people, I guess it’s normal. It’s a normal thing to hear a voice like this and make a big change all at once. It’s a common story, just like Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or John the Baptist, any of these people who you find in Scripture. You get called, and you respond. Could God have spoken to me some other time? Possibly. But that was in the precipitating events—enough to lead me to a point of making a decision or saying yes to the call—making a decision that I’ve never changed or deviated from. I’m so surprised. It was a surprising thing, because we don’t expect to hear the call of God at a time. God breaks in, you hear his voice. You keep your heart soft. You don’t expect these mystical encounters to happen. You’re glad when you get them, but you can’t precipitate them. You can’t force God’s hand. No, God does these things freely. It was an awesome experience. Really, truly awesome. You know, the kids use the term awesome about things, but it was an experience full of awe. And it has stood me well over the years.

I had to give up the sins of my youth. One horrible thing at a time. I often give talks to 12 step groups and say to people that addiction is like having an elephant in the living room. You get to let the elephant out of the house, but then you’ve got to clean the living room. Now, you don’t start cleaning the living room by dusting, you know. You’ve got to take out the broken furniture,

you shovel out the elephant droppings, then eventually you clean the room up, and you and your life go on. So first you push elephants. I had a lot of elephants to push out of my life, you know. Then slowly, but surely, you clean things up as you go along. But it takes all your life to break with the old way of life. You give up this, and you give up that, and then you move on to other things, and you just start to live a better, more sane type of life.

I find now that there's all sorts of things that are happening in the world, I had no idea existed back when I was younger. Different people, whole new generations of people coming up looking at the world in a different way than I ever considered it. And because I do deal with people of all ages, I have to say, "Well, I never thought about that before." Then, you must re-examine your prejudices and your attitudes to ask *what is real and true here?* You learn from other people, and you continue to read, watch things on television, computers. You get different people's points of views. The older I get... you know... I guess I get a little bit more... more wise, and you learn that there's more stuff you don't know. There's always more to learn about, and you're amazed at the things that people are finding in the field of science and psychology and all those different types of things. It's lifelong learning.

It's a difficult life you know. It's not normal to be a priest anymore. My college friends were against it, though I do remember one good friend of mine saying, "Well it's something that has to be done. Somebody has to do it." You know, that's the kind of thing people thought back then, especially in the 60s or early 70s—that the priesthood life was an extremely unhappy type of life—which is what it looks like for people who aren't priests. And it became more difficult in the 80s of course, with the clerical abuse problems. It's very, very challenging. You get an awful lot of opposition, people who think things of you that aren't true. And you press on, and you say, God called me to this. And He will supply all the graces needed to be able to get along. And I know that in various deep struggles of my life that God has reminded me, not in a voice like the first time, but in different ways, that *He* will supply everything that I need to have to keep going at this vocation of mine.

I've gone from one country to another, and I've had to do all kinds of different things. You don't know when you start off where you're going to end up. I've been looking for more than 40 years now, for other people who've had similar experiences. And I have never found anybody who had that same kind of experience in real life, you know. Even amongst seminarians and religious students, they all come to this vocation in a different way. When I teach my Bible class, I say that there's a spectrum in our relationships with God, and somebody who's a purple can't be mad at somebody who's a yellow because the yellow isn't a purple. You have to accept everybody who has their different calls, in different relationships with God.

It's not a voice you hear in your ears. Nobody else could hear that voice. God can speak to people, you know, inwardly, by a feeling or by an image. Or sometimes God has to get really strong and hit you over the head, you know, so that you can really do something. Again, I was wrestling with going to the seminary from the time I was 18 to the time I was 27. You know, people back in those days could go to seminary college, philosophy school, or they would enter the theatre. I studied theatre and radio and acting and directing. I have a degree in literature. And I enjoyed all of that kind of work. But sometimes, you have to be thinking in your head *is this a way to spend your life? Is this a good way to live? Can you do anything good for people doing these different things?* There are all kinds of good ways for people to serve. But you know, that was the kind of struggle. Things had to crystallize.

Like I said, the absolute worst sermon I ever heard. I know why. The priest was probably on his fourth mass of the Christmas Day. It's hard when you're gonna get up and talk to people about those deep mysteries of the faith, especially on Christmas Day. I can understand why. I say this to fellows who are studying to be priests: the worst sermon I ever heard was the one that made me go into the priesthood. So what's the most *effective* sermon I ever heard? I've heard St. John Paul talk, so I've heard saints give sermons. I've heard all kinds of holy people give sermons. And they confirm what you feel. You feel good about yourself, but they don't radically change the direction of your life. God has his own way of tailoring things for people. Sometimes it gets just as clear as a voice. Now, I do have to admit, for about 10 years after that experience, I was kind of hoping I'd hear that voice again. But never again in the ears did I hear the voice so clear.

You've got to stop me because I give sermons all the time. This morning's first reading came from the book of Genesis, and the key to the second part of the first is when God says, "*Let us make humanity in our own image.*" I talked about a young man who came to my office one time. He was in religious life. And he came up to my office and he knocked on the door. He wanted to get ashes on Ash Wednesday, a little on the early side. He introduced himself and he started to say, I'm so and so's son. And I said, "You couldn't be anybody else!" because he looked exactly like his father. He was a little bit younger, of course, than his father. A little bit lighter than his father too, darker hair--but he couldn't be anybody else. That's the relationship we have with God. We're all made in the image and likeness of God. And so, all of us human beings—all of us—reflect our family appearance, which is God. Spirituality is just about being what we're always supposed to be. A plant is supposed to be a plant, my dog Max is supposed to be a cocker spaniel. And we're supposed to be living in the image of God.

The gardener plants tomato seed, but he doesn't want to eat the tomato seeds or the plant, he wants to get that fine ripe tomato at the end of the season to put in a salad or a sauce. And the

goal of human life is eternal life with God, mystical union with God. You grow towards that. You learn about Christ, and you make a decision for Him, and then you follow Him as best you possibly can. And you follow your vocation and you're moving towards that mystical union. So, God has always been extremely close to me, I'm charismatic in my spirituality. I have an Augustinian spirituality, I have a Franciscan spirituality, and all these different things show that God is your friend, and you can just get close to Him.

What's really changed with me, of course, is I've moved from being in the pews of the Catholic Church, to being behind the altar. For the last 40 years, I've been sharing my faith in a very public way. For a person like myself, it's the best way to praise, the best way to express my relationship with God. Through my sermons, through the classes I teach, and through the counseling I do with people. In all these different things, that's exactly what I'm doing. I'm honestly talking about my relationship with Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the guidance of the Creator. It's a case of things getting broader and deeper as you go on. I think St. John the 23rd said that a man can get old, and he can become like a vinegar or like wine. The thing is to become like wine—deeper and richer and more wholesome, and full. That's what the spiritual life does to people. You're connected to the very source of life. If you're staying connected, you grow more and more like the divine and reflect more of your family relationship with God. Religion is a codification of various human behaviors, dogmas, and things like that. Spirituality is private. It's a difference between a friendship that you have with a friend that you really know very, very well, and a professional relationship you might have with, with a doctor or a person who drives the school bus. Spirituality is the living relationship we have with Almighty God. It gets bigger, and deeper, and wider as the years go on. You know, it's just like, any kind of love relationship. If it's a true love it could last for all eternity.

I have the great fortune of being able to say the Eucharist eight times a week usually, and all the cylinders are firing. I also feel extremely blessed when I'm teaching the confirmation students or my Bible class. I taught a couple of classes ago on prayer, praying with the parables, and it's up on my Facebook page. I'm enthusiastic doing that kind of work because that's when I'm very close to God. But again, for a person like myself, the Augustinian people, we pray best at the point of a pen. Writing a sermon, and then delivering it, preparing a class, and then giving it, are great ways for me to live out my spirituality. When I'm doing my Franciscan spirituality and playing music, it's a different way of approaching spirituality, but to sing, to play my guitar, and to sing in church is a very high thing. But for the day to day, offering of Eucharist is how I feel most close to God on a regular basis. In an hour or so I'll be saying Eucharist for somebody I know,

for their funeral. And it will be a very good spiritual experience for everybody. But it will be a very good prayer experience for me.

Peter

I think about interiority and identity. I also think about spirituality as sort of the medium by which we are all connected to one another, and to the more than human world. Both the deeply personal, and the universal and connective, are the realm of the spiritual for me. So it has brought about a lot about interpretation and imagery and archetypes. The ways that we give meaning, and make meaning, are all the realm of the spiritual.

Yes, it was a dream that I had. Regardless of your theological approach to this sort of thing, it just felt like a gift, both to have the dream, and then have the space and the understanding to process it afterwards and think through what it might mean. It's not the only one I could talk about, for sure. I've had others, a series of dreamlike experiences. But I haven't thought about it for a while. It's kind of neat to go back. I've been having more vivid dreams recently that I've been thinking about and thinking through. I think it's possible that I have even done some writing about this. I thought about it significantly afterwards, discussed it with my therapist, my partner, and possibly other people. I just don't think it would often come up, not having spaces for casual conversation with people outside of my housemates. Also, I wouldn't bring this into a situation where there wasn't the space to express the whole thing. You know what I mean? I wouldn't say to somebody, "Oh, I had a wacky dream last night," and have them say, "Oh, tell me about it in 15 minutes." That's part of it. I guess. Just a basic sort of self-respect for me.

When I remember my dreams, in some of them, I am myself and in some, I am not present in the dream at all. And in some of them, I am essentially playing a role or playing a character. I'm someone quite different to me. This was one of those dreams. And the tenor of the dream, the kind of feel of it, was archetypical. It felt like a piece of art. It felt like a very distinct landscape with a lot of symbolism. And my person was an artist of some kind. I'm not an artist of any kind. I was just kind of a different person, and was sick, and was staying or living with friends. A sort of collective for the sick and vulnerably housed. In the main part of the dream, I remember traveling the streets of this sort of wintry city, kind of deserted, and cold.

When I have a fever, my dreams are more vivid. I've often found them much more chaotic, and in some ways, more meaningful. I think I was probably a little sick at the time. I woke up during the night feeling very hot, and feverish. And I don't know if I had the dream before or after that. But when I woke up properly, in the morning, I was fine. It felt like a very short illness. In this dream, I had an experience where my character has been trudging through this cold, lonely city with no connection to anybody. I go into this gift shop... and why it's a gift

shop, I don't know... I just remember the shelving with these different urns and vases and I'm wearing this heavy coat. There is a child in the gift shop who is being mean to me and being cruel—that sort of vicious mocking—and my character tries to just get away to leave. Then this child grabs hold of one of the toggles on the coat—the kind of draw string that you use to pull tight the coat—and just won't let go. When I talk about the emotional component of the dream, you know, these are very emotional experiences for me. I feel the hatred for this child, and perhaps the hatred of this child as well. And the kind of the panic that this tormentor will just not let go.

My character leaves and goes out in the street in this coat while this child is staying attached, holding on to this toggle, and won't let go. There's a crowd of people. Then someone in the crowd... cuts the cord... cuts the string between my character and this horrible child. And it's this moment of release. It's this awareness that I could never do that for myself somehow. That somebody else does that for me. I must release, to make them release. Later in the dream my character is back in the place where he's living, and it's like he has been healed or nurtured. He is sitting, reading or something, and thinking *later today, that child is going to come and we're going to have a cup of tea together*. It's this kind of reconciliation, or there's some integration of these experiences. That for me, is beautiful. Why is this child holding on so close? So tightly? What is it that they are trying to get? What is it that they're afraid to let go of—you know? The child can't let go; I can't let go. We must be released from each other. But once we are released from each other, it's possible that we can be friends.

One thing that was interesting to me was my artist self was queer. And that was kind of nice. You know, it's like it wasn't very relevant, but it was something I was aware of. It felt kind of personal to me. The house at the end was very 70s. So, there was lots of exposed wood and carpeting everywhere, and slightly odd designs, you know, like weird little platforms and things like that. That's a particular aesthetic that I find sort of quaint and funny, and kind of interesting and comforting. I think at some point in the dream, my character is remembering earlier success, and is in a cafe with friends, animated and excited, and is involved in the lives of these other friends who were artists or arty people. That had its own energy to it, as a contrast to where my character found himself trudging through these cold streets.

You know, I think all the different characters in the dream are all parts of myself. So, there's some desire for me to integrate the parts of myself that are at odds, that are hurtful. There's this whole other piece where my artist is sick and can't think of the next piece of work. But then later at the end of the dream, is imagining the next project and imagining telling the child about what this is going to look like. There's a great arc from sterility into fertility.

Everything in the dream is archetypal. Except that the person in the dream who cuts us free, is my friend, a very specific person. I think I wrote to her and told her about this as well, because I thought it was neat that she represented this sort of outside force, this presence in the dream who can offer this gift of cutting the cord.

The big change for me is letting go of a job. I lead a Christian organization working with young people in Canada. And I have done that for several years. My adult life has been about creating and learning collectively with others; creating events where we learn from each other, or where we kind of identify what's important and significant and meaningful, and share skills. What I've tried to do with this organization, and what I hope I've succeeded in doing, is working with young adults and students to develop tools. Not that we all have the same spiritual experience, right? We don't want to have the same spirit, but that people can take their own experiences seriously, and understand them as valid. Even just the simple act of creating a community where people can share experiences, and have them recognized as valid is, is fundamental and essential. And it's very educational. It feels like exactly what we should be doing as a student led organization.

Leaping into that doing that in the pandemic context really took a lot out of me. I was aware that I was gonna need to finish doing that soon, because I'm picking up a course of study. Something must give. I can't keep doing two jobs at the same time. I was also aware that I was burning out or running low. So certainly, in the fall of last year, I was kind of trying to figure out that piece, about how to let go. Themes of being released from something are very meaningful to me. I didn't want to just abandon that work. I didn't want to say, "To hell with the rest of you, I'm out of here." I wanted to make sure that it could be sensitively and appropriately transferred while also deal with the grief that is involved in giving up this thing that's been so important to me for so many years. Right now, in fact, today, we have some more interviews with people about taking on that job. It's taken a long time. It's been a very difficult process, actually—even just the tasks of creating a job posting and thinking about what the job will be, and how the heck we are going to do the transfer when we can't physically meet. All that stuff is very hard to think through, and I feel quite alone in it. That, to me, at least from this vantage point, is the biggest sort of thing in my life, at this moment. This sort of gradual transition from being the General Secretary, then starting pastoral work, and kind of gradually moving in this direction of Theological Studies and making that my core work.

I suspect I mentioned it to my friend who was the one recognizable figure in the dream, partly just because I think she's a pretty cool person. And in previous decades, she did the same job that I'm doing now. She knows a little bit about what it's like and can sort of understand how

stressful and difficult it can be. I also think when someone does show up in a dream, it's not always appropriate to go tell the actual person. But I think it's nice if that person did something that's interesting, or implies that you think of them kindly, or they have a good place in your spirit. It can be a nice gift or a fun way to reconnect with someone.

I'm not a very emotional person. I don't feel my emotions very strongly. When I do, it's very meaningful. I pay attention to that. And I think *what does that mean?* There's something real and deep and spiritual for me when that happens. Because I'd felt such strong emotions in the dream, and remembered them...okay, well, there's meaning here. This deserves further attention. If I ever remember a dream, I try to talk it over with someone and investigate it, and then wonder what I might learn from it. Even if it's just something kind of funny. But yeah, in this case, the feel of it was different. Part of that different feel was this strong, strong, strong emotional release, almost as a cycle or a process that I'm not actually experiencing in my waking world. I have some strong thoughts and feelings, for example, even about the job I'm leaving and things like that, but I'm not feeling those emotions all the time, or even most of the time.

For me, the dream itself is half, and the working with it afterwards is the other half, you know, the kind of what was it? What was said about "strong emotion recounted at leisure is the essence of poetry" or something like that? You know, there's the dream itself, and then there's the process of making it into something that in this case, I can relate to somebody else, or I can discuss with somebody. In some ways, the biggest thing I learn from experiences like this is that I'm a real person, and I have depth, and I'm not just a worker or a cog in the machine. I don't just exist to perform functions, and follow reports, but that I have these deeper parts of myself to attend to, although they are also attending to me. And they will make themselves known in one way or the other. It's the iceberg, the unconscious, right? There's more going on, much more going on, than is visible or expressed. I think that is part of it as well as part of spirituality, or soul. Working on this, is recognizing there's probably more going on than what you're aware of, as most is happening below the level of your consciousness. And that's okay. The dream is one of resolution and of going through a traumatic or unpleasant experience and getting somewhere. Up to a place of resolution and even reconciliation. Healing, I guess is the shorthand for this sort of thing. I think that is what the learning is. But like all good symbols, it both indicates and accomplishes. So even having the emotional experience reminds me "Oh, I'm also an emotional being." These things are true of me and they're also part of me. They're not a strange imposition on my will or something. It's reminding me of the parts of myself that *seem* to be alien, perhaps, but that are fully me.

For dreams, particularly, if I remember them, sometimes I jot them down, and then come back to reflect on them a bit later. But I don't tend to create anything permanent. And I think, for me, there's something about allowing a dream to compost back down into the unconscious, that I find very meaningful. So sometimes I wake up, and I've had an interesting dream, and my instinct just tells me, you can let that one go. You're not doing a disservice by not writing it down or making content out of it. I don't know how much you think about content, but as someone who runs a billion Facebook pages and Instagram, everything's about content. Okay, we're doing a meeting, how can we take a picture? How can we produce this deliverable? And I don't find that very life giving. I don't necessarily want to make content out of my dreams. Or even my thoughts on my spiritual experiences. Having said that, sometimes I wake up with this funny phrase in my head, and it sticks with me, and I think, yeah, that's good, I can share that. Or I think of a dream I had about a friend. We were in Theological college, and it's collapsing around us or something like that. But he's just sitting there munching an apple, and says something very profound, and relaxed. I woke up and I sent him a message, and then forgot completely about it. And then, you know, a year after it happened, he wrote back to me and said, "I'm still thinking about that thing you said about me." So that feels like a gift. And it feels like sometimes you pass that gift on, other times you can just let it dissolve.

Celia

I think that spirituality is where I draw my strength from, so that core belief of an inner light in all of us allows me to live my life in a way that is consistent with my beliefs. It underpins everything. I hope to live in a way that's simple and honest, being of service where I can, not chasing too much in the way of material things, being giving and kind as best I can.

I was young. I was only 17. I had graduated from a tiny Friends school here in the mountains of British Columbia. We were only 24 students in the school and the community had just over 100 people. It was not a Quaker community, but there were a substantial number of Quakers that lived there. I was daunted at going out in the world to make a living because there were no economic opportunities here in the mountains for me, because I didn't want to be a tree planter. My parents were working at the Quaker school and could not afford to send me on to university, so I decided to take a year off after high school and earn some money to be able to carry on my studies. To find a way to do it safely, I went to work for a Quaker old folks' home in the US, as a cook. I boarded with a young couple who were managing it. They had been my house parents at the Quaker boarding school I attended in grade nine. I felt it was a safe way to leave home and learn how to be an employee, get a bank account, and pay my taxes.

I was kind of lonely. I was 3000 kilometers or 4000 kilometers away from home, and my parents and I didn't have a lot of money, so there were not a lot of phone calls home. There were moments when I lay in bed at night—and this was one of them—where it felt like I was down in a deep pit. I would call it loneliness. I imagine this was in the first few weeks that I arrived. And as I lay there, in the dark... I said... I called on... you know, I just said: “*Jesus help me.*” Now, having grown up in the sort of liberal branch of Quakerism (and especially because my father didn't necessarily believe what many Christians believe about Jesus), Jesus had played no role in my upbringing. And right now, really plays no role in my life. It was an odd thing for me to do, and to find the peace that resulted was quite astounding. It made me realize that it doesn't matter. God doesn't care what name we use. All we must do is ask.

I don't remember being carried all along on a wave of euphoria or anything like that. I think it was just that momentary relief, being lifted in that moment of loneliness or despair. It was like a big sigh of relief, even in the depths of my loneliness, to learn that I was not alone. There was great peace that filled me, a relaxation, a feeling of just a letting go. One of the great advantages that came about was that the school term started, and the friend's boarding school was two blocks away. I joined the choir and became friends with several of the students and staff there. Some of them have remained friends to this day.

I am not aware of calling on Jesus again. I can't think that I have. Well, that might not be true. I think there have been times in life when I've been sad, where I've kind of said "*Walk with me.*" And I'm not quite sure who I mean by that. It might be Jesus; it might be God. That sense of *I need some support here.* The thing that occurs to me to share, is that ironically, I have at times felt uncomfortable when people speak of Jesus, and the daily impact of Jesus in their lives.

I don't have any identifiable daily spiritual practice. I do try to go to the weekly Quaker meeting. During the pandemic, I have been meeting by myself and have been surprised to find that it works. I would have never believed it. I think that as Quakers we quite value lifelong learning, and the gradual acquiring of understanding; I really appreciate in Quakers the concept of being open to new light and open to new understanding of what we're called to be in the world.

I have grown up as a Quaker, and I think that the basis of Quakers relies on individuals experiencing what I would consider a connection that we can't explain—that we can feel as a presence. Quakers have described it in the past as a presence in the midst. And they were almost meaning that Jesus was standing among them as they met in silent worship. I think for me, spirituality is kind of all mixed up in with my feeling of a sense of connection with all that is, and my definition of God. I do not in any way consider that any kind of being. I don't consider it to have any kind of gender. I just use that term because that's what I grew up with. The way I see the hand of God is the perfection of nature. That's where I can kind of go, "*Yes, this. This is God at work;*" just the way everything in the natural world has its place and interacts with every other thing. Everything works, and renews itself, and carries on life. The more that I know from a scientific basis about how things work in nature, the more I'm just astounded by it all.

As a child, what I was taught was God is love. And I must say, the most sort of spiritual sense I've had, has been in what Quakers' call gathered meetings, where there is this profoundness to the silence that leaves you in awe. There's something beyond what we sort of scientifically talk about or see that connects us all. At Quaker gatherings, I have this huge sense of being totally free to be me, and I will be understood. One of the ways that I feel that God has shown us that we are walking the path we should be, is a sense of joy.

Jan

My spiritual practices come to mind, like meditation or prayer, walking in nature. I am a Spiritual Director, and I receive direction. I guess I think of my spiritual life as my core. And then it impels me to act you know? It compels me to act so that it's not just a private thing, but it's what undergirds my activism.

I've probably discussed the spiritual aspects of the encounter with my osteopath; we've been together forever. I keep having injuries, and we're very close. In fact, I miss her terribly because of the lockdown.

I have two children. And both pregnancies required me to be in bed for four months each time. Because of this and my accidents, I have this history of being homebound. It seems like for the past five years, I've retriggered the concussion several times, in very intense ways. All I must do is tap my head, like I bumped my head two weeks ago, and the symptoms come back. I think the medical world is starting to have more understanding of traumatic brain injury, that you don't have to become unconscious for it to be serious.

I think the day before my fall in St. Louis Square, I was just so heartbroken. I was in the shower, weeping, and I wanted to die because I was just so, so discouraged. And that's when I said it; *"Could it just look like an accident?"* "The next morning, I got up—I was between churches, working part time as a chaplain at a senior's residence—and was checking out a Lutheran Church in downtown Montreal. I came out of the metro station, and the sidewalks were completely glazed with ice. I was picking my way through the streets on these little black pebbles, trying to keep from falling. But I was wearing a long skirt, and my foot slipped to the right. I remember thinking, *"Who in the world wears a long narrow skirt in the winter?"* As I went down, I hit my head with such force that inside me, I heard *this is it*. And then my soul, my psyche... I must admit, I believe I was out of my body, because I saw the person face to face. It was like I was hovering over my body. Do you know what I mean? I was on the ground, but I could also see them, sort of face to face, from maybe 250 meters away. There was intention there. I could see the face and see this intention from one end of St. Louis Square to the other. I could sense their intention was to come and assist me. And I thought *someone cares*. And I just kind of slipped back into myself. Then the person came and stood over me and just said very simply *"When you're ready, I'll help you up."*

I've had three out of body experiences. The first was when I was raped when I was 19. The second was almost exactly a year later, when I hit my head playing on a geodesic dome. I was 20 and I was trying to hang by my knees in the playground. It was night, and I was talking

to a friend, and I wanted to stretch out my back. And I was trying to swing to catch the bars. I was not being very geometrically savvy, in that it didn't occur to me that if I was going to get the momentum to reach behind me to grab the bars, I might meet the bars in front of me first. I hit the bars on just on the outer edges of my eyebrows. And then I saw myself through the jungle gym, you know, through the geodesic dome. I saw myself briefly, and then I was back inside myself. I'd hit so hard my eyebrows were swollen within minutes. That was very embarrassing. But I guess that just shows you that once you're unmoored from your body, it's not so difficult to knock yourself out again.

So, in my sense of things in St. Louis Square, there was an angelic presence, just because of the whole surreal or hyper real intensity of it. I mean, somebody touched my hand. The person was physically real and matter of fact. I don't like to use a gender but my impression at the distance was that it was a man with shoulder length dark hair. But after they helped me up, they kept going. They just disappeared out of my view because they were going in the opposite direction toward the metro, and I went on to the church. When I was walking, I was a bit disgruntled; *"Look! Here I am, on my way to church, and this happens?"* I was in a lot of pain because my cell phone had dug into my side. I think I bruised my ribs because it was in my jacket pocket. I think there was also sorrow and regret because of my having wanted to die. It was a huge load of emotion. It was learning that I must be careful about what I think and say, that I don't need to die. I don't need to die because I'm in pain. I need to find another way. Another way to ease the suffering. And, in the years since, I've still had to catch myself and say; *"No, that's not what I want. I don't need to die."* Sometimes I'd hear *"You must die"* because I'm upset with having failed God and myself. So, I have to say: *"No. No, that's not true."*

In the church, I sat down, but then I went to work, and then to my second job, which was making sure an elderly woman ate her supper. When I got home, I was so nauseated. I called my osteopath and after she saw me, she said it was very severe, but by the time I had a CAT scan, they didn't take it very seriously because five days had gone by. Even though my osteopath said it was a severe concussion, the medical people didn't see it. And I didn't tell them that I had an out of body experience. I just told them that I did not become unconscious, because I was fully conscious.

About five or six years before, I had another involving angels. I was in a happier place, driving from Montreal, to see my beloved in Vermont. I was driving up the Pinnacle, and the weather just shifted suddenly. I don't even think it had been raining, but immediately, when I got to the part where the road was rising, I hit black ice. I was propelled down the road. The car started to turn and then the wheel went over the edge of the road, and it started to turn upside

down. And it was in that moment, as it was flipping over, that I had a sense of angels. It was pre-thought if you know what I mean? Awareness, like whatever comes before thought. Just that there were angels around me. And then I was upside down in the car and a little bit in shock. I tried pressing the horn as an SOS signal. And nobody responded. So, then I decided it was maybe not good to hang upside down for a long time, and I went to get out. Be very careful if you're upside down, the seatbelt will just fling you. You will be released. I hadn't expected that. I had expected I would have to try to untangle myself. Instead, I just kind of plummeted a foot down to the ceiling of the car and sustained whiplash and a tear in my shoulder muscle. Then I lay on the bottom of the car for a while, which was in fact the ceiling of the car, for a while, which was very surreal. I could see red apples. I could see the red apples and they were spilled on the gray interior. I decided I had to get out. I hooked my foot on the steering wheel and pushed with my back to get the car door open. I found the first house was empty. And I walked to the second place. I was very cold. And they took me inside and we called for help. Very kind. I still bless them when I go past the house. It was the same kind of thing as the concussion, where I couldn't be up for very long without having nausea and dizziness. I was out of work for three months with the accident. I think the second time, after the fall in St Louis Square, I only rested for a week, even though it was probably much worse. For my head, certainly.

You know, I've been beautifully educated. And I did learn a lot of important things in all those places. I don't ever stop taking courses and I'll attend workshops and things, because I have a curious mind. But I do think that some of the deep learning is because of the relationships I've had. I learned the importance of kindness from the car accident. So many kind people. The people who took me in that evening, my partner who came and followed me in the tow truck to the hospital, the people who brought me food. I couldn't do much at all, and people were just so kind to me. And it's just one of the most important things in the world, kindness. Around that time, someone very dear to me wrote to me because he was distressed. I think he'd sensed it in the spirit. Sometimes people feel things when they care deeply about each other. And I wrote him a letter and told him that it was okay, that I was on the mend. But it's always a grace when you come across people that you care about, and they care about you, and you're aware of the connection. Like we're all really connected, but somehow, we're estranged from so many others.

I have spent a lot of time in prayer connecting with people as a chaplain. If I visited someone at the seniors' residence, we'd often have a prayer. I prepared services for them, or we'd sing. If someone was dying, and if they were part of my congregation, or I knew they were Christian, I would sing hymns to them. If they weren't Christian or believers of any kind, I would

sing lullabies. I spent a lot of time on the edge between worlds. I only had a couple of agitated people. One woman—I put my hand over her heart, and said, “Your daughter’s here with us, I’m representing your daughter,” and she calmed right down. And I said the same thing to the daughter, “I will represent you to your mother, you will be with her through me.” And they were both more at peace about having to be at a distance. And she died very peacefully.

Then there was another man who had belonged to one of those holiness churches where he would never be good enough. And he was yelling, “Get me out of this snake pit!” And I would just talk to him calmly and say, “Reach for your Jesus’s hand.” And then I sang ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,’ and another person came and joined me. Then he was peaceful, and he passed. You’re trying to fill the room with love to kind of ease the transition. And I could feel the love there. I could feel joy. I could feel peace. There was an opening between worlds as you saw the person off. I thought of it as midwifery. It was a very, very sacred, privileged place to be.

I said to my daughter recently, you know, my gravestone could very easily say, there were no short answers. I am a writer. It’s part of who I am. I found it hard to talk when I was in my teens, I suppose. I work with poetry mostly. For myself. Well, poetry and homilies, or sermons, you know, given my work. When I was in seminary, we were working on inclusive language, and for a long time, in my image of God, I stayed away from the masculine pronouns. I remember one of the teachers would call God “womb of compassion”, which I found very beautiful. And she encouraged us to see what name resonated with us. I think for a while it was “Divine Imagination,” but it could also be “Maker,” because maker is the Old English word for a poet, and I think God is a poet. But somewhere along the way, I realized I was sort of neglecting Jesus. Jesus had been so important to me as a young person. Embodiment has been difficult for me. So, the story of the Incarnation became very significant.

I grew up in a religious home. We went to church every Sunday, though my father stopped going to church when I was five. My mother taught Sunday school for something like 25 years. And once I was confirmed, I taught Sunday school, so every year for a long time I had a perfect attendance pin. Yes, I grew up in a faithful home. I had an experience of God’s presence when I was very young. And I never lost it. I mean there were sometimes I would say God and I aren’t speaking to each other, but it was momentary. Sometimes it felt like long moments, but I know it was more about my ability to be responsive to God. I think I was just trying to figure everything out on my own. But I think I’ve never really let go of God.

I’ve had 6 years of training as a Spiritual Director, and I am going through the Spiritual Exercises the second time, a decade later right now. I’m a lot gentler with myself than I was. I’m more relaxed about doing the exercises. I still want to do them, but I’m less worried about

getting it right. I don't remember the formal Examen prayer exactly. But, when we review our day, we can look at it and see where we moved toward God, or where we moved away. And we acknowledge these things to God and then ask for the grace to continue to move toward God. Driving is particularly challenging for me in Montreal because they are crazy drivers. This is a place where I can get out of sorts very easily. And when I'm driving, I can sometimes find myself doing something that's less than gracious, and so I try to send a blessing instead. Other times when you know you've failed or been unpleasant with someone, you take that right into prayer, that you can find the grace to apologize and to move forward and to let the past go. So that's kind of the way I think of the Examen prayer. I feel like my reactivity is not as intense or as strong as it used to be. And I can catch myself. It's a work in progress.

Wendy Luella

For me, spirituality is the set of processes that sustain my life, and sustain all existence, and being in connection in a deep way with those processes. My own spirituality is very embodied, very much rooted in creation. Eating, having my feet on the earth, growing things, and experiencing life through my senses. So, my spirituality is earth-based, relational and non-dualistic. It's not like spirit is somewhere beyond the physical. The physical is imbued with spirit. The spirit shines through all of creation.

I had a friend who called that period of my life, when I experienced that deep spiritual awakening “the Meister Eckhart Disease.” It would be interesting to talk to her now because I think she has a better memory than I do! It was something that we talked about a lot, and she was very mystical herself. She was all poetry, no prose, filled with metaphor. And she was a real kindred spirit in my theological training, a wonderful friend and dear companion through this deep spiritual awakening and journey.

It was 1995 and I was in theological college. I was taking a course called *Mystical Fathers, Mystical Mothers*, or something like that. I can't remember the exact title, but it was about some of the key Christian mystics in the late-middle-ages. I really got into the course and found myself swimming with the texts and ideas in an intimate way. I was in my late 20s and it was my third degree after high school. I remember saying to myself, *I am doing this one for me*. I'm not doing this degree for other people to tell me what I need to do. I'm taking responsibility for my learning. At the time, I was studying for the Unitarian Universalist ministry, and was a non-Christian studying in a Christian school.

I did quite a bit of creative adaptation in that degree, where I would talk to my profs and say, “So I see that the major project for this class is a 2500-word essay, and I was wondering if I might write a meditation manual with prayers and photographs instead?” For the most part, they were game for my proposals. I was a serious student. I wasn't trying to get out of work. I just wanted to engage with the materials in more creative and embodied ways.

During that Mystics class, I got into studying the works of Meister Eckhart in a very big way. And his theology was about profound union with God. That we are not divisible. The human is not separate from the divine. Eckhart wrote: “The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love.” As I read more deeply, I entered a state of being where those ideas and theologies were living in my moment-to-moment experience. Even when I talk about it right

now, I kind of feel like I could access that altered/elevated state again. It is available to me whenever I want to enter it.

Over 25 years later, here I am in my living room right now, talking to you over the internet and drinking water out of a mason jar. In that state, back in the 1990's, for about six weeks, I had a deep knowing that the jar and I, the computer and I, and you and I and were not separate from one another. We were profoundly connected. In that state of understanding of the deeper reality of things, I perceived that everything was tangibly interrelated. I experienced it in a very bodily, but mysterious way, that energetic connections existed among all creation. It was like a fantastical web of energy flow. I didn't exactly see the web, but I perceived the web. Hm, thinking back to that time, I remember that a lot of my journals were like that too, where seemingly disparate things had arrows and dotted lines and little "squiggles" that related, each one to the other. And I still do that. It's funny, I'm preaching on Sunday, but I do not write a sermon by starting at the beginning and proceeding sequentially. I start by having a bunch of disparate ideas, songs, quotes, images and then I find where the pieces come together and talk to each other.

When I try to make meaning of that period of my life, one of the squiggly lines goes to mind-altering drugs. It's interesting to reflect on that now, because my previous Masters' degree before studying Theology was in Psychopharmacology and Addictions. Mostly I *studied* drugs, as I *haven't done* a lot of drugs, but came from a family where addictions had a big impact. In my own life, I've drunk very, very little, smoked marijuana a few times, did LSD once, mushrooms once. This spiritual awakening was very much like a psychedelic experience though, except that instead of feeling the effects for a few hours, I was in this altered state for a month and a half.

Every color was brighter. Everything had more sparkle. Everything was more animated and alive. In that time, I could look at a jar and see the life in the jar. It was alive. Everything had life force in it. Everything emanated, radiated life force. And it was an unbelievable experience. I remember going to bed, lying in bed then waking up in the morning wondering, "*Is it going to be the old world or the new world? The old reality or the new reality?*" And then I'd open my eyes and notice "*Nope. It's the new, more awake reality.*" Day after day, week after week. I was awake to relationships, and energetic connections that I had never experienced before. I might have intellectually said, "Yeah, we're all connected. When I drink the water from this jar, the water is going to become the water in me, which I will excrete and will eventually become water in a river, that will flow to the ocean, which will evaporate into a cloud, and later fall as rain and end up in my, or somebodys jar again," like an intellectual sort of thing. But no, this was not

intellectual. This was completely *not* intellectual. This “Meister Eckhart disease” had me awake to and aware of the vibration in all of life. It was vibrating with all of life. The vibration in me, was vibrating with the vibration of my pencil, which was vibrating with the vibration of my scarf, and the vibration of the plant on the table. The pulsation of the universe’s energy was made aware to me, brought to my awareness. And then I physically sensed it in what I heard and what I saw, and what food tasted like. It was crazy, because I could feel the energy of the food I was ingesting, and that we’re all part of the same particles and vibration.

During that experience, living with that experience of that ultimate powerful connection had its beauties for sure and, also some drawbacks and fears. As the days and weeks unfolded, I found it more and more difficult to live in the world of paying my bills, getting my groceries and doing my schoolwork. I felt, for those six weeks, not that I lost touch, but that I lost ties. I lost touch with one kind of reality and gained access to another kind of reality where no effort was required. I was doing a lot of walking. I still do a lot of walking. Hmm... I am remembering what walking felt like at the time, I was not exactly dizzy, but floaty, I felt as if I was lighter... on the one hand I felt ungrounded to the *ways of the human-centric world*, on the other I felt deeply grounded to the *ways of the all-beings and things world*.

I spent a lot of time at the lake. I wrote something at the time, that I am remembering just now: “I go to the lake to listen but am not sure if I am on the shore, listening to the water, or in the water listening to the earth. And the water and shore are listening to me?” I think I did a lot of listening from many different perspectives at that time, listening and singing, and cooking and talking to strangers, and puttering. You know, those activities that ease you into meditative states; that for six weeks, I was in a sort of deeply meditative state. While I still attended classes, my work and life as a student felt like a lot of effort and a bit superfluous. In the ultimate reality, profound being is all there is. I found that hard to reconcile—to bring those two different realities and truths together—the ways of the world, and the ways of the spirit. That’s interesting because that makes it sound dualistic. But at some level during that period of my life, living through that profound spiritual experience, much of everyday life seemed extraneous, not at all essential. I think if one lives 100% with that knowledge, then it’s very hard to stay in the capitalist world.

As a student, so much of what’s required of us is a kind of dissociation from our bodies, from our feelings, from our intuitions. I think that what became clear to me, through that experience is like, *Oh yeah, this is what the machine wants of me*. The machine wants me to study x, y and z, report that I’ve learned these things, by doing this, and the other thing, and then I will be given a grade for the world to see, a rating of my capacity. Then, there will be an

institution, an authority saying, “Yes, you have mastered this to that degree.” Which so easily translates to “You are better than, or worse than others.” I did have a struggle at that point, with being in school and wondering if this was a system that I wanted to stay in the middle of. Was I learning, growing, changing, becoming in a good way through this “education?”

Ha, I am just remembering, one of the other classes that I was taking at the same time as the Mystics class. It was an education course, team-taught by two former ministers. Lots of folks in my program, just took courses in theology, but I wanted to branch out to other offerings within the university and somehow, I found my way to the Faculty of Education. The course was called Human Dimensions in Teaching and Learning and was about human being, not human doing. It explored the concepts of loving, believing, becoming and the rhythms of our lives. It was an amazing course that has rippled through my life to this day. *That* was the kind of education I wanted to be part of—the kind that celebrated the whole person in relationship to the whole of existence.

A lot of meaning and beauty were arising for me through this experience and some fears arose. A part of me, knowing about mental health issues was like: *Wow, is this a kind of psychic break that I'm having?* I was 28 at the time, which was a little late for a first episode if I was schizoaffective, or something like that, but still, I worried. Some folks who have profound “spiritual experiences” later become “diagnosed,” with some serious mental illnesses. I know that some folks labelled “mentally ill” can have access to spiritual realms that other people don’t have. And they’re not able to be in the world, often. I was struggling a bit as the weeks proceeded with the question “is this altered reality a real reality?”

I think that this experience circles back to education. We have schools where everybody sits down, and they sit in rows, and that’s what’s required of kids, although it might squash their “true spirit.” Yes, education, work, and the ways of the world can break people’s spirits. Most of us learn to sit in rows and deliver what is asked of us. Which makes me muse: Is education ultimately about cultivating compliance or cultivating creativity? Making good workers or fostering good humans? We don’t have a lot of tolerance for multiple ways of being and knowing and making space for that. And so, back then, I think that for myself, I had my own internal judgment of what good mental health looks like, I was like, “*Oh, shit, this spiritual awakening could be something that leads me to not being able to live in the world, and not being capable of caring for myself.*” That’s not taking away from it being a profoundly meaningful experience. There were feelings of great joy and wonder. It was like “*Wow. Wow. Wow.*” I did have the feeling at one point that maybe this is when people go into monasteries and close themselves into little rooms. And they pray and eat and sing. You know? I mean, while there certainly are

more activist elements of religious orders, a lot of them are “retreating” from the world, entering into union with the holy.

One of the learnings from this experience was that after returning to the “regular world,” I knew deep inside myself, that I could access this sense of profound connection at any time. The knowledge that whatever happens in life, that all will be well as everything is tied together. I’m not separate. And there was a kind of a peace that comes from this, feeling I’m part of a large body. My little body is part of a large body, of the whole body, and a certain pressure came off of me. Maybe even about death. If a chair, which was a growing tree is now “dead” and has the same energetic pulsation as I do, whatever happens to me, I will never be divorced from that. There is a certain peace that comes from that insight.

I think the other learning was about respect. Nothing is a thing. Even things I call things are not things. Everything is imbued with sacredness. And not just chairs, or mason jars, but difficult people, rivers, and grief. I think around this time, things even shifted with my family of origin. I grew up in a very abusive, difficult family. In my teens and early 20’s, I’d had a sense existentially, of not belonging, of loneliness, of separation. I had the experience when I was younger thinking *Am I adopted? What is going on? Because I have fallen far from this tree.* But I think something softened in my heart around the time of this spiritual awakening. As I look back, I had that feeling that everyone was just doing the best they could. The harm that was done to me was their way of trying to get through the world without hurting as much as they already hurt. Something also shifted in me about just having more compassion for myself and not being so hard on myself. There was something very healing about that. In terms of my learning, it just opened a lot of space for contradictions, a lot of space for difficulties, space for forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of the things that happened right at that time, was that songs just started coming out of me. On my walks, as I followed the beat of my feet on the earth, little ditties would arise out of my heart, and I would find myself singing songs. My own songs, my own words, my own tunes. Singing had been very important to me as a child, in fact, when I was 3, and my older brother was in grade 2, he took me to ‘show and tell’ and announced “this is my sister, Wendy Lu, listen to her sing!” Song had been incredibly important to me. But after high school (and many musicals), I somehow lost my singing voice, lost my confidence, lost my identity as being “a singer.”

During my spiritual awakening, I started creating my own songs, they came through me and to me. If I walked, songs would come. One of those early songs, inspired by Meister Eckhart was:

River o river, wash me clean
River o river, hold my dream
River o river, keep me true
River o river, transform me into you.

That is a powerful song to sing, as while I start with words, as I sing the song over and over, the words begin to dissolve and the consonants drop away and there is simply the sound of oo's, ah's—the river itself.

So, there was a real creative emergence for me during this time. I think that songs were probably always there, under the surface in my heart, but I wasn't allowing the space for them to reveal themselves. But something about my state of being, state of allowing, state of non-judgment that allowed for song to pour out. With all the vibrations, something opened in me, in terms of my own sense of being a creator. Yes, I was both a creature and a creator.

Looking back, I credit this time in my life as so powerfully affecting who I am today. Singing and song-writing and leading Soulful Singing meditation groups is a huge, significant part of my life and a fundamental part of my spirituality and calling as a minister.

I really believe in the power of songs. And that songs can sometimes reveal a deeper cavern in people's lives. It's funny, because I'm a very auditory person, sound is my most salient, developed and relied-upon sense. I don't have any visual memory. I never have an image come to my head. I can make an image come to my head. So, if you say find a horse, I can make an image of a horse. But images never spontaneously come to me. Because of that, when I'm trying to recall something of a place in time, it's very difficult because I don't have any images to attach to it. But I have songs—hundreds of them that anchor me to time, place, and memory.

In terms of me being a creator of song, I can't think of any songs I had written before this encounter. I made a lot of songs as a little kid, but I don't remember any of those. My mom tells me I would often just break into song. And why not? I think I probably had a deep knowing when I was quite young. I grew up on a farm. I had a sense of enchantment of being not separate but connected and part of the beautiful harsh land that I lived on. I think from a very young age, I experienced that. Later, I'd have different language for it, but I think at that time, when I was 11, 12, 13, what I remember is that sense of flow state with creation, and that I wasn't separate from the other elements of creation, the little brook that ran at the bottom of our field, the woods out back, the mosses that were along an old wooden fence were all intimately connected with me. I really felt, as child, as a young person, quite a profound connection with all those things. And especially when I was in the field, or in the forest, or down by the stream.

My current partner and I got together maybe six months after this spiritual awakening. I knew when I met him there was a vibration between us from the very beginning. I met him at a concert. Ha, yes there was song, of course, at our meeting! He was the director of a choir. I talked to him afterwards. He asked, "Do you sing?" I said "yes." He asked, "Do you want to audition for the choir?" I said, "Yes. Here's my number, but why don't we do the audition now?" We did the audition. "Have you had lunch?" *No. Let's go for lunch.* And we've been together ever since.

That's another one of those deep spiritual experiences in my life that has had so many of its own ripples. And this is interesting. Something's coming to my head right now, which is very funny, I'm thinking: *I hope she doesn't think I'm flakey!* It's interesting that's come up as one of my fears. Saying that aloud offers space for holding the contradictions I continue to work with. Always another chance for deeper acceptance, trusting the spirit's urgings, leaning into the intangible, honouring the knowledge of the heart. Sometimes this is hard work, because the world is quick to privilege head over the heart, the scientific over the spiritual. I spent 10 years in university where I was trained to rely on facts and be suspicious of feelings. Obviously, there is still some untangling to do! *I need to spend some time with that.* Time to look at my self-judgment or my judgment of others around being perceived as *flakey*. I try to go back to my senses a lot to see what they tell me. Because often, they're trying to communicate to me. And if I pay attention, I can figure out what they're trying to say. The wisdom that is coming through.

In my early 20s I had been invited by a friend to a Unitarian Universalist congregation. And I remember going there, and my very first experience sitting in the pews. We had an opening song, and everyone stood up together and started singing. I didn't know the song, but as it became familiar to me, I started singing along, and then I full-on started to weep. I just wept and wept during the singing. And then it was like, *Oh my God, how could I forget this? How could I forget how sustaining singing and community was? How could I forget that?* And that poignancy of *Oh, my gosh, I'd forgotten it.* And then there it was, in my face and in my body. And because singing is such an embodied practice, I think that's part of what resonates with me as a human being and just the way my brain is, not having visual memory, but having very profound auditory memory. The direction of my life completely shifted after that. Yes, that congregational experience profoundly connected me with a sense of singing as part of my spirituality in a very deep way.

It was standing up, singing together. Singing with people. This was not "professional" singing. This is some people who were comfortable singing, some people who had a hard time keeping a tune, some people that sang louder than anybody else was singing, some people

singing softly, some people who didn't sing at all. The whole mixture of humanity making a sound together, a joyful noise. Singing words in the Unitarian Universalist context, because as a child, you know, I remember feeling that church wasn't for me because I felt like I had to check my brain at the door. I guess what I mean by that, is that the Christian churches my friends went to were conservative. I liked that we got to eat together. And I like that we talked together. I loved that we sang together. Those were the highlights. I could do without the scripture and the sermon. I just felt like, *I can't buy that*. They're asking me to believe something I would not, I could not stay in the middle of, with integrity. When I went to the Unitarian Universalist congregation, and then had that experience of singing a song, and the song was not about us being sinners or not deserving the crumbs at the table of the Lord. It was a song I could wholeheartedly sing. It felt like I had come home. Yes, I was at home.

Right now, I am at home—it's pandemic times, so most people are at home. I'm watching this guy jog down the street; I see him most days. It is nice that I have a neighbourhood; strangers, neighbours, friends, birds, trees, other beings who I interact with. It brings me a sense of lightness, a smile in my centre that I am connected, with these other living and non-living beings. It all calls me to act in the world for more love, more respect, more justice.

Another thing that's bringing lightness and meaning right now is how I'm learning and changing in the Soulful Singing practice that I'm doing. That has been rich. Blessed. Humbling. Grace-filled. I am finding that I can be even more present than I thought I could be. That means present to what songs arise, present to the people that arrive, present to what is happening around us, present to what people share. All of that. I feel like I'm learning how to do that more skillfully and elegantly. I am deepening in my practice and my life. Sometimes it is effortful, but other times there is a profound and beautiful ease, an effortlessness. It connects back to that state of being affected by "the Meister Eckhart Disease," or perhaps I should call it "the Meister Eckhart Ease;" tapping into powerful presence. Connecting with the flow. Plugging in to the main source. What a deep learning that is: *I knew this. But now I really know*. It's like when you intellectually know something, and then it really lands in your centre. *Mmm-hmm. Oh, no, this is a learning that I won't forget*.

It's all connected, bird, cloud, and tree

It's all connected, earth, wind, and sea

An interwoven, exquisite tapestry

It's all connected, breath, you, and me

(Song written summer 2020)

Maggie

*Spiritual experience can be hard to ignore. Well, you could just walk on, I suppose. But it's like I've got to figure that out: What **is** that? And then you sort of go down a rabbit hole. To me, it's like a rabbit goes by and you can chase it or not, but it sure looks like fun! I think that matters of the spirit are very important. They're often under-represented in institutions. So, anybody who's going to study spirituality and wants to put it into a framework or examine it? I want to help them along. I just want to be part of the journey.*

I worked in a long-term care home and the home itself had quite a good reputation. But the work environment often felt chaotic and difficult. The home consisted of three open floors and one secure dementia unit where access was by password. A service review was conducted on this dementia floor, and it was decided that there was not enough programming for those with severe dementia. The administration requested more small spiritual care groups.

I knew the residents on the dementia unit because I used to conduct church services there. It always felt a bit like doing stand-up, because you just never knew what was going to happen. I'd wheel in this little altar and had a pianist with me. I learned to do what I called threading beads. There were 40 people on the floor and the service took place in an open common room where people could walk in or out at any time. It was organized chaos. You would start with singing or prayers, and people would yell at you or come take your books and throw them on the floor. I had somebody fill in for me one day, and she said, "You didn't tell me it was the pants optional service!" She was saying a prayer. And she looked up, and here was a man, naked from the waist down. It always felt a bit haphazard, and novel. But eventually, as we sang the old, old hymns they had learned when they were probably three or four, you could kind of catch them up. You would notice that they would start to mouth the words or sing. This was also true of liturgy that people had known all their lives, or readings, such as Psalm 23 or the Lord's Prayer that they had recited since childhood. When they heard the familiar phrases, they would mouth the words. The service was very much trying to reach back inside of them to something that still existed. And with dementia, the old memories are more fixed in their brains than the new memories. So going back to the time when they were children, and they went to church with their families—those things managed to kind of thread them onto the string. You had everybody kind of with you.

Most of all, residents loved when you came and touched their hand and spoke to them. Inevitably, some memory of the hymn brought back an old experience. They often talked about their moms or their grandmothers or their fathers, so that was comforting to them. That was the

group that could sing. Some of the other people at the service were in Geri chairs and showed little response to the service. Once in a while, you might be able see their lips move during the hymns, but there was little or no sign that they understood where they were or what was going on. It was with this group of people that I was requested to work. I thought, *Oh, how am I going to do this?* I think I started with four or five of them at the beginning, and we were in a small room, and I brought music because I knew it was an element that caught their attention. And after the first couple of programs, it was just like *Oh, what are you doing? Oh my God, this is terrible. I can't do this.* There was very little feedback from them, and I would go out filled with doubt.

In the home they also had a Snoezelen Room which was a beautiful sensory stimulation room which incorporated music, bubble tubes, things to feel, see, hear, touch and taste, like chocolate pudding. I sometimes worked with residents in that space, spending the hour with them in that very pleasurable place. And sometimes people wouldn't respond at all. And then sometimes, it took some time. There was one lady that after maybe five and 10 times, the only way I knew that she knew she was going into this room was that she started smacking her mouth because she liked the chocolate pudding. When she saw the paper butterfly that hung over the door of the Snoezelen Room, she started to smack her mouth. And I realized, *Oh, she knows she's here.* Certain people would sit up and talk to you or say things that were sort of startling. One day, I was feeding a lady a square of chocolate and she suddenly said, "Oh, everybody loves chocolate." And I said, "Well, actually, I know somebody who doesn't." And she said, "What's his name?" Very funny, very episodic, just like flashes. I knew that was sort of possible, but I didn't know how to do it. I continued with this group, and started playing old music from the war time, and then reading them poems they would have known in school. And there was one day I didn't get much response, and I thought, *"This is just hopeless."* And one lady, as I was wheeling her out, said, "That was very nice. Let's do that, again." I nearly fell over because she didn't give me any feedback that she was enjoying it. Quite often, they don't look at you, they look away. You're not sure what's going on, or if there's connection being made. But that kind of set me back on my heels.

I thought, *Okay, I just need to be looking at what makes connection. Music makes connection. I play war time music; they suddenly tip their heads back and sing all the lyrics.* They knew all the lyrics. I didn't know them, but they did. *There's more in there than I think. There are whole sentences in terms of lyrics. Poetry makes connection. What other things can I throw in?* It was a matter of tapping into what was already there. And then also encouraging them as a group to enjoy each other's company.

I started in this dark little room with them, and thought I needed to be in a lighter place and booked a sunny room. It had a big, long table, and I put a nice tablecloth on it. It was very colorful. I brought flowers. I brought music. When they would come in, it was like they were coming to a party. They often didn't remember that they had come to group before and it took a little persuading sometimes, so you'd say "Well, you came the other day and you really enjoyed it." The music would be playing when they came in. They were already sort of starting to arrive mentally with the music before we sat down together. And then I treated it like any kind of group. To open the session, we lit a candle and sometimes it was just the act of lighting the candle that seemed to bring them into the presence of the group. I could see them "arrive." I often wondered "Where have you been?" We would have a prayer to open and a prayer to close. They were simple prayers, asking for this time together to be blessed and for each person to feel special. In closing we would say thank you for what had occurred, and ask that, as each person left that they would feel loved. They would hold hands in the prayer, and often they remained holding hands throughout the whole group, and the prayer also seemed to bring them into the group. I would just bring a lot of material: stories, pictures music, poetry. We'd sort of talk about whatever they would interject into the conversation. We would go with it. For example, I played them Englebert Humperdinck's "The Green, Green Grass of Home." And then one lady said, "Remember the grass of home?" And I had never heard it expressed like that. But it was, *What's the grass like? What was the grass like around your house? What was the grass of home?* And people talked a lot about their homes, their mothers, their fathers, always in these little episodic cryptic sentences, but they were juicy with content. And one would spark off the other.

But you had to let go of any kind of continuum through it. It was just whatever occurs, this is sacred space. I wanted to make sacred space for them. As the group progressed, we started to include some daughters of the women in the group. I remember one daughter coming in to cut her mother's hair, and her mother was reciting a verse from "The Highwayman." Again, it was an old, old poem, they had learned in school. And she nearly dropped what she was holding, because she had not seen her mother like that in quite some time. But the group had brought her mother out. She asked to stay. In all, there were about four daughters who would come into the group with their mothers. They were part of the group as well because it was totally experimental. I just thought, *let's just see what happens*. And quite often, it would get very raucous. They were talking about being pregnant. And they told stories of being pregnant that were just funny. And the daughters would laugh, and sometimes they cried in the group time, because it brought up memories.

The daughters were a bit drained after the groups. They knew it was good, but it also took an emotional toll. We would go through a sort of playtime where I would put out this material, and we'd just go wherever the residents took us. At the end I would close with the song and a prayer. There was always a very structured beginning and end, and in the middle was just liminal space. *How did this happen? How did they come? And what brings them?* I couldn't figure out what it was. I couldn't figure out the mechanism. I just knew it had happened over, and over again. And I didn't have the words for it. One morning I had a dream, and as I woke, I heard "*Oh, it's liminal space, Maggie,*" and there was nothing more accurate. I started looking at Victor Turner and liminal space—a space between worlds—and how liminal experiences occur. And some of the factors that enable it. Part of that was the structure. I think I was on to the structure early in terms of it being different, because for me, it was like calling up this piece of them that was so old, and each piece was precious.

Sometimes the conversations were edgy and bordered on sensuality, work play and sexuality. We were talking about spring one day and I was asking one man "What did you feel like when it was spring?" and he just blurted out "Oh, the earth smells like lemonade." And this woman next to him, sort of leers at him, "Well, yeah, must have been lying in the long grass then!" Comments, you know, some of them were very witty. It was just a deep appreciation for what came out. I had this friend who's a poet, who came and did Haiku groups with me, and as we read poems, we also recorded their responses. I wrote down everything that they said. Then we formed Haiku from what they said, from their juicy speech. My friend helped us to put together a chapbook of these poems on the theme of spring. This little book has had a life of its own. It's gone all over the world in people's pockets. And we've heard back from people. They sparked other people to think differently. The people who made the poems are all dead now, but this is their speech. And it's wonderful because it's them. And I think the spirituality aspect of it was that no one is spiritually dead. It's just, you need to look at it from different eyes. They were my teachers. They enlivened me, made me question, made me search. Plus, we just had so much fun.

I think personally, it gave me something to focus on; to question and to chase. Of the 150 people in that home, we lost 70 a year. And I was present at almost all those deaths and funerals. A lot of my work was about death, and about people coming to death, about panicked and unhappy families and staff who had to do a lot of very hard work wiping bottoms and dealing with physical problems, and some people who were aggressive and fearful. It was a hard place to have hope, but it did give me hope. It made me see that Spirit is robust, and funny, and full of juice. It just helped me look at reality a little differently. And I also started to do some speaking

and writing and found myself in a larger global environment with people who were asking the same questions around the world. It was like finding a community as well—for me—of people who were asking these questions, and who had been doing the same kind of work, maybe different ways, but still trying to get to the same thing. This was a big affirmation for me that I was on the right path.

When I had that experience of clairaudience upon waking, at first it was kind of like *Did I just hear that or what?* And if it came out of my subconscious, it was deeply in there, I can tell you, as I didn't know anything about liminal space when I started this. But I was so curious. Where are we? Where do we get to? And how do I keep it safe, that they, we, can go into the space and come out of it without people being harmed or lost? If you look at Turner's work, one of the ways you know you have reached a sort of liminal transformative experience is what he calls "communitas." One day, in group time, we reached a place where it felt like we were a whole bunch of seagulls up in the air sort of calling to one another. We definitely had lift that day, and people were laughing, and they were funny, and there was kind of a bit of sexuality or sensuality in the things they were saying. It was just like a sense of having a draft underneath you. And there's a sense of community. These people didn't recognize each other when they came in, and yet they formed an amazing group; a sense of belonging to one another, belonging to something greater, acceptance, joy, and funniness, and just being alive.

In terms of the more sobering aspect of my job, which was being present in the death rooms of many of the residents, there is much the same concern for what happens to the group involved. I was concerned that everyone felt safe to be in the room and that their presence was accepted. It was important that they said what needed to be said and did what needed to be done in a protected and sacred environment. Time was not important. There were big tasks being accomplished in that room for everyone.

Sounds very odd, but one of the unusual offshoots from the group was that I realized how important gardens were. I started a garden in the home, there were three big beds, and I had each floor tell me what flowers to plant. Things like hollyhocks, or big tomatoes. You know, we did a whole riff on tomatoes. One woman had cried for 6 weeks coming into the home. She was lost. She was blind. We put a tomato in her hand during group. And she said, "Oh, now I'm not afraid. I'm in my grandmother's garden." And so just the feel of the tomato brought her to a place where she was no longer afraid. And she could tell us where she was. And people talked about tomato sandwiches to the point that we had to have a tomato sandwich day. They talked about all the different ways that they would make the sandwiches and what they would do when they ate them. Some would eat them in bed with a pickle. Some would be on their front porch

having a tomato sandwich. It was kind of like one of these experiences that everyone experiences privately. It's always a shock when you find something that just totally animates the whole group, and the tomato was one of them. When we planted the garden, we wanted as many people as possible to participate. They planted seeds. They helped plant the gardens, their families did. And people used to just go out and sit. Hollyhocks reminded people of their grandmothers. They were just very down to earth connectors. But they were things that people felt proud of because they were things they loved. And those flowers helped them to remember long cherished relationships. It gave families the opportunity to go out and make connections with their families in the garden as well.

Gardening has always been deeply spiritual for me. It's been a way to just shut my mind off and be present. I went through quite a few years of personal difficulty in my life, but I found that if you go out to the garden and dig, it just gives you flowers. It was a place to put all your frustrations and energy in, and it only gave back good things. I found it very hard to express anger. I'd rather dig and do it that way. I think I put a lot of my feelings in the garden. And in a way, particularly in my professional role, it wasn't about my feelings, but the thoughts and feelings of the residents and their families. Often when I was at a bedside, I had a lot of feelings. But I had to push those off and be present to the feelings and to the experiences happening in the room and aware of my role as witness, and as a necessary person, but it wasn't my story.

I think it was my greatest arena of learning, spiritually. It still contains a tremendous amount of mystery. I must say, now that I have left work, I'm in such fallow, at the moment, and I don't even know if I'm spiritual now. I tend to do things on a micro scale. I'm almost anti-social. I'm very quiet. And I know this is part of spirituality as well, but it's hard to accept that. I don't feel very juicy, is what I guess I should say. Being so open to satisfy curiosity, I'll just sort of say that learning comes from experience and trying to put words and ideas to those experiences. How wonderful it is to read books about people who will understand that and can give you a kind of framework, or maybe ask more questions, or make you laugh out loud at your silliness. There's so much that comes from experience and trying to put words to experience. But I think, for me, the mystery resides in the space between experience and word. I was very fond of the Sufi poets just because they embraced that mystery, and it didn't have to be all resolved. We're very linear our civilization, in terms of wanting to go from A to B to C. I don't think that exists. In the world of the spirit, time and structure are only convenient constructs to help give shape to what is indescribable.

My clairaudient experiences often came at a time of deep questioning or trying to work something out. I say I heard it, but I'm not sure I heard, if you know what I mean. But it was

almost an imperative message. I was sitting with a woman when I worked in a psychiatric impatient unit. She'd had numerous suicide attempts and was exactly my age. And the staff I knew had given up on her. And I went in to sit with her and she didn't say anything to me. And this voice said, "Just sit still." And I could feel my hair standing up on my neck. I was so scared. I was just like *I don't know what to say to this person*. I felt useless. And afraid. I was afraid she was going to kill herself. I felt that I couldn't do anything to stop it. When I sat on that chair, for I don't know how long, and I just sat tight because the voice said to sit tight. I did. And then she turned to me, and she said, "You have a body like my grandma. Would you hug me?" And I said, "Oh, yes," without delay. I did. I gave her a hug. And then we just talked for a couple of minutes. Then a couple of weeks later, she was starting to get better. And I asked her what helped her to recover. And she said, "It was the moment you agreed to hug me. I knew that the universe was kindly." So that's like going to this place where there's nothing. It's like standing on the edge, right?

Pebbles are falling into the abyss. And you don't have anything in your pocket that's going to help that person, but that person manages to find something to save themselves. So that "Sit tight"—I didn't know what it meant. But somebody knew to do that. Every other part of my body wanted to run out of the room. I didn't want to stay there. But it was a turning point, a nexus for her. I think it's that awareness, that often you're used as a tool, in a way, by spirit, that your understanding doesn't equal.

Chapter 7: Themes

As you consider the stories you have just encountered, and perhaps use the guiding questions offered earlier in Chapter 6 to ponder the meanings and connections they have in your own life, in this section, I will present some insights I have gleaned from the study. I have been able to draw upon the entire data set, including Phase 1 questionnaire responses, the 75 stories that were shared, 20 interviews (10 interviews and check-ins), the final narratives and artifacts. These data led me to identify 12 emergent themes, and offer some deeper observations about learning through spiritual encounters.

Emergent Themes as Insights

In this section, I will be presenting the emerging themes that came out of this study, using my conceptual framework of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness. In doing so, I will primarily draw upon the narratives, and will quote from them using italics, as they often provide the most in depth examples due to the richness and quantity of the data. Where relevant, I will supplement some of this with other learnings from the interviews and check-ins, to deepen our understanding of the theme, in addition to text responses from other participants in the Phase 1 questionnaire. As I have previously alluded to, you will notice that many stories and examples have overlapping themes and could easily fit under more than one category. For example, those involving death, often also involved an aspect of asking for or receiving, signs. Rather than try to make these boundaries strict, I encourage you to make space for this fluidity as you read and feel along. Before exploring each in detail, here is an overview of some of the ways attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness were present in spiritual encounters.

Insight 1: Participants were *attentive* to

- death and dying
- a voice or presence
- the natural world
- bracketed space/time

- body/senses and emotions (e.g., surprise was very important but less so than I had anticipated, as other strong emotions often took precedence)

Insight 2: Participants were *willing* to

- ask (e.g., for signs, or in prayer, or reflective questions)
- take risks and leaps of courage
- learn (e.g., 7/10 had graduate degrees and demonstrated willingness to learn in other areas of their lives)

Insight 3: Participants demonstrated *responsiveness* through

- making choices and decisions often related to identity, lifestyle and vocation
- usefulness (e.g., encounters were helpful, and participants used them purposefully)
- kindness/compassion
- an ability to share their encounter (e.g., spiritual encounters were not ineffable)

Attentiveness

Death and Dying. Death, of course, is something we all will face at some point; whether our own or the deaths of those around us, or even in the larger context of war, famine, genocide, pandemic, and climate catastrophe. My study also suggested that it is a key aspect of learning through spiritual encounters.

In Poetry's account, it was the aftermath of the death of her grandfather which spawned a spiritual journey as she moved towards, and then away from, her faith. Interestingly, she also marked her own learning and growth by how well she felt able to process her grandmother's death a few years later by comparison. For Anusree, it was the accident—a close brush with death—that brought the sudden insight of wanting a child. Jan also discussed the subject in much detail as her spiritual encounter allowed her to learn that dying was not the only answer to her situation, and that she had other alternatives available to her when she found herself feeling despair. In our second interview, she spoke about how this was a key learning from her fall in St.

Louis square. She also beautifully described the times she guided others through the process of dying. She recalled singing them songs and supporting people in distress as they transitioned and noted the peace that eventually came; the honour and palpability of being with the dying.

More than one participant in the study recognized this aspect of spiritual encounters around death and being with the dying. Maggie acknowledged this aspect of her work. She laughed as she described how she had, at times, witnessed people dropping their inhibitions as they neared their own death. She recounted the story of one female client, who had always typically been well mannered and polite, and then one day snapped:

The family had me come in to say a prayer. And I was standing by the bed and I went to start. And she said to me, "Will you shut up?" And I burst into laughter and so did the family. It was like, finally, you know, finally, she says what's on her mind?

This moment highlighted the capacity for death to cut through pretense and bring us more authentically into the present; to say what needs to be said, sometimes offering opportunities for more frank, clear, or direct communication. Maggie also talked about how much of her work with the dying was about making room for the families to be guided through their own preparation and mourning process, which might also be seen as a form of learning. She acknowledged the sacredness and responsibility of creating a safe environment. She also spoke about its challenges:

... we lost 70 a year. And I was present at almost all those deaths and funerals. So, a lot of my work was about death, and about people coming to death, about panicked and unhappy families and staff who had to do a lot of very hard work wiping bottoms and dealing with physical problems, and some people who were aggressive and fearful. It was a hard place to have hope, but it did give me hope. It made me see that Spirit is robust, and funny, and full of juice. It just helped me look at reality a little differently.

Just as Maggie acknowledged the need for sacredness and care in her account of being with the dying, Ben acknowledged this responsibility in a different way in his narrative account

of the symbolic slaying of the Stag King. He described being keenly aware that the theatrical killing in the ceremony was not to be taken lightly; it was something festival organizers, and he himself, had considered deeply. He had expressed concern and sensitivity, that if taken out of context, there was a risk that some could misappropriate certain ceremonial elements and Norse symbols that played a role in pagan rituals to promote hate. Still, he recognized that the symbolic death in the ritual had varying levels of meaning for participants, and at times could be seen as a deeply powerful offering, and how this connected to opportunities for personal growth and community service.

In the stories submitted to the questionnaire, the connections to death were glaring and plentiful. As I will elaborate on in the discussion, I had vastly underestimated how much of an impact this theme would arise in reports of learning through spiritual encounters. Typically, these accounts involved the death of a loved one, participants' own close calls with death, or the witnessing of someone else's death. Whether it be the death of a family member, an unborn child, a friend or stranger, or a brush with one's own mortality, participants were deeply impacted by this in a variety of ways; sometimes it brought peace, or a sense of being helped from beyond. This often occurred through dreams or signs, and participants described learning experiences which provided both emotional or tangible support, such as one participant who reported the sense that a deceased loved one had assisted them find a lost object, and another, a new home.

A Voice or Presence. Sometimes it was unnamed, sometimes identified; participants often used terminology such as spirit, spirit guides, or even a deceased loved one's name or title, e.g., "Dad", and many people simply described it as a presence, or voice. This voice was often heard from within, but distinct from their own. This could happen awake, sleeping, such as in a dream, including visits from loved ones from the past, or the future, like one participant who had a 'preview' of her adopted children, or in some cases, in the transition between these states. One person even reported having sensed the presence of his own incarnation from a past life,

after a week spent at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland. For this participant, these experiences are strongly connected to *place*. Some people described the presence as a light they could see, and often feel (e.g., like electricity), and others, that it had an angelic quality (three stories explicitly involved an angelic encounter). Many referred to it as God, such as after the car accident when Anusree said, “It had God’s hands all over it.” In our conversations, she clearly credited her survival, and the resulting insights about having children, to God: *I am constantly watched. I am constantly protected. I’m constantly taken care of*. In fact, in the study interviews and text responses, the word God was used well over three hundred times.

Celia also described the feeling of being accompanied when she called upon Jesus: *It was like a big sigh of relief, even in the depths of my loneliness to learn that I was not alone*. While she does not regularly call upon Jesus now, and in fact, described being slightly uncomfortable when people talk about His impact in their lives nowadays, she did describe a sense of presence in Meeting for Worship:

I have grown up as a Quaker, and I think that the basis of Quakers really relies on each individual experiencing what I would consider a connection that we can’t explain—that we can feel as a presence. Quakers have described it in the past as a presence in the midst.

Of course, of those I interviewed, Father Frank’s experience was among the starkest. In the opening line of his narrative, he says “You know the voice of God when you hear it.” He describes the moment he heard the voice of God in the church, twice telling him to be a priest—how it moved him so powerfully, that he replied with an audible yes. *I had never heard God speak so clearly in words*. He also talked about his process of trying to confirm this decision over the next few days, alone with his Bible, and how he kept encountering themes such as: “Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts” (*New Living Translation*, Hebrews 3:7). Father Frank reiterated in his account how normal this type of religious experience was for many:

St. Augustine had a very similar experience when he heard the voice of God to change. For my kind of people, I guess it's normal. It's a normal thing to hear a voice like this and make a big change all at once. It's a common story, just like Isaiah, or Jeremiah or John the Baptist. You get called, and you respond... God breaks in, you hear his voice.

He acknowledged this as a softening of his heart, an awesome experience that led him to accept the call into the priesthood. He described it not as a voice he heard in his ears, but inwardly. He did admit, however, that he has never heard it since, even though at times he wished he had, and that he has never personally met another priest during his forty years of searching who had the same type of call.

In Poetry's account, she described two times she felt a presence or a voice. The first, after she experienced a renewed sense of direction in her academic life:

... it felt like a divine intervention, as though God was telling me: You know I'm there. You may have all your windows and doors closed. You may be angry with me right now. You may not even have anything to do with me right now, but I'm here.

She talked about God's presence with a metaphor of stars in the sky that one cannot see during the day—invisible, but still present. The other experience she described occurred two days before her grandmother passed away: *Just a couple of days before my grandma passed away, I sort of had a vision of her telling me, just this one word, that I could, that I can... it still rings in my ears. She said, Believe.* This encounter with her grandmother left her with a palpable sense of peace that had ripples in other areas of her life.

Of course, Jan described both her car accident and fall in St. Louis square as being angelic encounters. In the case of her fall, she noted “an angelic presence.” Indeed, she recognized that a real person helped her and touched her but described the encounter as surreal or hyper real. The interaction was brief, but incredibly meaningful to her. She describes being able to feel and sense the presence of a male figure with shoulder length hair, from the opposite side of the square, as if they were face-to-face, even though there was a 250-meter distance

between them. She could also sense that there was an intention to help: *I could see this face and see this intention from one end of St. Louis Square to the other. I could sense their intention was to come and assist me. And I thought, someone cares.* She also mentioned an experience of God's presence when she was very young. She described how she has had phases in her life where she might say "God and I aren't speaking to each other," but she never lost that sense of connection, even though at times her responsiveness might tarry.

In many stories involving voice or presence, there is also a strong sense of communication or direction, often providing help or guidance in ways in which the participant felt went beyond their own sense of understanding, rational thinking, and at times, will. Josee described an epiphany-like moment, in which she recognized she was both patient and practitioner during the self-administered Reiki session. As she went deeper into the treatment, she also began to sense a presence:

I just started hearing... something talking to me. I still don't know if it was myself, but not like my physical self obviously. I guess my soul or my spirit, whatever you want to call it, or something else. I don't think it had a gender if that makes any sense. But if I must stick a gender to it, it leaned more towards the feminine; gentle, soft, but firm in the sense like "Hey, pay attention to what I have to say. This is important."

She described the voice as guiding her towards specific information about her trauma and deployment experience that had not previously occurred to her: *Look at this!*, it said, as it pointed out new information. In terms of learning, she recognized this process as having impacted the course of her career, emotions, thoughts, and therapy. *As the voice was saying these things I was just bawling. It was like this enormous release—not a healing—but like an enormous release. And yeah, I couldn't control it. I couldn't. I just let it happen.*

Maggie described experiences with clairaudience too; she credits an imperative voice as being the reason she was able to stay sitting next to the woman in the psychiatric ward despite her own fears and resistance. The voice told her to "just sit still." She also describes the voice she

heard upon waking which guided her towards her research of Turner's *liminal space*, which assisted her learning, and resulted in supporting incredible breakthroughs with her clients and a way to better understand their shared experience.

The Natural World. Sensory experiences in nature also often involved a sense of presence, and not unexpectedly, the natural world played a very large part of people's encounters, perhaps even more so in the stories that were submitted online through the survey than in the interviews—whether it be a moment with a raindrop that foretold the death of a beloved entertainer, or a sprig of bittersweet found along the path at Big Sandy Bay as a gentle reminder of a mother who had recently passed. Many examples from the natural world involved encounters with beauty, wonder and awe, an opportunity for deep contemplation, humility, a sense of interconnectedness, receiving signs, and opportunities to learn from animals. The survey responses included a range of examples, including someone being struck by lightning (and how it completely changed the course of their life), or experiencing a sense of timelessness and God while walking in a field; people spoke of the vastness of creation, and specific encounters with animals as signs and teachers, such as birds (cardinals, chickadees, bluebirds, red-eye hawks), swallowtail butterflies, white moths, or indeed “kind” horses. The stories submitted also talked of relationships with geography and the landscape itself, as one participant offered about the horizon:

I read that someone had introduced themselves by saying they had been raised by a river. Were they speaking geographically? Or had the river raised them in some way? (Maybe both). What had I been raised by that I hadn't realized? I was raised by the Horizon, in a place where the land is flat and with few trees. I watched the Horizon, played with it as a child (I would move the line of the horizon up and down depending on the clouds in the sky). I realized the Horizon taught me the importance of perspective in life, taking the long view, how to trust there is more to see past the wall of trees or whatever is currently blocking my view. The Horizon taught me to trust in

change, to weather storms, and so much more. I experience learning from spiritual practice weekly, if not daily. I also teach in a theological school that emphasizes learning intellectually and spiritually from all we do. (So, it is part of what I do personally and professionally.) I now, with expanded intention, continue to learn not only from the horizon, but from all creation around me. Nature, land, sky, non-humans, and humans in different ways than before... and in deepening ways.

In the narratives, Poetry described how as the result of her spiritual encounter she, too, began to feel more connected to everything in nature, which she described as her biggest learning:

I am equally as significant as a tree outside my window. Or maybe a squirrel sitting on the top of that tree. I think I am more connected to everything around me.

Everything in nature. And that's something I teach my kid as well. If we are a part of everything, the same energy flows through all of us. So just because you can stand and walk on two feet does not make you any more important than a plant that is growing in a pot on your window.

Wendy Luella also spoke in depth about her interconnectedness with everything in nature and about her own memories of childhood and growing up on a farm and “the beautiful harsh land” she lived on. She described that sense of not being separate from other elements of creation, such as the brook, the woods, and the mosses. During the 6-week spiritual encounter she had as an adult, she again re-remembered this interconnectedness with nature:

When I drink the water from this jar, the water is going to become the water in me, which I will excrete and it will eventually become water in a river, that will flow to the ocean, which will evaporate into a cloud, and later fall down as rain and end up in my or somebodies jar again.

While we didn't speak explicitly about this word choice as we edited her narrative, the emphasis on the body in this last line was noted. In describing her experience during COVID-19, she spoke of how important it was to her, to be surrounded by *strangers, neighbours, friends, birds, trees, and other beings*.

There was a great deal related to this theme in Maggie's encounter as the various prompts she used in the group often led to discussions of the natural world. We see this in their discussions of the grasses of home, memories of spring, and the hollyhocks. *They were just down to earth connectors*. Maggie spoke of the gardens; how involved some of the clients and their families became in planting, enjoying, visiting, and taking pride in the garden beds. Of course, there is also the tomato sandwich example, which resonates deeply with this theme, or the imagery of the seagulls taking flight, neither of which will soon be forgotten by me. And as we've already mentioned, Maggie herself took great solace working in the garden: *if you go out to the garden and dig, it just gives you flowers... it only gave back good things*. It was interesting that Father Frank also used the example of the tomato in his account to describe the process of becoming closer to God:

The gardener plants a tomato seed, but he doesn't want to eat the tomato seeds, or the plant, he wants to get to the fine ripe tomato at the end of the season to put in a salad or a sauce... so you grow towards that.

Josee also talked about gardening, and her connection to Mother Earth as being essential aspects of her spiritual life and learning. She talked about writing a book including recipes and love letters to Mother Earth. Indeed, it seems that even when participants were not actively engaging in nature, they would often find themselves referring to it in metaphor.

Bracketed Space and Time. Many spiritual encounters seemed to occur in bracketed time; time set apart from usual activities. This occurred in different ways, for example intentional retreats, meditation practices, silence (often outdoors), ritual, or even sacred daily practices. One person even reported a spiritual encounter during a liver cleanse. They can also

occur in other episodes that seem to happen *to us*, such as in the dreamworld, or during medical procedures. In both, people reported visitations from deceased grandparents they had not previously met. Bracketed time might also include the period of mourning after the death of a loved one, a short trip or drive, a period of illness, or indeed, even the boundaries of a pandemic. Other examples might include times of intense focus or study, as presented in the narratives.

For Josee, we see that her spiritual encounter occurred during a leave of absence as well as during a particular time and environment set apart for the Reiki treatment held in a sacred space. Other survey respondents reported powerful encounters during Reiki sessions too. For Father Frank it is Christmas Day, during Mass, which he acknowledged as a heightened and emotional time for any kind of important decision making. In Peter's case, not only do we have the bracket of the dream, but also of his short illness, and a heightened period of personal and professional transition during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Poetry's encounter, there was a sense of bracketed time between the passing of her two grandparents, and it marks a turning point; much of this also coincides with her period as a graduate student, another form of bracketing. In Anusree's story, the accident was the primary bracket for this spiritual encounter. Her sense of time also seemed somewhat impacted as she described being surprised at how fast everything happened—how this new insight comes to her during this very heightened moment, as she realizes she has not been harmed: *I should have had a baby with my husband.*

Ben's encounter evoked a very specific sense of bracketing; such is the nature of festival, and he described the format of the day, the environment, and sense of space not only physically, but metaphorically: *It's learning, because it is that deeper understanding of yourself if you allow yourself to get into that space.* He also spoke about some of his friends who practice a druidic faith and how they cast circle, and intentionally set a sacred space apart from regular physical space:

We have cast this circle, and this circle is for us to do the work that we're doing. These are our prayers, these are our offerings, so on and so forth. And when the ritual closes, they disassemble that circle...the event is very much building a ritual space. The ritual occurs within that space. And then afterwards, you return to the real world.

He also describes ecstatic dance in a similar way. For himself personally, he described that nowadays this looks more practical for him, and how practices such as meditation and the tools of cognitive behavioural therapy help him engage more consciously with how he is feeling, and what he is doing.

In Wendy Luella's account, there is also a very specific bracket around her intensive period studying Meister Eckhart. She spoke a great deal about how this felt like a new reality for her, which prompted her to contemplate how one might respond to this heightened state by retreating:

I did have the feeling at one point that maybe this is when people go into monasteries and close themselves into little rooms. And they pray and eat and sing... I mean while there are more activist elements of religious orders, a lot of them are retreating.

Jan's discussions of those periods of time in her life where she has been homebound due to injury or pregnancy were also a fascinating form of bracketing. Jan also described some of the other tools she explicitly uses to connect to her spirituality and carve out a boundary of time; daily spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and contemplative reading, for example *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (1548). Maggie's story also involved deliberate actions she took to create safe ritual spaces for her clients, for example the tablecloths and music, candles, opening and closing prayer, gentle, safe touch, and offerings of gratitude. She described how after delving into learning more about liminal space, as a result of her clairaudient experience, she was able to incorporate these learnings to enhance the experience for the patients with dementia. She found that certain prompts, such as music, or poetry, could allow participants to access memories in a deeper way across the boundaries of time. Maggie had also explored

retreat and spiritual learning in other ways in her personal life, and in fact it was she that first offered the concept of bracketed time as a possible key factor in learning through spiritual encounters in one of our interviews.

Body, Senses, and Emotions. This study, like others before it, reiterated the place of the body and senses in learning through spiritual encounters. This happened in various ways, whether that be the presence of the body in physical space, feelings experienced through the senses or a more involuntary embodied act, such as childbirth or death—or one survey respondent who described the involuntary movements of her body during a Kundalini yoga practice. More than one story was shared related to out of body experiences, too. Emotional intensity of learning through spiritual encounters was also one of the strongest themes that emerged in the study. Keeping in mind that 58.2% of people who completed the questionnaire ranked it a 5 out of 5 for emotional intensity and 24% ranked it a 4, it seemed evident that emotions can play a very powerful role in this type of learning. In terms of surprise, 40.5% of participants who answered said they were 5/5 surprised, 21.5% ranked their surprise a 4/5, so this was a key emotion and most certainly present in many of these accounts. The data also suggested that for some participants who had a regular spiritual practice, these surprises had come to be somewhat expected. What emerged even more strongly from the stories submitted, and in the lives of those I interviewed, was the impact of intense feelings such as grief, anger, sadness, loneliness, shame, and other emotions that might be considered challenging or difficult.

In Anusree's narrative the embodied aspects of her encounter were described in precise detail; the physical experience of being in a car accident, including the sensory details such as smelling burning flesh, or the feeling of the spinning car. Other images that stood out were the white phone cord or her heightened awareness of the blue and white spaghetti strapped dress that her mom had given her. Her awareness of her own body, her feelings, and her needs after the accident were also an element of this story—both in the way that she advocated for herself,

and also in her husband's care and prioritizing of them. She also described learning that due to the arthritis in her eye, she can get very tired while driving, which was an important reminder for herself. But of course, primarily it was this embodied knowledge that she needed to have a child that stood out most starkly for her. Anusree also described very strong emotions, particularly in her initial reaction to her husband, namely the unexpected anger that arose in her as result of his practical response to her after the accident. She described the learning that took place as result of this, as eventually she came to understand the reasons for his calm approach and how he attended to her needs. She talked about how her understanding of him deepened, as much to her surprise, she recognized the benefits of his way of handling things. Interestingly, earlier in her account, she herself, had described a feeling of calm that came over her immediately following the accident too. She also noted how proud she was that she advocated for her needs with the police when they arrived on the scene and had asked her to get out of the car. She did acknowledge surprise around the speed of the accident, and how fast everything happened. She was also surprised by people's kindness and some of her own reactions and learnings related to her interaction with her husband. But by far, in her mind, she acknowledged, the greatest element of surprise and learning being the revelation of wanting children. Lastly, Anusree also described the bravery and courage involved in some of her life choices, and her reliance on faith in God.

In Poetry's example, she recounted the feelings of emptiness, heartbreak, and anger she encountered while moving away from her religious beliefs to embrace a state of nothingness. She described her sadness akin to leaving a lover, and a sense of being lost as she felt she had forfeited her support system. This was also followed by a period of great guilt for not connecting and believing in God as she used to, and she found herself intentionally blocking herself from feeling anything. She described feeling surprised that this moving away from God was even possible for her. Feelings of devastation, loss of confidence, and unhappiness were also present as she described facing numerous medical and psychological complications. On the other hand,

upon returning from medical leave, she described a shift in her circumstances related to her academic life that brought comfort. For example, she began to consider what kind of learner and person she truly wanted to be and felt that she became a more courageous parent. She also noted that she has become more compassionate and kinder to herself and others.

Her story contained strong elements related to the body. She talked about the very embodied nature of the heartbreak she experienced, so much so that it prompted a medical leave. Poetry also used embodied, intimate imagery, such as that of a romantic relationship when discussing her moving away from God: *You know, you need to move away, break free, let go* and compared the process to a break-up and reconnection between people in love. In her discussion of her academic identity, she also talked about having previously tried to fit into various moulds. In her changing views on learning, she touched upon embodiment when she said, “I had to start looking for my pail and filling it myself.” She also described a key element of her learning through spiritual encounter as now being able to “walk in other people’s shoes” a little more. Also, she notes how her image of her Creator in the drawing exercise is always changing, and how her daughter’s remains constant. The sensory experience of drawing and art making with her family appeared to be a powerful reflective tool.

Likewise, Ben’s spiritual encounter involved very physical elements: *They’re going at it tooth and nail*. He talks about the physical aspects of the ritual and described it as very physically demanding as participants are involved in various physical endurance challenges, in an outdoor festival, in the hot sun, even racing each other to the starting point. Notably, however, he talked about how there are also misconceptions here; that often people were surprised to learn that the ritual is not just “boys club shenanigans with guys running around and playing grab-ass” but actually far more transformational inwardly too. He described this as a key learning for himself, which prompted him to want to participate and mentor other men in a meaningful way. He alludes to the embodied and experiential nature of this type of learning in a comparison:

You can do research, you can read up, you can try and do and know everything around it, but until you go skydiving, you don't fundamentally know what that feels like, and you don't know how you are going to react. Not genuinely.

As previously discussed, he also spoke about some of the other physical or embodied elements of creating ritual spaces such as ecstatic dance, sweat lodges, and the idea of casting circle. Our conversations also touched upon things like meditation and exercise and other ways that ritual activities or daily spiritual practices could be leveraged in one's spiritual life. Ben described a great deal of emotion in his account too. One of the moments that stood out the most was his discussion of the men's heartfelt reaction to the child asking, "Why do you deserve to be my Stag King?" When I asked Ben about his level of surprise with the encounter, he suggested that it came from the same place he felt many others had experienced: primarily the idea that the ritual he was participating in was far more transformative than he could have expected, and that this learning is what encouraged him to want to help create a similar experience for others.

Josee's spiritual encounter occurred during a Reiki treatment as part of a detox, which very much involved the use of her body, as she was both patient and practitioner. She described the treatment space in such detail, her sacred room/library, her books and crystals, and blue upholstered chair, as well as the altars she created out of salvaged wood. In terms of the encounter's impact, she talks about it bringing to the surface things that were "gut wrenching" and buried "deep, deep, deep" down in there. She spoke about how the emotional response and release felt out of her control, and how some of the resistance to sharing her spirituality has felt almost irrational—her choice of imagery certainly very evocative: *Nobody's going to fucking burn me at the stake. But there's this weird fear like this is something I shouldn't talk about.* Josee also described how she explores her spirituality in more embodied ways; that she journals and draws and often burns her creations. She also described how she has been writing letters to Mother Earth and compiling them in a book. She talked about pleasurable activities such as

gardening and travelling being an important part of her spiritual practice. She contrasts this with the harshness of the military environment. *They don't even care about you, you're entirely disposable...* Josee's encounter had a very deep emotional component too. At the time we spoke she was on medical leave dealing with burnout and post deployment difficulties, which she described as a very dark period of her life. She spoke about the intense emotional response to the information that arose during her Reiki treatment; first shock, because she had not yet considered the information that was being brought to her awareness, and then a sense of release, as she learned more about her pain and trauma. While the feelings associated with this resurfacing were difficult, she also described a sense of deepening resonance, gratitude, and love for the spiritual encounter itself. She spoke about fear she carried regarding survival and how her spiritual experience helped to reaffirm that the divine is present in her life. She also expressed some degree of shame and fear in her past; acknowledging what she described as ancestral wounds. She described how she experienced both fear of being judged, or left, at the idea of sharing her spiritual encounters with past partners as well as a degree of regret that she did not more intentionally integrate spirituality into her son's life, though she is thankful that he does believe in *something*. She described her increasing confidence in this area of her life, and described feeling most alive when she is gardening, in nature, travelling or practicing Reiki. Lastly, her comments on emotion and the military were incredibly telling: *even just something like crying is a nail in the coffin. I'm not ashamed. I love my spirituality. It's just not a good environment. The closer I get to retirement, the less I'm going to give a fuck.*

Father Frank's account also felt very embodied; the interpretation of the burning bush story he shares at the beginning of his encounter—about God wanting Moses to have his human feet touching holy ground—was very evocative of the type of intimacy he believes is possible in spiritual encounter. Even the image he used to describe his call at an early age: that he saw becoming a priest almost like being a firefighter. Or, indeed the images such as his wrestling with the decision, the pizza, his mother's Bruce Springsteen t-shirt, and the metaphor of pushing

elephants out of the house were also very visceral and embodied elements of his story. He also used a few other ‘colourful’ examples to describe the embodied nature on the individual ways we are called to serve God: *someone who’s purple can’t be mad at someone who’s a yellow*. It is also apparent in the story he shared about the young man who came in to request ashes for Ash Wednesday who resembled his father. He used this experience to explain how we are created in the likeness of God. He also spoke about how embodied practices of playing music, or guitar or offering the Eucharist were meaningful for him, and how he connects most deeply to his spirituality.

In terms of intense emotional experience, Father Frank talked about worship beginning in “awe,” and described how intimate spiritual encounters with God could be a source of great comfort. He also spoke of the emotional journey he went on in his decision to become a priest. He referred to that period of wrestling with God regarding the timing of his decision to enter the priesthood—sometimes, veering off for a pizza instead! He talked about the reactions of his family and the range of emotions they experienced; his mother’s worries stood out too—her concern she would have to give up her Bruce Springsteen t-shirts and behave like a priest’s mother. His friends were also against it: *You know, that’s the kind of thing people thought back then... that the priesthood life was an extremely unhappy type of life—which is what it looks like for people who aren’t priests*. He described his “mystical” experience in the church, his strong reaction to a terrible holiday sermon, and how he was not expecting to hear God’s voice that day: *I never heard God speak so clearly... in words. And Christmas is a very emotional day, you know, not necessarily a good day to make such a life changing decision, you know*. He acknowledged his surprise at the timing: *I’m so surprised. It was a surprising thing, because we don’t expect to hear the call of God at a time*. One of the most emotional moments in Father Frank’s interview was when he spoke about some of the difficulties of being a priest: *It’s a lonely type of life. It’s very, very difficult. It’s very, very challenging. You get an awful lot of opposition; you get an awful lot of people who think things of you that are*

not true. And you press on, and you say, "Well no, God called me to this. And he will supply all the graces needed to be able to get along."

He also spoke about how, during the process of becoming a priest, he had to look at his own life and make changes in order to shed "the sins of his youth" and used the metaphor of pushing elephants out of a house to describe the emotional work involved in that process towards "a saner type of life." He also shared that he felt very alive when he was in the flow of writing, playing music, teaching, creating sermons, or offering the Eucharist, and compared the possibility of connection of God akin to a true love "that could last for all eternity".

In Peter's account of the dream there is much physical and sensory detail. He also talked about how feeling under the weather in real life (e.g., waking up feeling hot and feverish) tended to impact his dream life. In this case, he described the dream like a piece of art. He described his character in the dream, travelling the streets of a wintry city, deserted and cold. He could vividly describe details of various scenes and locations in the dream, for example the urns and vases in the gift shop, as well as the mocking of the child who was a central character in the story and being very cruel to him. He recalled wearing a heavy coat, and the child grabbing hold of one of the toggles. Other aspects of the sensory experience such as the 70s style design and architecture, lots of exposed wood and carpeting, various platforms and oddities were also very distinct and meaningful to him. Peter discussed a great deal of emotion that was present in his feverish dream: *When I talk about the emotional component of the dream, you know, these are very emotional experiences for me. I feel the hatred from this child, and perhaps the hatred of this child as well.* He also described the feelings of healing and nurturing that come as result of being released as the dream took a turn towards themes of reconciliation. In looking at the dream from a different perspective, Peter also noted that he found other aspects of it interesting and comforting, such as the fact that his artist self in the dream was queer, or the aesthetic elements of the dream being quaint and funny. He also described contrasting emotions in the dream as his character remembered earlier life successes. Peter identified this dream as being

archetypal and including an arc from sterility to fertility. He recognized the dream as representing parts of himself, and that he had some desire to integrate these pieces that “are at odds, that are hurtful.” Peter described in his own life, that the pandemic context, and doing two jobs at once, plus beginning a course, had taken a lot out of him and he described a feeling of burnout or “running low.” He described how feelings of being released were meaningful to him as in real life, he sought to make sure that his job responsibilities were “appropriately transferred.” He also spoke of the grief he experienced giving up something that had been so meaningful to him for many years. He described the weightiness of all of this, and a feeling of being quite alone in it. He commented on the role that this dream played in reconnecting him to his feelings:

I'm not a very emotional person. I don't feel my emotions very strongly. When I do, it's very meaningful. I pay attention to that. And I think, what does that mean? There's something real and deep and spiritual for me when that happens. So, because I'd felt such strong emotions in the dream and remembered them... okay, well, there's meaning here.

He spoke about the dream as an emotional release and recognized that while he had strong feelings and thoughts about leaving his job, he wasn't always consciously feeling them. In working with the feelings and symbols in the dream, he was reminded that he is indeed an emotional being, even if at times these parts feel alien or unfamiliar:

The biggest thing I learn from experiences like this is that I'm a real person, and I have depth, and I'm not just a worker or a cog in the machine. I don't just exist to perform functions, and follow reports, but that I have these deeper parts of myself to attend to. But also, that they are attending to me, and will make themselves known one way or another.

One other aspect of our discussion that did not come through in the narrative, but seems relevant to the theme, was Peter's response to what makes him feel most alive:

I think that I made a decision, a conscious decision in my life, to allow myself to live and to do the normal things of life and to take them seriously. So, you know, getting married, and making meals, and playing games, and seeing friends and things like that are all things that were not emphasized in my spiritual tradition, by my religious upbringing, or even formally in the religious community I find myself in these days. We don't necessarily have a lot of theology that talks about the goodness of the everyday...but it's something that I find life-giving.

While Celia's account is a little more subtle, there is some reference to embodiment in the physicality of her loneliness. It was also interesting to note that while she was not sure if she had ever called upon Jesus again, she came to realize that perhaps she had, at times, said "Walk with me." She also discussed that while she does not have any identifiable daily spiritual practice, she does try to go regularly to in person Quaker meetings, weekly when she can. During the pandemic she also described having met for Meeting by herself and that it was *working*, much to her surprise. In her encounter, Celia described her feelings of loneliness like being "down in a deep pit," and then described the astounding feelings of peace that she experienced after calling upon Jesus: *a great peace that filled me, a relaxation and just a letting go*. Celia describes having been raised to believe that God is love; she does not believe that this is a being with a gender but sees this perfection in nature. She described feeling astounded by science and the natural world. And yet, she also acknowledges that there is *something beyond what we scientifically talk about or see that connects us all*. She talks about the profound silence she experiences in Quaker Meetings leaving her with a sense of awe and described feeling that this is a place where she can feel understood, and free to be herself. One of the other ways she believes one knows they are on the right path is a sense of joy.

Emotion was very present in Jan's encounter as she described the deep heartbreak and discouragement she was experiencing at that time in her life, and feelings of wanting to die. She described the aftermath of her fall in St. Louis square as being emotional too; feeling disgruntled

and in pain, but also full of sorrow and regret for having wanted to die, which she described as “a huge load of emotion.” She elaborated on this experience:

It was really learning that I must be careful about what I think and say—that I don't need to die. I don't need to die because I'm in pain. I need to find another way. Another way to ease the suffering.

As previously shared, she also talked about having large periods of her life where she has needed to be “homebound” due to pregnancy (requiring her to be in bed for four months each time) or injury. In fact, her osteopath is one of the only people Jan recalled having shared her spiritual encounters with. The physical details of her stories—for example, the shower she took while heartbroken, the description of the pebbles and long skirt in St. Louis square, the pain of the phone digging into her ribs, feeling nauseated after coming home from a job where she had “to feed an old lady her supper”—all stand out in her account.

Jan's spiritual encounters involved traumatic brain injury and by their very nature were deeply embodied. Her description of her first two out of body experiences were very physical; the first when she was raped at 19 years old, and then again at age twenty, hanging up-side down in a playground on a geodesic dome, where she fell and hit herself on the outer edges of her eyebrows: *Once you're unmoored from your body, it's not so difficult to knock yourself out again.* Jan also noted the embarrassment she felt after that fall. In another example, Jan described the idea that embodiment had been quite difficult, given her life circumstances. As a result, she realized that the story of the Incarnation of Jesus was very important to her. Also poignant, was Jan's discussion of helping people transition through death and on occasion, “subbing in” for people's relatives at their bedside if one could not be present:

One woman—I put my hand over her heart, and said: Your daughter's here with us, I'm representing your daughter,” and she calmed right down. And I said the same thing to the daughter, “I will represent you to your mother, you will be with her through me.”

And they were both more at peace having to be at a distance. And she died very peacefully.

Wendy Luella's account is chock full of physicality, as embodiment is a key aspect of her spirituality: *My own spirituality is very embodied, very much rooted in creation... it's not that spirit is somewhere beyond the physical. The physical is imbued with spirit.* She recognized that her spirituality involves things like eating, having her feet on the earth, growing things, and experiencing life through her senses. In Wendy Luella's encounter we discover that during Theological college, she viewed herself as a serious student, but one who wanted the freedom to be creative and take responsibility for her own learning. She described that heightened sensory and emotional experience she had reading Meister Eckhart as a *fantastical web of energy flow*. She described feeling "awake" to relationships and energetic connections in a new and deeply embodied way, but also that this experience had certain drawbacks and fears. For example, we see this when she talked about how it became increasingly more difficult for her to attend to tasks such as paying bills, getting groceries, and doing schoolwork. She described feeling as if she'd gained access to a different kind of reality; on one hand feeling floaty and ungrounded, and in another, *deeply* grounded to other aspects of the world, normally unseen. In addition to wondering if she herself might be having a psychic break, she recognized that many who had been deemed mentally ill may have access to spiritual realms that other people don't. She described the whole experience as being a "wow" moment, and marvelled at how it made room for spaciousness—contradictions, difficulties, forgiveness, and reconciliation. She described this 6-week period of time where she was experiencing what her friend called the "Meister Eckhart disease," and how it made her aware of the fact that she was not separate from anything else:

I experienced it in a very bodily, but mysterious way... I'm not separate. And there is a peace that comes from this, feeling that I am part of a large body. My little body is part of a large body, of the whole body.

She talked about things having more colour and sparkle, being animated and alive, as if she was acutely aware of the life force vibrating in all of it. She found herself tending more towards embodied activities such as walking, cooking, listening, and talking to strangers and singing during this time. In our interview, Wendy Luella sang the song she created by the river, and it profoundly resonated in my body and touched me deeply. She acknowledged that she found it hard, after having been in this extended meditative state, to reconcile these worlds (the new one, and the old one which required effort). She reflected on the idea that students in schools, and in other places in society, are frequently asked or expected to disassociate from their bodies and feelings too. She acknowledged, similarly to Peter, that *Oh yeah, this is what the machine wants of me.*

She also spoke of singing as an embodied practice and described how songs began to come out of her: *On my walks, as I followed the beat of my feet on the earth, little ditties would arise out of my heart, and I would find myself singing songs.* She described the dynamics of singing together in community with *people who were comfortable singing, some people who had a hard time keeping a tune, some people that sang louder than anybody else was singing, some people singing softly, and some people who didn't sing at all.* She explained how she experienced a creative emergence at this time, and talked about its impact on her singing, song writing, and meditation practices which have had a huge impact on her work as a minister. She also described a time in her life where she had lost her confidence and identity in singing after high school, and how this spiritual experience helped her reclaim that. Her discussion of the heart, trusting the spirit's urgings, and even her own wondering in the interview: *I hope she doesn't think I'm flakey* also related to the emotional aspects of this encounter. Wendy Luella's encounter emphasised embodiment and remembering. In her rediscovery of singing together in community in the Unitarian Universalist congregation, she indeed described it as "a joyful noise," and discussed this in contrast to some of her earlier church experiences where she'd felt she needed to "check her brain at the door." Integrity was a feeling discussed here too (Poetry

also mentioned integrity in her parenting), and the notion of singing more wholeheartedly in this new environment: *It was a song I could wholeheartedly sing. It felt like I had come home. Yes, I was at home.* Nowadays, Wendy Luella describes her experience leading a daily Soulful Singing practice as bringing lightness and meaning. She used words such as rich, blessed, humbling, grace-filled, and effortlessness in discussing her feelings. She also describes a sense of presence, to songs, to people, to what is happening, and to what others share. For her, this is a type of learning that lands in her centre, rather than strictly an intellectual exercise.

Maggie described much emotion in her encounter, too. She spoke about the environment of the long-term care home often feeling chaotic and difficult as well as some of the doubt she experienced after running some of the earlier programs due to the lack of feedback from her clients: *Oh my God, this is terrible. I can't do this.* She also demonstrated curiosity as she continued to find ways to create meaningful experiences of connection for the participants with dementia. She talked about wanting to create opportunities for the group to enjoy, to be present, to feel special, and to feel loved. She also discussed her desire to create a sacred space for them, and about how poetry and music often evoked emotion and memory in the participants and in the daughters that visited them to cut their hair. They laughed and cried, too. At one point Maggie also talked about how the vibe in the room got raucous, as people spoke of pregnancy, and that some of the conversations could also border on sensuality. Participants' emotions and feelings were recorded in a Haiku book project. She described the group members as her teachers: *they enlivened me, made me question, made me search.*

She described the feelings of transformation that also occurred at times in the group, in her discussion of Turner's notion of *communitas*:

One day, in group time, we reached a place where it felt like we were a whole bunch of seagulls up in the air sort of calling to one another. We definitely had lift that day, and people were laughing, and they were funny, and there was a kind of a bit of sexuality or sensuality in the things that they were saying... these people didn't recognize each

other when they came in, and yet they formed an amazing group; a sense of belonging to one another, belonging to something greater, acceptance, joy and funniness and just really being alive.

As discussed previously, she also acknowledged some of the emotional challenges of working so close to death; that this environment could involve panic, unhappiness, or even aggression and fear at times, and yet she could still experience a sense of hope and the *juiciness of spirit*. Maggie described how gardening helped her deal with some of the stressors in her life and described how she “put her feelings in the garden.” She explained how her professional responsibilities often meant that she had to set boundaries, and at times repress her own emotions:

Often, when I was at a bedside, I had a lot of feelings. But I had to push those off and be present to the feelings and to the experiences happening in the room, and aware of my role as witness.

Maggie talked about the importance and value of touch in many of the people’s lives that she was working with; she explained that often, in long term care, adults do not receive caring touch, and that they found it very meaningful when they did, such as if you touched their hand when you spoke to them. In her groups, sometimes they would open with a prayer and the participants would remain holding hands for the entire duration of the session. She also described the profound ability of old hymns and certain prayers, in sometimes being able to “reach back inside” while working with adults with dementia:... *eventually as you sang the old, old hymns they had learned when they were probably three or four, you could kind of catch them up. You would notice that they would start to mouth the words or sing.* Her description of the Snozelen Room as a “beautiful sensory stimulation room” which incorporated music, bubble tubes, things to feel, see, hear, touch, and taste was very visceral. Her story about reaching the one woman through chocolate pudding (e.g., how she smacked her gums upon entering the room) demonstrated the ways in which these embodied experiences were able to help people

break-through. War time music also had this impact as *they suddenly tip their heads back and sing all the lyrics*. Maggie described how she actively observed these moments and intentionally worked with them to tap into memory and greater connection by bringing in photographs, music, poetry, etc., and it often provoked stories involving the body, such as the examples from pregnancy, which were often humorous. Maggie also described that sense of being uplifted together some days, in that beautiful passage we already highlighted about feeling as if they were seagulls with *lift*. Again, while so many of these themes overlap, another powerful sensory example, was the story of the woman who had cried for 6 weeks straight after coming into the home, and how it was only after holding a tomato in her hand that she said she was able to calm down: *I'm not afraid. I'm in my grandmother's garden*. While this also relates to our theme on the natural world, the example of “tomato sandwich day” in which the clients talked about all the different ways they made tomato sandwiches and how they ate them was a very beautiful, embodied, shared connection. She also talks about the garden she planted, and how she asked each floor which seeds she should plant. The hollyhocks reminded people of their grandmothers. This, of course, is reminiscent of that strong example of embodiment in her account, during her encounter with the woman in the psychiatric inpatient unit. Maggie described feeling scared and useless, and afraid, but ultimately chose to listen to the voice that asked her to sit tight even though she could feel the hair standing up on her neck before the patient said: “You have a body like my grandma? Would you hug me?”

Willingness

To Ask. The notion of *asking* appears explicitly in at least one third of the encounters described in the narratives and questionnaire. Prayer is mentioned about as frequently. The notion of calling out—often to spirit, but sometimes to another human, or indeed to parts of oneself—for some assistance, information, or support seemed to be a very common element of people’s spiritual encounters. This might also involve asking for help, signs, information, guidance on a life issue, even a wondering, or asking a reflective question. In fact, asking

questions seemed to be one of the most fruitful components of learning, before during, and after an encounter. It certainly also played a factor in many of my own examples provided in Chapter 2.

This aspect of learning through spiritual encounters was present in diverse ways throughout the narrative accounts. Celia's may be the clearest example of this in the narratives. In her account, we find her calling out to Jesus, with whom she did not have a relationship, and receiving comfort, as she makes the discovery that *God doesn't care what name we use. All we must do is ask*. But this was also evident in other more subtle ways such as in Maggie's encounter, in which *asking* played an important role in her professional life. There were several places in which asking came up in Maggie's account; perhaps most dramatically with the patient who asked for a hug, but also in the self-examining she was doing in trying to find ways to make the experiences deep, safe, and meaningful for her clients with dementia, beginning with: "Oh how am I going to do this?" And then, as she noticed progress: *how did this happen? how did they come? And what brings them?* These were eventually answered in a clairaudient experience upon waking, when she was given the reply "liminal space." We also saw this in the types of questions that emerged within her small groups as she strived to create an atmosphere of vibrance, connection, learning, and sacredness. The questions she asked clients, whether they be about the ways they enjoyed a spring day, or their tomato sandwiches, or in one case, an example inspired by a song:

I played them Englebert Humperdink's, The Green, Green Grass of Home. And then one lady said, Remember the grass of home? And I had never heard it expressed like that. But it was: what's the grass like? What was the grass like around your house? What was the grass of home? And people talked a lot about their homes, their mothers, their fathers, always in these little episodic cryptic sentences, but they were juicy with content. And one would spark off the other.

Maggie also described the sense of connection she found as she began to feel actively engaged with others who were doing this work too:

I also started to do some speaking and writing and found myself in a larger global environment with people who were asking the same questions around the world. It was like finding a community as well—for me—of people who were asking these questions, and who had been doing the same kind of work, maybe different ways, but still trying to get to the same thing. This was a big affirmation for me that I was on the right path.

In reflecting on her clairaudient experiences, overall, she also described that they happened as a result of “deep questioning or trying to work something out.”

Nowadays, since leaving work, Maggie describes feeling fallow, almost anti-social, and quiet. She talked about welcoming the opportunity to revisit these memories as part of the study and described the process of examining spiritual encounters akin to going down a rabbit hole, and fun. In our check-in, however, Maggie also described having to work with her own emotions to ask deeper questions regarding her own faith at this current stage of her life:

I had to ask about my own sense of loss, and unhappiness. And did I do this because maybe I didn't feel God was doing it well enough for me, you know... a lot of questions about what I thought about God and what I thought about compassion. Did I just want to prove that the world was different from what I experienced? I was experiencing a lot of sadness and loss and grief. And you know, this taught me something in the most bizarre way. But it did give me hope, so it was really like going to the place of greatest misery to find an answer.

In Ben’s account we learn more about the role of questioning in his discussion of different ways the Stag King ritual had been approached, including some of the more reflective elements that had been incorporated during the years:

And there was one element where, you know, a simple question can be asked as to why do you think you deserve to win? And it's interesting because there were people that

would be asked that type of question. And they didn't know why they got involved, and they felt a bit overwhelmed by it. They came to answer that they didn't think they deserved to win. They had that realization in that moment. And I feel there's a lot of value to that, when they have that type of insight and realization, again, whether that's a purely spiritual thing, or whether that is more of a psychology matter...you'll also notice that I don't tend to draw a hard line on those two things.

He spoke about the emotional nature of this for the men and the changing context and emotional response this provoked in the participants when the question was posed by a child.

Similarly, the notion of asking also seemed present in Peter's encounter, as he worked with deeper questions about the dream in his waking life:

So that for me, is beautiful... why is this child holding on so close, so tightly? What is it that they are trying to get? What is it that they're afraid to let go of? The child can't let go, I can't let go, we must be released from each other. But once we are released from each other, it's possible that we can, actually, be friends.

He discussed the value of this type of personal exploration, *the dream itself... and the working with it afterwards* as being a part of this learning through spiritual encounter. Interestingly, he also described that it was the way the questions were asked in the Phase 1 questionnaire that prompted him to continue his participation in the study:

I was kind of intrigued by the way the questions were formatted. And it took me in these slightly less traditional ways, you know. I don't think I will stand up in front of my church and recount my dreams anytime soon. Unless I think that illustrates a point or something. But in terms of personal spirituality, and meaning making, I felt like this is something I can offer.

Other references to asking, including prayer, were apparent in the narratives, such as Jan's distressed plea in the shower: "Can it just look like an accident?," but also during her

discussion of the Examen Prayer of St. Ignatius, one of the tools she uses to explore her day through the use of deliberate questions:

And so when we review our day, we can look at it and see where we moved toward God, or where we moved away from God. And we acknowledge these things to God and then ask for the grace to continue...

In part of our discussion, she spoke about the very practical benefits of prayer, for example in her dealing with Montreal traffic; she described how she would turn to prayer when she was tempted to be “less than gracious” and how this process might instead help her offer a blessing to another driver instead. She also spoke of the role of intercessory prayer in her experience during COVID-19, and as a chaplain and spiritual director. She described prayer as something that helped her feel most alive.

In Anusree’s encounter, she asks herself a series of questions right after the accident: *Am I hurting? Why am I so calm? Why am I not freaking out?* And later, of her husband, *Who the fuck eats before they show up to their wife?* when she finds herself initially taken aback at his reaction to her accident. She explores his perspective through questions too, and notes his consideration of her needs—*Does she have food? Is she warm?*—eventually recognizing the value in this type of practical thinking. At the end of her account, she speaks about their decision to have a baby on their own terms and timing, and indeed ends with a question: *Like I always say to my husband, what else can you do when you’re choosing a life of bravery?”*

In Wendy Luella’s encounter we see that as she was having this pivotal life experience in which everything felt more animated and alive, she found herself waking up each morning asking: *Is it going to be the old world or the new world? The old reality or the new reality?* Related to this time of profound interconnectedness, she described a moment of deep questioning by the lake: *I go to the lake to listen but am not sure if I am on the shore, listening to the water, or in the water listening to the earth...and the water and shore are listening to me.* At this time, Wendy Luella also had many intellectual wanderings as result of her

encounter. For example, she asked questions such as “Is education ultimately about cultivating compliance or cultivating creativity? Making good workers or fostering good humans?” These types of questions and reflections seemed central to her learning through spiritual encounter. There were other touching aspects of her description that involved asking questions. One, as a child, as she describes wondering if she is adopted; *Am I adopted? What is going on? I have fallen far from this tree.* Another example that was deeply moving in this respect was when she recounted the story of meeting her current partner, another profound spiritual encounter. In our discussion she described a series of questions they exchanged, and her telling of it in the interview was very playful: *Do you sing? I said yes. He said, do you want to audition for the choir? I said yes, here is my number, but why don't we do the audition now? Have you had lunch?* Another poignant aspect of asking in Wendy Luella's encounter related to her experience of singing in community. These experiences of singing with others prompted her to ask: *how could I forget how sustaining singing in community was?* She described these related spiritual encounters of interconnectedness and singing in community, and the ways that song came through her afterwards. This allowed her to remember these aspects of herself in an embodied way that has been sustaining ever since.

Poetry's encounter also involved questioning as she began to move away from religion and God; reading, asking new types of questions, and considering new information seemed instrumental in this. She also described a more recent line of inquiry at the end of her account, in the moment where she speaks of drawing or imagining her Creator: *I often wonder if believers ever try to imagine God at all. If they do, what do they imagine? How do they imagine God?*

While Father Frank's encounter is going to be discussed in greater length in other sections, it does seem noteworthy that his entire journey to the priesthood involved a considerable amount of questioning with respect to the timing of his decision. He talked about his other interests, for example in theatre, and in exploring a life path or vocation, noting:

Sometimes, you must ask yourself if this is a way to spend your life? Is this a good way to live? Can you do anything good for people by doing these different things? He also described how he has had to, throughout his career, re-examine his beliefs, prejudices, and attitudes by asking “*What is real and true here?*” in his own process of discernment. Another way Father Frank’s experience speaks to this theme of asking, calling, or reaching out, is in deep prayer life, which he spoke at length about, and will be mentioned again as it relates to other themes.

The stories submitted to the questionnaire abounded with references to asking, prayers, questions or calling out for guidance or help. Phrases such as the following appeared in the accounts:

- “I asked the saint for a marvelous sign.”
- “We asked him to let us know, if he could, after death.”
- “I kept asking for this to last.”
- “I asked Jesus for help.”
- “I asked for wisdom on a life choice.”
- “I asked the nurse to help.”
- “I often ask things of my body or of the divine while I meditate.”
- “I had decided not to set an intention for that evening’s session but rather asked my guides for any guidance or support they wished to send my way.”
- “I asked them to help me find this object.”
- “I had asked for a sign from my grandpa.”
- “I always prayed and then still tried to control everything until this one day, it suddenly came to me to call for help.”
- “One night, during an unbelievably stressful time of academic and existential challenges, I was in such emotional pain that I could feel my soul screaming inside of me as I was trying to fall asleep. I could feel my whole body falling into a black hole and my insides

were screaming (though my body remained still and silent). I screamed for my psychic that I was consulting at the time. The next morning—early—I got a voicemail from her as I was asleep. I could hear it play loudly in my home saying “I heard you screaming for me last night. Call me.”

Risks or Leaps of Courage. Given the fact that many spiritual encounters arose during times of great challenge, heartbreak, or complexity, much of the learning that happened through spiritual encounters seemed to involve or require significant risk and courage.

Poetry left behind a religious practice and a God to go out into the unknown and began thinking critically about her experiences in her reading. She made courageous choices during her academic life in deciding what kind of learner she wanted to be and moving away from cultural and traditional moulds. She also was willing to listen to what she perceived as a spiritual nudge from God, or her grandmother.

Anusree described the courage it required to make faith-based choices, namely her decision to wait to have children until she felt safe. Josee had exhibited courage by looking deeper into these difficult events from her past, which helped her begin to understand some of the elements of her pain and trauma with a therapist, and also in her willingness to speak to me about her experiences, given the challenges of being in the military. Father Frank’s decision to accept the call of God to enter the priesthood required courage; so did pushing the elephants out of his life. Celia, of course, took a risk by moving away from home at a young age, and calling on a deity she didn't believe in.

In Maggie’s encounter we see some of the difficult experiences she had to endure in the long-term care facility, dealing with death and a great deal of emotion, including her own which she often felt she needed to suppress. She talked at considerable length about wanting to create safety in all these spaces; that this was a large priority for her. It took a great deal of courage and risk at times, i.e., having to set aside her own feelings to be there for a family who was grieving, or indeed to remain seated when spirit asked her to, despite her own fear. And while this was

some time ago, and she did not necessarily think it so at the time, agreeing to hug the woman who had asked might also be seen as an act of courage and risk in terms of professional boundaries—certainly in institutional contexts. But in our check-in, Maggie noted: *Oh, I didn't struggle with that at all. That was such an authentic question. And the way she said it, you have a body like my grandma, it wasn't me hugging her. It was her grandma.* Maggie noted that in that psychiatric unit, patients could often come down and sit with her in the café as a reward for good behaviour, and she had never had anyone run away on her.

In Wendy Luella's story, courage and risk seemed present in her decision to advocate for herself as a student and choose an assignment that spoke to her; to question institutional norms. She also expressed courage in her ability to allow the spiritual encounter to bring up questions regarding her mental health, regarding her childhood, regarding education and systems, and about engaging in meaningful activism. She noted an increased capacity for speaking with strangers, and an openness to the interconnectedness of relationships. This courage was also, of course, exhibited in returning to singing and in making it a greater part of her ministry.

Also, at the time Peter was sharing this encounter, he was facing numerous challenges in switching roles and starting a new academic program during a global pandemic. He spoke about feeling quite alone in this process, and that themes in the dream were able to provide some degree of comfort and depth of understanding. Jan's seems like the ultimate decision requiring courage and risk: to live. To continue to live, and to experience life, and help others, and examine one's day to see where one might do something differently. There also seemed to be courage in her story, and in so many of the other encounters, where people were called in various ways to be present in the face of others' deaths, pain, or suffering.

The capacity for so many people to acknowledge, work with, and learn from a spiritual encounter, often during a period of great challenge in their own life, stood out as being very courageous. Their propensity to then share it, with the hope of helping others with it, was inspiring. Another surprising, and noteworthy way that many people seemed to express courage

and risk was in their choice to use their own names in this study. I found this sense of agency remarkable, particularly given the fact that we live in a world that is still quite critical of this type of experience. Despite the risk, for example, the chance that one's employer may find out, or that they might subject themselves to judgement, this seemed an important decision for many, and personal details were shared openly in the accounts. The act of putting one's name to a story also made me feel more confident that the material shared was authentic to their experience. Examples of courage and risk abounded in the stories people shared online too: directly addressing difficult emotions, switching careers, leaving relationships, acts of forgiveness, trying something new, asking for help, responding to the promptings of a voice or presence, solitude, the softening of hearts, travelling or going out into nature, riding horses, etc. One might also consider the fact that by submitting a story at all, these people were engaging in an act of courage to share an intimate experience with me, and with other strangers.

Learning. The people I interviewed were all willing to learn; they showed a capacity to change and grow. Anusree allowed herself to make discoveries about her relationship with her partner, and her willingness to have a child. Poetry allowed herself to move away from religion and to get to know God on her own terms. Father Frank demonstrated a beautiful moment in his own learning when he talked about his desire to use inclusive language; similarly, Celia talked about the ways she incorporates scientific discovery into her own spiritual understandings. Peter was beginning a new graduate course. Several participants expressed working with these spiritual encounters to learn more about themselves in therapeutic, educational, personal, or professional contexts. Many talked about hobbies, curiosities, and courses they were taking.

It cannot be overlooked that the participants in this study are well-educated individuals. In the study, 7 out of the 10 people I interviewed had graduate degrees, including at least one who spoke of being educated at an Ivy League university, though I suspect there are others. Many had roles of significant professional responsibility, in hospitals, care settings, the military, and schools. I make this observation, not to glorify higher education, but rather, perhaps, to

debunk a cultural myth that spiritual encounters do not occur to rational thinking people. In speaking to participants for several hours, these people came across as articulate, clear, and rational. As Jan said in her interview:

I've been beautifully educated. And I did learn a lot of important things in all those places. And I don't ever stop taking courses and things like that. I'll attend workshops and things, because I have a curious mind, but I do think also, some of the deep learning I've had, is because of the relationships I've had.

Wendy Luella reflected a great deal on systems of higher education in her own account, and shared a more hopeful experience she had, coincidentally at a Faculty of Education, in a course she took called *Human Dimensions in Teaching and Learning*. This course focused on concepts of belonging, believing, and becoming—she said it was about being a human *being*, not human *doing*: *That was the kind of education I wanted to be a part of—the kind that celebrated the whole person, in relationship to the whole of existence.*

Responsiveness

Choices and Decisions. Spiritual encounters often involved choices, and compelled people to make important decisions related to their identity, lifestyle, or vocation. In Poetry's encounter, she described her decision to actively move away from religion, and embarked on a period of thinking critically about her faith, which challenged her core beliefs. She described how this led her to make some tangible decisions and choices about her parenting, what kind of learner she wanted to be and about how she related to the world. This was also apparent in her impulse to create an image of a Creator of her own imagining in the drawing exercise. In some ways, this intentional act is reminiscent of one survey respondent, who shared that they'd had an epiphany when they had come to understand that belief is an "ACT of faith. It had to come from me and my active involvement with searching for what is true. There is a leap to faith."

Anusree's story involved choice and decision-making too, most obviously the one to have a child, but was also evident in some subtler ways, such as how she responded in the moments after the car accident, and to her partner. She talked about how many of her decisions have been influenced by her faith in God, such as the timing of her marriage.

Ben made a decision to become involved in the ritual, not only as a participant, but also as a facilitator, and subsequently, as a mentor of other men, which we will touch upon in an upcoming theme. He spoke about how each year, the leaders could make specific choices for the ceremony: *Essentially you get to design the event if you so choose... a lot of people try to put their own spin on it.* Many people did so to make the event more contemplative. He also made decisions about how he would use some of these learnings alongside skills of cognitive behavioural therapy in his current spiritual practice.

Peter spoke at length about the numerous life transitions he was making at the time of our interview, and how the dream helped provide a sense of insight in this process. He described the process as a gift, both to have the dream, and then the choice to actively work with it, for example in an emotional or therapeutic way for deeper insight. One thing that stood out about Peter's account was a sense of self-respect he conveyed in the choices he made regarding with whom, and how, he shared his spiritual encounters, such as dreams, which he often preferred to just let "compost back into the unconscious." He spoke about ensuring that he did not feel rushed and discussed the capacity for the other person to be able to receive it. He also noted how the dream was influential in his professional life; he referenced some of the specific practical decisions he had to make during the pandemic, and a time when people could not meet face to face. He talked about the complexity of this task, of holding interviews, and creating job descriptions and leaving a post he had found so important for many years in a way that would be appropriate and respectful.

Jan's encounter, of course, specifically deals with a decision of great consequence—whether to live or die. She talked about how the spiritual encounter itself made her realize that

there were other alternatives; that in fact, she did not have to die, and that she wished to be more mindful of her words and thoughts when that impulse arose. Father Frank's story also involved a big life decision regarding his entry into the priesthood, and he discussed the ripple effects of this choice and the challenge he had in making it over the course of nearly a decade. Wendy Luella talks at length about the impact of her spiritual encounter on her career path and vocation as a song writer, leader of Soulful Singing, and minister.

Celia too, made a choice to move away from home before college in hope of learning new skills, and made a choice to call on the name of Jesus in a time of loneliness. She also spoke about her decision to continue to meet with herself for worship during the pandemic.

Josee talked about decision-making as it related to her Reiki treatment. Early on in her encounter she described a moment where she makes a choice to continue to go deeper into the session. She also made decisions to use the information from her spiritual encounter in a therapeutic context. She talked about various choices she had made regarding how much she wished to share her spiritual experiences with others, particularly in the context of her employment with the military.

Maggie talked about how she worked with the information she was given both by the clients themselves in her direct encounters with people with dementia, but also in the moments of clairaudience; in the dream, for example, and her decision to learn more about liminal space to incorporate these strategies in the group. She decided to obey the voice when it asked her to sit tight, and indeed to hug the woman when she asked. We see that she also began to connect with others, as she started to speak and write more on the subject, which also provided new opportunities for her personally and professionally.

Other examples that people submitted to the questionnaire involved decision making around children, retirement, and other big choices, for example, decisions about changing a course of study in graduate school towards more meaningful work.

Usefulness. Despite that so many of the stories shared by people included challenging situations and experiences, there was an overarching sense that this type of learning was *useful*; it brought healing, peace, and often, practical help. This was demonstrated in many ways ranging from emotional healings to very specific instances where help was provided with such things as food, information, or an opportunity. This often resulted in healed relationships or allowed people to better cope with difficult situations, such as the loss of a loved one. The guidance that was provided at these times often brought further healing or deepened the process, such as a decision to use information gleaned from a spiritual encounter in therapy, follow a vocational leading, or help another. A feeling of peace, calm, or purposefulness often accompanied this. Indeed, there seemed to be a sense of reciprocity at play, for example one respondent to the survey shared an experience in which her divorced parents, their new partners, her own partner, and brother were all sitting around a dinner table conversing in ways that felt like “old friends,” which in turn, provoked a release inside of her—a sudden overwhelming emotional response to “an internal feeling that our relationships with one another were healing before my eyes.” Building on this sense of relationship, acts of service were also one way people reported learning. Consider, for example, one participant who shared in the questionnaire how unexpectedly moved he was by the act of offering Communion to the residents of a seniors’ home weekly with his wife, and how much it was feeding a spiritual hunger in those he served. While he thought he was simply helping his wife “check off her list,” he came to see the worth of this ministry, the individual character of each resident, as well as their deep appreciation. He noted being surprised at how much he missed it when COVID-19 curtailed their visits.

In terms of the narratives, we see the theme emerging in Poetry’s encounter, after what she described as a ‘divine intervention’ in her academic life. After that change and perceiving God’s presence again, she described the feeling of comfort that overtook her:

I don't know how else to explain it. So, it's as if you've been in love with someone, and that person breaks your heart. But then that person comes back and tells you that they really love you. You're not saying I love you too, but you're just taking comfort in the fact that the person is still there. I think I'm doing much better overall. I think I'm becoming me again, slowly but surely.

Overall, she spoke about how this whole experience, and her journey away from religion, created an opportunity for her to get to know herself better, as a learner, as a parent, apart from cultural or academic expectations. *But right now, it's all very quiet and calm within me, because I only look to myself for everything that I need. And that's where I am right now.* She spoke about the comfort she was taking in not needing outside validation, but also of a new-found sense of compassion and the realization that she was becoming kinder and kinder. And ultimately, she found herself coming to a greater peace in her understanding of her Creator:

I try to use the word Creator to describe something that I haven't seen but is present in me and everywhere in the universe. I kind of feel that I am part of the universe, and the universe is part of me... that source of light, that source of my spirit, holds the entire universe and everything in it. And that is also within me.

In Anusree's case, the encounter was helpful in the sense that it gave her specific insight into her desire to have children. She and her husband are now able to work with this information in a way to help make plans for their future, as this priority has emerged in their lives. As previously noted, she also described learning about how the arthritis in her eye impacts her driving, how she needs to put boundaries around how much she is willing to "hustle and bustle," and how the lessons about the value of her husband's calm and thoughtful response to her accident gave her deeper insights into their relationship. It is interesting again to note, that she herself, was remarkably calm in the immediate after-math of the accident: *I remember thinking, why am I so calm? Like why am I not freaking out? Am I in shock?* The fact that she was not harmed also reaffirmed her faith in God.

Peter speaks of the usefulness of the information that he gathered from the dream in terms of helping him to remember that he is an emotional being and described how he was able to work with the symbols and archetypes in the dream in therapy to gain deeper insight. Similarly, Josee uses the information gleaned from her encounter to assist in her treatment for her post deployment difficulties and burnout. In general, she also describes how finding Reiki has changed and improved her life for the better: *I fell in love with Reiki the moment it came into my life*. Likewise, Ben discussed how he uses the tools of meditation and cognitive behavioural therapy in his own spirituality these days—but acknowledges the transformative nature of the ritual he participated in, and how it had a lasting and positive impact in his life, for example in his desire to make these learning experiences possible for other men.

Father Frank acknowledged that his decision to become a priest was clarified through his mystical experience on Christmas Day, 1973, and acknowledged how this has impacted countless others and changed the entire course of his life. While he had wrestled with the choice before this, he described the feeling of awe that overtook him:

...enough to lead me to a point of making the decision to say yes to the call—a decision I have never changed or deviated from. It was an awesome experience. Really, truly awesome... And it has stood me well over the years.

For Celia, she received help, in that immediate sense of peace she encountered upon calling out for Jesus, and in the months afterwards, did find herself making new friendships and connections. In Jan's account, she mentioned that her spirituality undergirds her activism, and her work as a Spiritual Director. Jan's encounter brought peace and help in that it taught her that she did not need to die, and to be more mindful of her thoughts, and use of language. She also described how it taught her about the kindness of others, which will be explored in the next theme.

Maggie's story had interesting connections to this theme too, as in this encounter we find that her clairaudient experiences were able to help her in quite practical ways: for example, in

learning more deeply about liminal space she was provided with a framework to better understand the dynamics of the work in her group for adults with dementia. We see that by following this prompt and continuing to implement these strategies, she was not only able to facilitate a successful and meaningful experience for the clients, but also found herself connected to other people working in the field through speaking and writing engagements. We can also note that her decision to listen to the voice which asked her to sit tight, despite the original discomfort that she experienced sitting next to the woman in the psychiatric ward, was useful. In listening to this guidance, she was able to bring a moment of peace or relief to the woman who requested a hug; this is seen when the woman expressed that it was *this* interaction that helped her make a turnaround.

Wendy Luella describes how the spiritual encounter she had those 6 weeks of her life, and her experiences of singing in community, were profoundly impactful: *The direction of my life completely shifted after that*. Her spiritual encounter was deeply influential in reconnecting to her singing and sense of herself as a songwriter, which is the central focus of her current ministry. She speaks of how this embodied learning allowed her to remember that she can *tap into the powerful presence, connect with the flow, plug into the main source*. She also identified other healing experiences such as the capacity for more forgiveness and learning about respect, towards herself, and others, and her family. She talked about how she began to see that everything was “imbued with sacredness” including *difficult people, rivers, and grief*. *I think around this time, things even shifted with my family of origin*. Of course, she also met her life partner shortly after this encounter too.

Kindness. One of the key themes that came out of this study, was that learning through spiritual encounters often emphasized kindness and compassion, and was evident in both the interviews and narratives. Sometimes this kindness or compassion was experienced during the encounter; sometimes it felt more like a teaching. For example, not only did people recognize the kindnesses that had come to them, but they also expressed that they themselves had grown

in their own capacity for kindness or compassion because of the experience. And again, this often happened during very challenging circumstances.

In Anusree's story, she noted the kindness of the people that came to help her after the accident, along with the tow truck driver. After her own anger subsided, she also eventually came to better understand the kindness offered to her by her husband in his reaction. In Poetry's example, she described in detail how the spiritual encounter had allowed her to become a more compassionate person, able to walk in others' shoes. She talked about how it had brought her into a place of greater humility that impacted her parenting: *I think I have the courage to tell my daughter that we celebrate everything, and we believe in everything, and we love everyone. And we think that everyone is equal.* At the end of her narrative, we also see her come to know her Creator in a new way: *the source of my creation, the source of love, and whatever it is that is changing me to be kinder and kinder.*

In Peter's encounter, he noted this kindness in the changed feelings his character had towards the mean child in the dream, once released, as well as greater feelings of self-compassion in working with his emotions. He mentioned that sometimes what arises in a dream can be appropriate to share with a friend, if they were part of it, that it might be a gift. I also thought his comments about protecting his spiritual encounters, i.e., not sharing them in a situation where he does not have adequate time, an act of self-love and a healthy boundary. A kindness to himself.

Celia described kindness as being an aspect of her spirituality that she hopes to foster in her own life. Father Frank spoke of kindness as a good gauge for a person to have about their lives. In our check-in meeting, he mentioned that one could not quarrel with someone else's spiritual experience, but instead suggested that we might: *...accept it and see if it manifests itself in a good life, and is showing the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.*

Wendy Luella talked a good deal about *softening her heart*—a phrase that more than one participant used during this study. She described how her spiritual encounter increased her compassion towards herself, other living and non-living beings, and her family:

I grew up in a very abusive, difficult family... but I think something softened in my heart round the time of this spiritual awakening. As I look back, I had the feeling that everyone was just doing the best they could. The harm that was done to me was their way of trying to get through the world without hurting as much as they already hurt.

Also touching, were her examples of all the different types of voices involved in community singing together, that *whole mixture of humanity, making a sound together, a joyful noise*. More contemporarily, Wendy Luella spoke of how being present in her neighbourhood, and connected with living and non-living beings calls her *to act in the world for more love, more respect, and more justice*.

Jan spoke a great deal about kindness too; she shared that she once took a class with a teacher who called God “womb of compassion,” and how much that resonated with her. She described how the accidents led her to become more aware of the kindness around her in the way people helped and supported her by bringing food or by writing letters or indeed offering her help. *I think, you know, when you see all the suffering in the hurt, and the evil in the world, I think it helps me to remember all the kindness that doesn't make the news*. She speaks about blessing the house of the people that took her in after the car accident, every time she drives by—even to this day. *It's the kindness of people, the kindness of people that gives me the strength to keep going. It's so important. You know, kindness is... I think it's like a breath. It's so necessary for life*.

Connected to this, she also described her role in supporting people die, and described how she was able to encourage some agitated clients towards a more peaceful death: *You're trying to fill the room with love to kind of ease the transition. And I could feel the love there. I could feel joy. I could feel peace*. Lastly, she talks about how practices such as prayer can help

one with forgiveness and letting go—which she described in her own life as a work in progress. Jan spoke of how she could use prayer to help her work with more difficult emotions, either by praying for others, for example for people suffering during COVID-19, or indeed for forgiveness when she'd been “less than gracious.” She described how “you can find the grace to apologize and to move forward and to let the past go” as she noted her own reactivity is not as intense or strong as it used to be.

Maggie's account is full of moments of gentleness, compassion, and kindness, both in her descriptions of the groups she facilitated, and indeed that hug that is offered at the end. *It's such a human thing to touch someone, and yet there's so many taboos around it. But if it's done with love, and care and compassion, it can be very powerful.* Certainly, the final moment in her narrative, where Maggie talks about being used by spirit in ways that understanding can't equal was *powerful* to read too:

Then a couple of weeks later, she was starting to get better. And I asked her what helped her to recover. And she said, “it was the moment you agreed to hug me. I knew that the universe was kindly.”

Sharing. As you may have already gathered from reading the narratives, spiritual encounters are not ineffable or beyond words, and it is my current belief that this idea will only hold us back from further research, understanding, and movement in the field. Both in their survey submissions, and certainly in the interviews, I identified that most of the time, participants used language thoughtfully, skillfully, in precise, colourful, descriptive ways, with great care and accuracy; they paid attention to detail, word choice, timelines, and meaning. In our co-writing process, my own role was made far easier by the beautiful use of metaphor, rich examples, and emotive, honest responses to the questions asked. This was evident in our check-ins too, where some participants took a more active role in the editing process, requesting to make small changes for accuracy, to further anonymize, or to add more detail. I always found it

exciting when participants took more agency and ownership at that phase, wanting to make some changes or provide feedback directly on the document.

Interestingly, many of the participants wrote in their own lives in one capacity or another, often as part of their career or academic life. Anusree writes. Poetry said she had already written pages and pages about her experience and thought she might like to make a poem about it: *I do want to write a poem about it, or maybe do a painting. I think I'm holding myself back. But I have written pages and pages about it.* Ben had already written papers about this in graduate school; Father Frank wrote homilies and sermons all the time, but admitted he hadn't looked at this particular aspect of his life in a long while, so was grateful for our conversations; Peter journaled and sometimes wrote social media posts about his dreams or shared them with a friend—he was also leading a Christian organization which encouraged others to connect to their own experiences of spirituality, and was beginning new work in pastoral care and Theological studies. Jan called herself a writer explicitly: *I am a writer. It's part of who I am.* Maggie identified with this too. Maggie and her co-facilitator had written and published a book of Haiku of the poems generated in her groups of adults with dementia, which had found its way to different places around the world. Wendy Luella described writing down song lyrics that came through her body, as well as journals, and sermons. While some of these people wrote regularly before their encounter; often it was the spiritual experiences themselves that had compelled them towards it. This was certainly the case with Josee who said:

I still don't consider myself creative, but apparently I am. I recently started writing a book. I mean, God, I don't know how that's gonna turn out. I just felt compelled to write. I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. But I'm doing it.

Language itself, often played a direct or meaningful role in the spiritual encounters, and words mattered deeply, such as when people heard a voice sharing a specific message—whether that be in their own voice: “Shit, I never had a baby with my husband,” or, from someplace else: “Just sit still.” Conversely, Celia made the important discovery that *God doesn't care what name*

we use. We also see that Maggie explicitly used poetry and prayers with her clients, recognizing their effectiveness and capacity to evoke memory and connection. Ben described how the use of a poem might enhance or deepen the ritual. Wendy Luella talked about how songs and lyrics seemed to come to her on walks, almost in time with her step. Likewise, Father Frank talked at considerable length about praying “best at the point of a pen;”: *the Augustinian people, we pray best at the point of a pen. So, writing a sermon, and then delivering it, preparing a class, and then giving it, are great ways for me to live out my spirituality.*

Peter’s discussion about writing his dreams down was also interesting. He spoke about how he did not feel compelled, necessarily to “create content” from his spiritual encounters such as dreams. He described that in his career, every moment needed to be captured for social media purposes for Facebook or Instagram, and he didn’t feel that was very life-giving, but that sometimes he felt inclined to share if he woke up with a funny phrase in his head or felt a dream might be a gift to pass on to a friend (such as when they were present in the dream itself).

Metaphors and analogy also abounded in these descriptions of spiritual encounters; romantic love, pushing elephants, finding, and carrying buckets of knowledge, webs of interconnectedness; planting seeds, chasing rabbits, etc. are some you may have already noticed. Indeed, as previous research has suggested, it was very evident in our discussions that metaphor does indeed play a key role in allowing people to speak about these encounters and express their feelings.

It has been my experience, at all stages of this research, to note that most people very much *want* to talk about these encounters, and through this study, I have become far more convinced that this is possible under welcoming conditions; spiritual encounters can be described, and often include powerful examples of learning.

This was made more evident not only in the content and quality of the responses, but also by the very fact that during a global pandemic, participants completed the questionnaire, submitted a story, and 10 of them devoted several hours of their lives to sharing their experience

with me during the interviews and writing process. By the very nature of this project, all participants were willing to share to some degree. Many expressed gratitude for being able to do so for themselves, and some recognized that their stories may be of benefit or useful to others too. It was also apparent that some people felt compelled to share their spiritual encounters with a therapist which seemed a positive decision for many who articulated a desire to apply their learnings in other areas of their lives.

Of course, sometimes they were cautious. It became increasingly apparent to me that people's willingness to share was significantly impacted by factors, such as timing, issues of privacy/sacredness, and often how they felt it would be received. Would the person hearing the story be capable of receiving it? Judgemental? This further supports McColl's (2021) position that stories are told in the context of relationships, as discussed in Chapter 2. The fear of judgement, or of being misunderstood, even among participants who were immersed in full-time spiritual work was noteworthy, for example Wendy Luella's *Will she think I'm flakey?* Ben's comment when discussing rituals of the druidic faith was also telling: *They don't think they go to the moon or anything crazy*, and again his observation in our check-in:

...depending on how the reader comes at this, frankly, it can come off as somewhat crackpot... I mean, that's just how these things are. If you're viewing it from the outside and being completely clinical or analytical about it, it's like, what do you mean, people get dressed up in funny clothes, and then go dance in a circle? That's lunacy. So there's always that aspect of it...depending on the viewer—their preconceived notions... what biases they bring to their reading of it.

Indeed, in the Discussions chapter, I will return to this idea, and describe my own experience with this during the study.

Beyond writing, there were other ways that people felt able to share their experiences when they did feel safe to do so. For Poetry, we saw that she was able to explore this aspect of her life with her immediate family and a supportive friend. Her family exercise of drawing her

Creator was one way to work with this encounter more deeply through art. With Peter, sometimes he talked about sharing certain dreams with a trusted friend, particularly if they had played a role in it, and it felt appropriate. Wendy Luella shared her spiritual encounters through her ministry and by running singing groups in community; Father Frank noted that his spiritual encounter had *changed the whole direction* of his life, and the lives of those around him. Josee had spoken about her past experiences with painting and journaling though she described herself as an “epic failure at it,” and again, described how she would often burn it to protect her privacy. She did, however, describe this as a “release of energy.” Though she expressed increasing willingness to speak about spiritual matters more publicly, she was still aware that her work made this challenging:

I don't know it would bring me anything good to talk about my spirituality. I mean, I wouldn't be opposed to it, let's say, if I felt like a person was trying to have a conversation about it, or needed to have a conversation about it. Especially now that I have Reiki in my life. I have a feeling that I'm going to maybe be a little bit more open about my spirituality. But I'm very careful with that.

Ben's encounter certainly involved aspects of sharing one's spiritual learnings; the roots of the ritual itself contained some of these elements; a sacrificial offering, a service to the community; again, *we give you the best of us*. Ben talked about how many participants believed that they were doing a service for their community through this ritual act, and those involved with the festival sometimes did try to engage with the community in meaningful ways beyond the ritual space, while others viewed it strictly a ceremonial title. For himself, he credits the experience in helping him develop an interest in mentorship and talked about how gratifying it felt to help someone experience a transcendental moment for themselves, and deeper understanding. His discussion about his current attitudes towards mentorship, and how this has trickled into other places in his life was particularly touching to me:

More contemporarily, it's less based on that competition or holding that role, but continuing to talk to, and help guys through situations is something I make myself available for. I don't know it feels a bit grandiose, but to be able to act as an elder and specifically to other men... on occasion I was asked by people entering the competition, or just generally by younger men in their 19-20s for advice, or insight and things, which is pretty fascinating and gratifying.

After exploring these insights in depth, with ample examples from both the questionnaire responses and the narratives, it is clear to see that the qualities of *attentiveness*, *willingness*, and *responsiveness* are present in the lives of many who report learning through spiritual encounters. In the next chapter, I will summarize these, and related conclusions, as well as discuss my own learnings from the study in greater detail.

Chapter 8: Discussion

I had a feeling this chapter did not want to be written at home. As soon as I received the news of a rare opportunity to attend a week-long poetry retreat at Wintergreen Studios, an off-grid eco-retreat centre, with one of Canada's leading poets, I knew I would save the heart of this chapter for then. To my great surprise, I had been offered a bursary in honour of a much-loved poet and past attendee who passed away of breast cancer (when she was just a few years older than me). I, myself, had never attended the retreat, though I'd dreamed of it. I had, however, been to the lodge on numerous occasions, for workshops and readings, and had even helped build the labyrinth on the land in the summer of 2017. I knew what a beautiful, and spiritually fulfilling experience I was likely to have at the retreat.

When I first moved back to Kingston seven and a half years ago, Wintergreen caught my eye right away; I had seen a poster in a farm shop around the corner from me, advertising a workshop on pilgrimage, and how to prepare for a Camino to Santiago, Spain. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, in my late twenties I too, had been to the start of one of the routes in St. Jean Pied de Port. I had intended to spend a few weeks walking it, but when my friend and travel companion cancelled last minute, I decided that I did not want to walk it alone. I did, however, take the flight (and a few trains), and my backpack, and spent the Easter holy week in the town, drinking free sangria, watching sunsets, and writing in my journal. I also got the first stamp in my pilgrim passport.

In many ways I am at that crossroads again, not wanting to go into the next phase of life, and over the mountain before me, alone. I feel like that is why I am sort of lingering in these last days of the PhD, and this dissertation. Currently, I am sitting in front of a wood stove, still in the green Roots track pants I have come to favour, now eighteen months into this pandemic, but here now with other humans who are also writing silently on our last day of the retreat. An oasis in between these *variants of concern* everyone keeps talking about. The eight of us women have laughed, eaten meals, and done the dishes together. After nearly two years of solitude, this

companionship was much needed. I feel grateful that one of the poets I have spent the week with has offered to drive me home to make the transition back to my apartment a little easier.

Midway through this retreat I was asked to give a talk about my research. As I fumbled my way through it—I hadn't talked about my research in front of a group in over two years—I realized that this opportunity offered me the chance to reflect on this final chapter too; to attempt to answer the two questions asked of me by the women around the table—what did I learn from this research, and how did it change me spiritually? In attempting to answer these now, I will return to my original research questions, to what was shared with me by others in the study, and to what emerged in my own heart. I would invite you to join me for this discussion; after all, the word *discussion* itself recalls an exchange of ideas, and just as I've asked you to engage throughout this work in other chapters, I would still love your company here, as you consider what you have learned too. Perhaps you might pause here, and take a moment to reflect on your own response to these questions:

1. How are the qualities of *attentiveness*, *willingness*, and *responsiveness* present in spiritual encounters when learning takes place?
2. What role does emotional intensity play in learning through spiritual encounters?
3. What role does surprise play in learning through spiritual encounters?
4. What is the lasting impact and value of learning through spiritual encounters?

What Did I Learn from this Research?

Research Question 1: How are the qualities of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness present in spiritual encounters when learning takes place?

In many respects, I spent the whole previous chapter devoted to this first research question, as I presented 12 themes which emerged from the data analysis, grouped according to these qualities. While it is true that the spiritual encounters involved much paradox, while considering the role of attentiveness, willingness and responsiveness in the stories that were shared, certain patterns did tend to emerge as insights. For example, when people reported

learning from spiritual encounters, they were often *attentive to* things such as death and dying, a voice or presence, the natural world, bracketed time and space, and their feelings. This included a heightened awareness of the body, and of their emotions.

In terms of *willingness*, the research suggested that participants were often willing to *ask*, explicitly—for signs, or in prayer, or even reflective questions. They often took risks and leaps of courage, and they demonstrated a willingness to learn in other areas of their lives. Not only were participants in this study highly educated overall, but they did things like take courses for personal or professional development, attend therapy to learn more about themselves, and explored special interests and hobbies. Learning seemed to be a key priority in many of these people's lives.

Lastly, when learning took place, participants demonstrated *responsiveness* to their spiritual encounters; they often reported that these encounters allowed them to make choices and decisions related to big life decisions, such as parenthood or related to identity and/or vocation. They found them useful, often in practical ways. For example, the encounters helped people find lost objects, or buy a home, or supported them to make and maintain healthy choices, such as sobriety or choosing to live after periods of suicidal ideation. These encounters typically brought a sense of peace—they helped people reframe challenging circumstances and relationships, connect with loved ones, and offered opportunities for emotional healing. One of the most frequent themes that came up in our conversations, was kindness—that the encounters often helped people to become more kind or compassionate, and to notice the kindness of others around them.

My study also demonstrated that people were often compelled to respond to their encounters by sharing them in some capacity—that spiritual encounters were not ineffable, and that people could often be highly articulate and precise in describing the experience, along with its impact and meaning in their lives. Even if they did not choose to share them with other people, they often wrote, journaled, or created art with them. Many people did choose to share

them with trusted loved ones or as part of their work. Factors that influenced people's willingness to share had a great deal more to do with considerations to time, self-respect, and the receptivity of the listener. Overall, many people still expressed a degree of self-consciousness in sharing, and recognized that doing so made them vulnerable, and at risk of judgement, for example being perceived as 'crazy' or 'flakey'. It is powerful to note that some participants in this study experienced these feelings, and still made the choice to be included in the research, further affirming that willingness and courage are often key components of this experience. I, too, became increasingly aware of my own fears in this area in preparing this thesis for publication, which I will discuss in some detail at the end of this chapter.

In terms of receptivity to learning through spiritual encounters, it became increasingly clear for me in this research that not only were the qualities of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness a fruitful conceptual framework for analyzing the data, I also came to discover that these components of spiritual discernment are equally useful as a reflexive tool for a researcher, practitioner, or any other person listening to a story of this nature. For example, in this study I can ask how am I being *attentive* to these participants and their stories? How do I respectfully *attend* to what has been shared? Am I *willing* to believe someone, to listen, to sit with what might be challenging, new or difficult? How do I *respond* when someone has shared a story of spiritual encounter with me? How do I *respond* to this encounter? To the person? To what I have heard? These questions all seem to point back to the concepts of hospitality and radical openness discussed earlier on. Having worked with this model in my study, I would now encourage additional research that builds upon the richness of this framework as a methodological approach.

Research Question 2: What role does emotional intensity play in spiritual encounters?

Emotional intensity appears to play a very prominent role in learning through spiritual encounters. In the survey 58.2% of people ranked it a 5/5 for emotional intensity, and 24%

ranked it a 4/5. This means that over 82% of participants who reported learning through a spiritual encounter reported a high level of emotional intensity. While surprise was highlighted in this study, many other strong emotions were noted: grief, heartache, nothingness, loneliness, awe, wonder, shame, shock, and a sense of interconnectedness were all examples of intense feelings reported by participants. These emotions appeared to serve multiple functions—in some circumstances they drew people’s attention to a particular circumstance or problem; other times they provided helpful information, a sense of peace, assisted in healing (either on own or with a therapist), or prompted action on a professional, personal, or social justice issue.

If I were to continue this research, I would spend more time exploring the emotional factors which precipitated the encounter, were experienced during the encounter, and/or were reported as a result of the encounter, though I recognize that this is unlikely to be stagnant or linear. It seems clear that in this type of learning, emotion intensity plays a central role. Given the fact that emotions, and especially strong ones, are often excluded or even discouraged, from traditional adult teaching and learning environments, workspaces, and other professional/clinical settings, it is not surprising that this type of learning has often remained unacknowledged, feared, or kept at the periphery. Again, I would suggest that working with the qualities of attentiveness, willingness and responsiveness may be of benefit in finding ways to better welcome, support, and understand this kind of learning and the many benefits it can bring in these spaces.

Research Question 3: What role does surprise play in spiritual encounters?

My research seemed to agree with the previous findings in the literature and suggests that surprise does indeed play an important role in learning through spiritual encounters. In the study, 40.5% of participants said they were 5/5 surprised, and 21.5% ranked their surprise a 4/5. This means that 62% of participants reported that their encounter involved a high degree of surprise.

Surprise seemed to have similar effects as discussed above, in that it could help focus attention to a particular problem, situation, or even another emotion that needed attention, and point people towards useful information, though I did make two other noteworthy observations. First, the data indicated that in these spiritual encounters, other emotions often took precedence over surprise, such as grief, awe, or feelings of interconnectedness. This was a helpful discovery for me, as while surprise appears to play a big part in learning through spiritual encounters and was noted by Tisdell (2003) in the literature, these other strong feelings may play an even more prominent role, at least from the participants' own point of view.

Deeply related to this, was the confirmation that while surprise was still relevant in the moment for many people—in the sense that someone might be caught off guard by an encounter with beauty, nature, synchronicity, a dream, or a new piece of information—in time, some participants shared that they had come to *expect* this. Several participants indicated that they were “no longer surprised” by this, and had integrated it as a *knowing*, something they could come to rely upon an element of surprise in their spiritual lives. This discovery fits with some of the cognitive research on *surprising coherence* that was mentioned in the literature review and the notion that people could expect to be surprised (Whittlesea & Williams, 2001). I also see congruence between the literature's suggestion of possible reactions to surprise (Tsang, 2013), and would maintain that when learning through spiritual encounters was reported, curiosity, learning, and modesty appeared to be the most common response, as opposed to dogmatic denial, or other examples offered in the research.

Based on these findings, I would suggest that we begin to deepen our exploration of the role of surprising coherence in learning through spiritual encounters, as well as devote more attention to other prevalent emotions such as grief and awe.

Research Question 4: What is the lasting value and impact of learning through spiritual encounters?

Throughout this work, I have offered many examples of how learning through spiritual encounters can bring about profound change, and deep learning in people's lives. We have already gone into significant depth about the specific ways this can occur in previous chapters, including life changing examples such as the call to become a parent or a priest, the choice to live or die, and the capacity to notice kindness in oneself and others; opportunities for mentorship, emotional release, and the reassurance that we are not alone. We know from this research that people who report learning from spiritual encounters demonstrate qualities of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness, including a deep capacity to share these encounters, especially when given the opportunity and encouragement to do so. This type of learning also involves a great deal of emotional intensity, and surprise. In responding to this research question, I will take this opportunity to re-iterate that while the encounters shared in the questionnaire and interviews often involved significant challenges, there was an overarching sense that this type of learning was beneficial and valuable. As one person remarked in the questionnaire, "It's a journey with many jolts, but all for the good."

Certainly, people in the survey reported that this type of learning brought them increased peace or reassurance (68%), deepened their spiritual understandings (62%), and increased their sense of wonder/awe about the world (52%). Consider that approximately one third of participants reported being prompted to take action on personal or social justice issues. Others reported that it reaffirmed their personal beliefs, helped them to learn more about themselves, made them more attentive or alert, helped change their beliefs, spark a new creative idea or innovation, and helped bring peace or resolution to relationships. People also talked about how they learned the value of faith, and how their spirituality helped them better cope with death.

The presence of death in this research was overwhelmingly marked, with experiences that touched upon end of life in multiple ways—close brushes with death, visitations from deceased loved ones in dreams, attending to the dying, even spiritual encounters at graveyards. It seems this research reiterates the importance of conversations that are happening around spirituality in end-of-life care, and in grief and bereavement work, from death cafes to death doulas, and even around green burial initiatives. For me, it was a sense of peace that participants seemed to express around death that was most striking. Almost unanimously, the experiences of learning through spiritual encounters reported by people around death and dying emphasized feelings of reassurance, connection, communication, and love. While this is not my own area of expertise, I found myself feeling more courageous in the face of this topic as the study went on. As a result of this work, I felt more willing to think about death and talk about it more openly, and perhaps continued exploration into this aspect of the research might offer others a similar opportunity.

In terms of lasting value, it seems very important to highlight that most people reported Nature (65%) as their number one site of spiritual encounter in this survey. Given what we know about the environmental crisis, and the urgent need to take action on green initiatives and innovations, I think that this, combined with reports of increased empathy and kindness, because of spiritual encounters such as these, are hopeful findings of this study and may support these efforts. Again, 78% of survey respondents indicated that they experienced interconnectedness as a component of their spirituality, with 69% sharing that their spirituality helps them make meaning. As with so many related changes we are advocating for in our communities, for example, greater respect and inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing, I believe that in order to move beyond platitudes and make real change, we need to be *willing, attentive, and responsive*—to ourselves, each other, and our planet. As such, I think this research offers a rich starting place for future work—valuable insight into how these qualities of

spiritual discernment might be fostered, experienced, nurtured, and protected too. And, if we dare, taught. Learned.

Contribution to Research and Practice

Now that we have taken time to revisit the research questions, I will seek here to springboard off of the last one, and offer some thoughts on where these findings might add a valuable contribution in research and practice more broadly. In doing so, it may be interesting to share some insights I gleaned during the check-ins with participants, when I asked them the following questions directly: What (if anything) did you want people to learn from reading your story? Who (if anyone) would you like to read your story? Listening to what the participants had to say about their own contributions to this work, and who they felt it might appeal to, helped deepen my own understanding of where, and for whom this research might be useful.

Participant Perspectives. In Jan's case, for example, the first thing that came to mind for her was that she wanted her story to convey a sense that we are all loved. On a similar note, Anusree said that from reading her encounter, she wanted people to know that they could trust their gut and "to absolutely surrender and then surrender even more...and to know that the hand of God is always over everything you're doing."

When I asked Ben for his thoughts, he really wanted people to understand that there were underlying benefits that could exist in what some people describe as "metaphysical woo." He explained feeling like he was running up against this perspective all the time, as in his own life, he strives to think critically about spiritual encounters. He said, "I want there to be more critical analysis of the benefits... it's not exclusively flimflamery if people endeavour to get something out of it."

Poetry talked about how important the struggle itself was, and how she wanted readers to see how the challenges she faced in her own spiritual life also allowed her to know herself better. She suggested that it made her a better learner and described how early on in her academic work, she felt she had experienced a sense of "imposter syndrome," but by working

through this spiritual encounter, she was able to overcome that and rediscover who she was. For Josee, the biggest learning she wanted to come out of her story was that anybody could have this type of experience:

It doesn't matter what your beliefs are, it's there...whether you believe in it or not... and if you ask the questions or if you need help, if you just open yourself up to it, it's there....it's there for everybody. Ask the questions. Ask for help. Take a leap of faith. I'm not saying have a specific faith, but take a leap of faith, and you'd be surprised what's out there to help or to answer. Just soften and open yourself up, and it's there...

When I asked Maggie what she wanted people to learn from her story she emphasized that recognizing the whole personhood in dementia was a key priority for her, but she also talked about how she, too, wanted people to understand that there is a huge spiritual lesson in letting go and letting things happen. She offered the beautiful line, “to be foolish enough to run headlong into the meadow without thinking,” and shared her desire to encourage people who read her story to just *try* it. It was in this playful spirit that she cautioned: “If you just go along the staid old paths, you may miss it.”

Father Frank presented a bit of a different perspective, as in his narrative, he wanted to emphasize the importance of the personal encounter with the divine, how formative it is; in his check-in, he talked about how some medical professionals may consider anyone with a life of faith to be delusional, and offered, “there’s nothing you can really do about it if they posit that, but it’s not fair—you can’t just dismiss it.” There may be some people, he said, that have an experience of the call of God as strongly as he did, and he wanted those who read his encounter to know that these types of experiences do happen and it’s nothing to be afraid of. Similarly, Wendy Luella talked about the idea of trusting that non-intellectual embodied experiences have value, and described her belief that when education becomes a commodity, it disassociates us from other ways of knowing.

Peter had an interesting response when I asked him what he wanted people to learn from his encounter, and joked that while “telling someone to pay attention to their dreams might sound trite,” he would encourage people to pay attention to the notion of unconscious awareness, and everything that’s going on beneath the surface, as he believed that the “self is much broader than what you’re consciously aware of.” Peter said that he thought this would be most useful for people who were able to ground these insights in their own experience after reading his story.

Interestingly when I asked people about their desired readership, and who might benefit from reading their stories, I heard a variety of responses that I wasn’t necessarily expecting, such as *individuals living with pain, those considering spiritual life or vocation, a South Asian audience, teachers working with international students, family members of people with dementia, and those who are “going through it.”* Two other telling responses were also offered to me. The first, from Celia who said: “I suppose that I don’t feel somehow that my experience is so profound that it need be shared far and wide.” This was fascinating because I didn’t get the sense that Celia meant that her encounter had lesser impact, but perhaps, that it was not so uncommon. She also explained to me that the links between her spiritual encounter and education were not clear to her. Alternatively, I found Josee’s comments about education and spirituality very revealing, and quite frankly, a little heartbreaking:

In terms of educational settings, I’m really curious how that will present itself. I hope it’s not going to end up in some Psych class saying here’s what crazy looks like. I hope that’s not how it ends up turning out. I think that’s part of why I and many others don’t share. There are plenty of people, especially in academia, who will say ‘here’s an example of crazy.’ It would be great if it was just used in a positive context for what it is, rather than what it is being translated as.

On the whole, this research seemed to confirm that fear of ridicule and fear of being labelled as mentally ill still play a significant role in why people often choose not to share their

spiritual encounters with others. Specifically, the language offered in this study by several participants suggested not only that spiritual experience is frequently pathologized, but also reiterated the stigmatization around mental health. In either case, I reassured Josee, that my intent as researcher was certainly in alignment with hers: that the experiences shared be received in a spirit of respect, valued, and understood in their context.

Scholarly Contribution. This research also makes several contributions to the existing scholarly literature and body of work on the topic of learning through spiritual encounters. First, the depth and scope of the descriptive first-person narratives presented in this research, including specific, rich examples around how spiritual encounters can lead to learning in adults, are unique among the literature I have reviewed. As such this research study made significant headway as it moved beyond debates centred around defining terms. In the past, a great deal of energy has been devoted to unravelling the duality of spirituality vs. religion or justifying one's position. Instead, this research emphasized the primacy of stories to convey meaning, with an emphasis on *believing* participants. Secondly, the study identified twelve key emerging themes that were frequently present in spiritual encounters reported by participants, both deepening and shedding new light on previous research offered by scholars such as Tisdell and Groen. Thirdly, the use of the framework of attentiveness, willingness, and responsiveness derived from Bieber's (2016) writings on Quaker practices for spiritual discernment, was shown to be an effective tool to better understand, rather than strictly categorize the emerging themes, and perhaps even more so, as a possible method of reflexive inquiry for those pursuing this type of work in the future. Fourth, the research results seemed to suggest that Tisdell's (2001) discussion of spirituality is still relevant to many Canadians today; not only is this application in the current Canadian context a significant contribution in itself, but participant responses also offered further insight into Tisdell's research, most notably, the role of surprise and emotional intensity when learning takes place.

Fifth, it is also noteworthy to acknowledge that the data collected as part of this research may still be explored through additional filters in the future, and the relevance of this work occurring during the height of COVID-19 cannot be overlooked. While I chose to present these findings through a wider lens, some of the insights gleaned in the pandemic context will likely be valuable; at the moment, I am unaware of other published studies in Canada that have dealt with this topic explicitly. Finally, it is my hope that through some of the strategies employed in this study, for example the conscious use of spirit-centred language, storytelling, a focus on deep listening, and acknowledging that spiritual experiences are reported as a valuable pathway to learning for many Canadians, including the highly educated, this work can be seen as assisting efforts to decolonize. While this work may be most easily applicable in educational research, the connections to other fields related to healthcare and environmental sustainability are relevant.

In Canada, women and immigrants are significantly more likely to report a connection to spirituality (Cornelissen, 2021); we also know that spirituality and culture are deeply intertwined. In our current cultural climate, where more discussion is taking place related to equity, diversity and social justice issues, this research seems timely—it is my hope that this work might better inform researchers, practitioners and policy makers to move beyond platitudes, and enact change. To soften, connect, and care. This, to me, would be accomplished through the re-prioritization of spiritual and wisdom traditions in so many of our hardened systems that have worked so diligently to strip us of our wonder, awe, emotions, experiences, bodies, and other ways of knowing, which are so valuable to our learning and being.

Dissemination and Knowledge Sharing. In terms of knowledge mobilization and my own plans to share these findings, my goals remain quite rooted in my interests as a writer and educator. Firstly, I believe this research would provide a very strong foundation upon which to help shape future courses in spirituality and education at the Faculty of Education at Queens University. My understanding is that we currently offer a transformative learning course, but that there is ample room for growth. I believe that my research could help support the

curriculum design for a new course on adult education and spirituality, which I would be interested in proposing to the Dean. Previous research suggests that adult educators have a desire to attend more to this subject area, and this could potentially be a place of fruitful growth in our Faculty. Secondly, I would like this research to continue to inform my own teaching practice in the Bachelor of Education and graduate level programs I'm currently involved with as an instructor.

Another possible pathway would be to host a workshop, or to send a package that includes a brief synopsis of my research, e.g., what might typically be called an “executive summary” in academia or business, to the various university and college chaplaincy offices in Canada, including the Office of Faith and Spiritual life at Queen's. Not only would this be a way of giving back to those who helped me in my recruitment phase, but it may also be relevant to the work that they are doing, including welcoming and supporting international students.

Personally, I would like to attend further courses on this theme, specifically related to the genre of spiritual autobiography, and possibly work towards developing a course of that nature in our community. Connected to this, I am excited about connecting with others who may be interested in writing their own spiritual autobiographies and could perhaps, support others in doing so, for example at Wintergreen Studios, or other retreat settings. Throughout my work, I also noticed intriguing connections to research that is happening in other fields, such as Dr. Mary Ann McColl's work around storytelling out of Rehabilitation Therapy at Queen's. I would be open to exploring possible research partnerships in the future.

Lastly, it has always been a goal of mine to publish this work beyond my dissertation, to develop an accessibly written, non-fiction literary textbook which includes the narratives shared in this research, and further builds upon the themes and ideas presented here. I envision this book being used in any number of settings, including education, healthcare, theology, wellness, retreat centres, etc. to help increase awareness around the depth and value of spirituality in learning, and to provide researchers, practitioners and policy makers with some language and

tools to begin to better attend to this dimension of human experience in their respective fields. Further to this, I recognize that portions of this research may contribute to scholarly articles, future academic research, and would welcome the opportunity to revisit this data from new lenses that I did not have the opportunity to explore in this dissertation.

How Did This Research Change Me Spiritually?

Thank you, what a lovely question to be asked. Now that I have talked about what this research has taught me, and what value it might bring to others, I will answer the second question that was posed to me by my companions at the retreat.

Being raised by, and then ‘estranged’ from, a mother who was an alcoholic and opioid addict, I thought I was quite well versed in devastating loss in my own life. Yet, overall, as I shared in the introduction, I underestimated the role of the “shipwreck” in learning through spiritual encounters. Growing up with a mother addicted to drugs, and witnessing some of the things that I did, it was easier just to stay quiet, or make light of it. I observed from quite early on that very little good seemed to come from talking about it. That I was judged or ridiculed—first as a little girl for not having a ‘normal’ mother, and then as an adult, for not doing more to help her, despite years of failed efforts. And of course, for having the range of emotions that comes along with having a chronically ill parent. When I did decide to talk about it, I often did so clumsily, and with a great deal of caution, or felt I had over-shared. Thankfully, in my twenties, I did address much of this *intellectually* with the full array of healthy tools, resources and boundaries, but admittedly, I am not sure that the healing had begun to occur on the *heart level*, that is, spiritually, until more recently.

As for this research, I had seen some evidence in the literature to suggest that a perplexing problem, or significant life event like a death, could be a site of spiritual encounter, but I think I underestimated the impact in practice. In my own life, I had spent so much time trying to find the light, exploring sources of illumination and more positive feelings, that I believe I overlooked the value of what lay in the shadows. Certainly, most people around me

recognize that I carry a lot of genuine joy. On the other hand, I have felt deeply judged whenever I tried to write or speak about difficult topics and emotions. This carried over into my research and thinking about this topic. For example, in sharing an example of spiritual encounter, especially from my own life, I tended to focus on the more light-hearted, or *awesome*, rather than the more challenging or painful elements (which probably led to even deeper learning). Seeing this reflected back so clearly now by others in my research, it seems unavoidable; the prevalence of death and loss, stress, trauma, uncertainty, loneliness, shame, feelings of unworthiness in these accounts, *as well as* all of the rich opportunities for growth, change, and increased compassion that can come from these places is evident. Doing this research, especially during a global pandemic, has allowed me to see things much differently and gain insight into my own experiences related to this work. For example, in acknowledging how much of my early life was spent in chronic fear worrying that my mother would die, I have become increasingly compassionate to myself in some areas I still find challenging. In addition, I find myself considering some of the deeper learning that had taken place on a spiritual level *in the midst* of long-term grief. As some of you will know well, it is entirely possible to experience grief *before* someone dies.

Interestingly, and again to my surprise, so much of this poetry retreat has touched upon death. As I mentioned, I was given a scholarship to attend, in memory of a poet who passed, made possible by a fund created by her friends and family. Over the week, I learned more about her life and was presented with a book of her poetry. We also touched upon death in our own poetry, including a writing exercise inspired by W. S. Merwin's poem "Place" that asked us to contemplate the last day of the world. This was my contribution:

Still, A Whistling Kettle

On the last day of the world, I wake up at 7am. If there is still a sun, I look at it for a minute, then say to my husband, "Sweetie, did you decide if you want to look at the sun?" I put my cardigan on. It's Cookie Monster blue. It was made for my body by my

grandmother. My husband reads to me for exactly one hour. If we still have power, I make a cup of builder's tea, if wood, a fire, and pancakes. Still, a whistling kettle. We make love, twice, in our favourite chair. Then, prayer. I had planned to visit the Holy Land: Wailing Wall, Golgotha, Gethsemane, in that order. Back in my own garden, I pet Clover, the neighbour's cat. If things still grow, I'll walk through rows of trellis, admiring my cucumbers, then slice with oil and salt. If someone's doing a Noah's ark thing, I will drop off peels for feed. My husband skips this part. Kisses my cheek. Assuming it isn't nuclear, that evening I will put on a head lamp, and search for my sister in town. If she can be found, I will hold her. If she can't, I will find a stranger, and do the same.

(Laing, 2021, p. 17)

And of course, our brilliant facilitator is still mourning the loss of her husband only three years ago. I was grateful to spend some time around the sink with her, as she so generously made room for some of my stories, too.

When I began this study, I did not anticipate how many participants would express spiritual encounters around death. While the literature acknowledged it, and I suspect it is more prominent in other fields such as nursing or theology, we don't talk very much about death in education, or how it might relate to learning. As I sit here reflecting on this from my current position, it does seem a glaring omission. It is perhaps, another one of those areas where we have removed our feelings and bodies (and in this case, facts?) from the learning space. To be honest, I'm not sure if I have *ever* taught a class that dealt with death explicitly or even tangentially. The closest I came was perhaps as a drama teacher, which as a subject, tends to highlight the emotional aspects of being human—but even then, quite cautiously. It is well known among drama teachers that one of the first things beginning actors will do is act out a scene that involves death, and often through violence. We have been trained to quickly tell our students to “find another way,” to look for a “more creative choice,” and because of our

discomfort, we deem it inappropriate, and throw the baby out with the bathwater: death is banned.

When I have dealt with it directly, it has either occurred privately, or in some of the more untraditional learning spaces I have facilitated or been a part of, such as community art groups. For example, I recall one of my experiences of decorating a Christmas tree with “Uncle Vic,” an elderly gentleman with Down Syndrome the year before he passed away, when I taught at an arts organization for adults with intellectual disabilities. Uncle Vic was a ladies’ man, and he was quite specific regarding exactly how and where he wanted the tree positioned. I honoured his wishes as best we could. When it was to his liking, he and I sat and watched Christmas specials together in its glow. When he passed, just shortly after, as a learning community including other staff, students, family, and community members, we mourned him; we talked about our feelings, we held a dance in his honour. This was not always the case, however—and at times, the topic was met with fear and discomfort. For example, when “Shannon” one of the students in my poetry and writing memoir class, an adult woman with an intellectual disability, herself in her 50s or 60s wrote a poem about her feelings about her father’s imminent death. Much to my dismay at the time, her sister and caregiver did not approve and requested that she not read it aloud in the showcase, seemingly worried that it would air the family’s dirty laundry. Interestingly, however, she did go onto read it and ended up being a deeply moving experience for the family, and to the sister especially.

I once attended a 3-week residency at an arts centre in which we were asked to create an artistic project which blended a minimum of two forms/genres. Being both a theatre artist and writer, I chose to combine poetry and monologue, and created a one-woman play which explored the concept of memory—the stories we tell ourselves, both imagined and remembered. Many of the scenes in the play were adapted from my own life; experiences related to spirituality (in particular, my Catholic upbringing), sexuality, and a certain residual sense that I had lost my own voice—in this case quite literally—my singing voice. It playfully chronicled my experience of

auditioning for and losing the role of “munchkin number ___” in the school production of the Wizard of Oz in grade 4. In real life, this event had epitomized my feelings of awkwardness—a mother-less early bloomer struggling to fit into a world of perfect little Dorotheys (who I now realize was motherless herself wasn’t she?).

I performed a large section of my work-in-progress for my colleagues and mentors in the program which included a former poet laureate of Canada. They liked it. My fellow artists in the program liked it. I liked it. I felt excited about the possibilities for my play. Perhaps I would take it on the road, perform it at a Fringe Festival, and maybe even get to sing in public for the first time in years. But one afternoon in the writers’ lounge towards the end of the program, in a closing day group chat of sorts, our facilitator asked us the question; “What are you really trying to In(ter)vent with your work?”

I thought about that question deeply and answered as honestly as I could. I said that as a child I had been explicitly taught to not feel sad, cry, frown, or get angry, and that I was trying “to intervent” my past and present to reclaim that ability. He responded kindly at first, but then (and likely with the best of intentions) told me that perhaps in my development as a writer, I would eventually go beyond a focus on my own self and begin to look outward. I’m still undecided on whether that was the most beautiful, or insensitive thing he could have said. But I can tell you that I wasn’t ready to hear it. I felt ashamed. I felt as if he was telling me that the world didn’t need another one-woman play about my experience, that I shouldn’t have been so self-indulgent, and that I needed to start to focus on other people’s stories rather than my own if I wanted to move to the next stage of my creativity and human experience. I stayed quiet, but inside, felt completely disheartened. My reaction was amplified by the fact that the poet beside me answered that she was simply doing the work for “delight.” I was simultaneously in awe and envious of her response. Everyone seemed very pleased with her. Her answer felt cleaner than mine, tidier, better.

This wasn't the only time I felt messy for telling my stories. When I finally performed my play, there's a line in the script about how the character's father had always wanted to be a writer, but ended up working in sales. Even though the show intentionally blurred lines between reality and fiction, and I didn't really think that to be true about my own father, some days for my own peace of mind, and my dad's, I wonder if I should have just taken the line out. On the chance that it hurt his feelings, I don't think I'd do it again. In the years since, he has often shared with me that he chose the perfect career for himself, and that he's happy. And I believe him.

There have also been negative reactions to my poetry. Friends who asked me to send them copies of the manuscript, only for it to be met with complete silence. Others who approached me at the end of open mic readings and suggested I change the ending of a poem to make it softer, men who told me they preferred it when their girlfriends wrote cute little rhyming limericks. This is not uncommon. I had a friend in the UK, a lady we used to call "Aunt Winnie," who after marrying her second husband, asked him not to look in a particular moving box as it contained some personal writings. He did anyway, and found her diaries, which were too sensual for his liking. He asked her to destroy them. She burned them. Or, another example of an acquaintance, whose journals were stolen and used by her family to have her committed to a psychiatric institution as a woman with bipolar disorder back in the 90s; how she had resisted writing for years after, and how her younger sister who witnessed this in her teenage years promised herself she'd never write anything down on paper either just in case. And more recently of course, there was the story of Israeli female researcher Orna Donath who had been internationally criticized and told she should be burned alive for conducting research and writing about women who regret having children in *Regretting Motherhood: A Study* (2017).

Throughout my life, I have become aware of how women are rejected when their writings aren't pleasing to others; when they are too honest, too sexual, too playful—and as I learned in my Master's research on female stand-up comedians, when they are too funny. For a brief time,

I had actually been toying around with the idea of writing a book called *Women Who Burn*, about women who choose to set fire to their own writing as an act of self-protection, defiance, and a personal act of agency. Early in my PhD, when I'd shared this with my supervisor, she asked me if I wanted to change my topic. I told her that I did not want to spend four years studying something so dark, something that made me so angry. I don't think I recognized at the time, how much this overlapped with my interest in spirituality, and the types of censoring so many of us still do in speaking about it.

As this research progressed, and I learned more about the lives of others in the literature, as well as in my own study, I became increasingly aware of my own fear surrounding sharing my spiritual encounters outside of my relationships with close family and friends. Even though this type of learning was a beautiful, massive, inseparable part of my identity, I realize that my difficulty explaining my ideas was rooted in the same concerns as many: that I would be judged, ridiculed, thought stupid, labelled mentally ill, rejected, and dismissed. Professionally, in my work at the university, for example, I also found myself worried I might be breaking a rule if I talked about spirituality while teaching a class.

There was also one more piece; I feared that if the more logical-minded among us found out I had grown up with a mother addicted to drugs, that they would simply pathologize my feelings, and presume that my spiritual experiences had been nothing more than a coping mechanism or crutch—stories I had invented to soothe or bring comfort. This possibility felt like the biggest, and most arrogant slap in the face of all.

As the time came closer to my final submission, I became increasingly more aware of what I would choose to leave in, or out, and experienced many of the same emotions described by my participants. The findings of my research suggest that I am far from alone, and the courage of others, as well as the support of community I have gained in the last five years, has helped me to gently (and at times boldly), add my voice to the conversation.

Not only did I begin to speak more about some of the deeper spiritual encounters in my life, but I also started singing again. As part of my experience during this PhD work, I found the Office of Faith and Spiritual Life at the university and was invited to join a daily singing practice, which I have now been attending almost every morning for a year and a half. I can remember how deeply I cried in my first session, just at the vocal release. This new addition to my day has allowed me to reconnect with my lost voice in ways that have been life changing; not only do I sing with others regularly online, and a few times in person, I have also led songs, written songs, and have had songs arise in me. I have also found this group to be a deep source of friendship and community during the pandemic; I spent Christmas morning with these people during the first year of COVID-19 when we were not permitted to visit our families. We've celebrated birthdays, marked griefs, joys, sorrows, and supported each other through various health challenges.

In our group, we typically sing for 45 minutes to an hour, and then have a half hour sharing time, related to a daily theme. In that sharing, we are invited to talk about whatever has arisen in the session for us, to speak from our own experience, and to refrain from commenting on anything anyone else has said. I have found it deeply healing, and it is helping me to become a better listener. In this group, it is our presence that is valued; we are welcome to come as we are, to simply show up. Given my personal history and my profession, not having to help, fix, or offer advice was a very new skill for me, and one that I am still working on. Would it seem odd to you if I said that my daily singing practice has even empowered me and given me the confidence to begin the process of becoming a mother at age 40? And yet, simply by being heard and valued, and having song come to me, and through me, I have found parts of myself being nourished, resting, coming to life. The simple call and response style lyrics shared in the oral tradition: "Keep a green branch in your heart, maybe a singing bird will come," or "I know this rose will open," and "I will be gentle with myself" remind me to slow down and offer me hope. I learn from the songs and the singing, and I learn deeply from what others share.

Connected to this idea of expression, I've also fulfilled a lifetime dream of writing a book, this spiritual memoir, and research—written to include some of my own encounters, too. At the risk of owning my self-indulgence for a moment, sometimes I do imagine that my future child, husband, or even my sister who is twenty years younger than me, might one day take an interest in reading my research, or my poetry, and come to know me a little bit better. Somehow that matters. It's less about ego, than a desire to leave something behind in this world, to remind someone that *we were here*.

Another blessing to come out of my research, is that I was introduced to Quakerism. Beyond the fact that I found Quaker writings and philosophy so helpful in developing a conceptual framework for my research, I also found myself regularly attending, and enjoying, a local Quaker meeting, mostly virtually, on Sunday mornings for the last two years. While I have been a life-long Christian, as an adult I had not yet found a church or spiritual community that resonated. While I am still very new to Quakers, I have found it to be a comfortable fit for now. In a world that has felt so overwhelming recently, I feel a peace in our meetings as we sit in silence together, listening for leadings from Spirit. I appreciate the simplicity of our greeting, the circle of chairs, the candle lit in the centre, or in our homes. I appreciate many of the Quaker values, especially their peace testimony, how I was welcomed, and that after a year of attending when they asked me if I would be responsible for checking the mailbox at the post office on behalf of the meeting, I didn't want to run for the hills. I was genuinely happy to help. This simple act made me feel useful. A sense of belonging to a community mattered to me.

My research has allowed me to sink deeper into my own faith, too. These last five years, I have been paid a modest salary to teach, learn, and think about some of my favourite things, and to learn from others' spiritual encounters. This period of my life has allowed me the opportunity to build time for reading, walking, gardening, and prayer into my day in a very natural way. Despite the challenges of conducting research on spirituality in academic settings, I have also made tremendous friendships in this process. As it turns out, many of my colleagues are

believers too. In fact, we sometimes joke about just how many people of faith and prayer we have in my PhD cohort year. I was also encouraged by a colleague and friend, who over brunch, recently shared that my research topic has helped her to feel more comfortable talking about her own spirituality at work too. Coincidentally, I met one of my best friends in this program, and we pray together almost daily. Before I met her, I had been too shy to pray in front of anyone, again this connected to my voice.

While conducting this research, I found my faith reaffirmed in multiple ways. Beyond my lifestyle as a graduate student, the research process as a whole—the literature, the questionnaire, the interviews and narratives, the people I met, the insights, felt very validating. The deeper I went, the more I had a sense that I was in such *good* company. That there were others who valued this type of learning in their own lives, and were able to speak about it so honestly and articulately inspired me. The fact these people were willing to share their stories with such vulnerability, and contribute to further research in the field, felt important and brave.

In my data analysis, I remember being startled when I saw how frequently people still used the word “God” in our conversations, and it felt heartening to me. It is a word I have been so sensitive and careful in using so as not to offend that it was quite remarkable to me to see how many people still seemed to identify with the term; also, that so many recognized the sense of a presence or voice *within* and that much good often came from following it, was also a comfort to me. I was very encouraged to learn that other people felt this way too.

Final Thoughts

Blessings

While there were certainly limitations to this study, many of them connected to the fact that I was conducting this study during a global pandemic, I’m going to break convention and conclude with a *Blessings* section. It’s odd. This week at the retreat, when everyone was so curious about my research and I offered that talk on Wednesday, not wanting to be self-indulgent, I chose to read one of the participant’s narratives in this volume instead of my own.

But the funniest thing happened. After people had listened to me read this story, they began asking about *me*: What about you? What have you learned from this research? How has this research changed *you* spiritually? While I must admit I struggled in my response in the moment (apparently, I still find it very difficult to talk about my own spirituality in new settings), I hope I have offered a clearer response here in writing.

I mentioned earlier that I felt I was at a crossroads, but in many ways, I also feel like I have come full circle, or I'm in the centre of one. Shortly after I moved back to Kingston, I sat by a fire with an old friend considering what the next part of my life might entail. I remember he said: What do you want to do with your life? *I want to write. I'd like to teach a bit. I'd like to make soup. I'd like to think about topics I love. I'd like to get married, and have a baby.* To my surprise, and perhaps to yours, he said that sounded like a PhD. This was a huge shift in thought for me, especially considering I had promised myself I would never return to graduate school again. Insisting, he gave me a few different names of people to connect with, including the name of my current supervisor. It was only in doing my preparation for that meeting that I discovered she was the person who had created and built Wintergreen (the sign that kept catching my eye in the farm shop). This quiet moment of synchronicity is what convinced me to meet with her. It turns out she had indeed walked these roads ahead of me: pilgrimages, PhD, motherhood. Perhaps, this is why she didn't flinch when I spoke of my research interest in spirituality, and answered her question, "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" in the same way again: *writing, teaching a bit, making soup, thinking about topics I love, married, with a baby.* Five years in, I now find myself standing in the middle of the labyrinth.

I hope my new friends at the retreat won't mind if I confess that we have all cried at least once this week. I have come to expect it in these environments. One of the poets at our retreat, the one who will drive me home, talked about the "unfathomability of it"—time, and aging, in one of her poems. She references a set of pink flamingo salt and pepper shakers we have come to recognize here at this table, informing us, in the title of her piece, that they will be "misplaced

before the end of the world.” This image reminds me of my beloved dad (who loves pink flamingos), who drove me here, and who has offered me *his whole life*.

Maybe the flamingo salt and pepper shakers will break. I am starting to believe that perhaps we all have a favourite piece of warped pottery. Whether we made it ourselves, picked it up along the way, or perhaps even put it out on the curb for another to find, I am beginning to trust that it will find the right hands; that even if it goes crashing to the ground, that it will reveal something useful or beautiful.

As much as I’ve talked about the importance of finding my voice in this last chapter, I am sure glad that it doesn’t always have to be mine. When words fail me, or when I feel awkward and fumbly, or lost, I think I have gathered enough evidence (mostly through the sharing of stories—yes, yours and mine) to suggest that Holy Spirit will speak—through another person, a bird, a poem, a dream, or a deep sound within my body. In my tradition, Jesus promised it. I choose to hang onto that hope, even when a doubting world, or my beloved companions think me foolish. I have learned that my life (and its shimmer) depends on it:

Whenever the experiment on and of
my life begins to draw to a close
I’ll go back to the place that held me
and be held. It’s O.K. I think
I did what I could. I think
I sang some, I think I held my hand out.

—Jane Mead (1958-2019)

“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” (*New Living Translation*, Isaiah 30:21).

“Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.” (*New Living Translation*, Mark 13:12)

Author's Note

A few days after submitting my thesis, I was informed that my mother was in the hospital as a result of a drug related accident. She passed away on April 13, 2022, at age 61, just five days before my PhD defence examination. I would like to thank Mary Ann, the chaplain, who supported me through her passing, and the friends, family and strangers who continue to teach me about mercy. This research helped prepare me too, and for that I am grateful to everyone who contributed.

Sunny days ahead.

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Appendix A: Letter of Ethics Approval



June 09, 2020

Miss Barbara Laing
Ph.D. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Queen's University
Duncan McArthur Hall
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-997-20; TRAQ # 6029317

Title: "GEDUC-997-20 Learning Through Spiritual Encounters"

Dear Miss Laing:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled

"GEDUC-997-20 Learning Through Spiritual Encounters" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at <http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/>; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies." Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, GREB, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by GREB or the Chair, GREB.

Note: Due to COVID-19, human participant research policies, in relation to hospital and non-hospital based research, are being continually updated. Many restrictions are now in place with respect to in-person research. For the most current information on the COVID-19 impact on research, please visit

<https://www.queensu.ca/vpr/covid-19>. For information directly related to GREB please visit the [Research Ethics FAQs](#).

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean A. Tripp".

Chair, General Research Ethics Board (GREB)

Professor Dean A. Tripp, PhD

Departments of Psychology, Anesthesiology & Urology Queen's University

c: Dr. Rena Upitis, Supervisor

Dr. Pamela Beach, Chair, Unit REB

Kyle Cummings-Bentley, Dept.

Admin.

Appendix B: Sample Letter of Information and Consent Phase 1

Study Title: Learning Through Spiritual Encounters

Name of Principal Investigator: Barbara Laing, Faculty of Education, Queen's University

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Rena Uptis, Faculty of Education, Queen's University

Thank you for the interest in my research. I am asking adults ages 18 and up to participate in a voluntary study. The purpose of this study is to explore how adults learn through spiritual encounters.

If you agree to participate, I will ask you to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask you about your past and present spiritual encounters (examples will be provided), and should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, the results from this study may help educators better understand the role spirituality plays in learning, and findings may be published for use in teacher education, wellness centres, clergy, and/or mainstream audiences. It will also help researchers better understand the impact of social distancing on Canadian adults' spirituality during Covid 19.

Due to the nature of this study, some of the questions presented are about sensitive and personal issues, and may involve emotional or psychological risk. You may skip a question if you wish. If you feel you need support after participating in the questionnaire, please call Crisis Services Canada at 1-833-456-4566. Basic demographic information will also be collected from you related to age range, education, religious affiliation (if any), etc. Please note that once an answer has been submitted, anonymous data cannot be removed from the survey, however you are welcome to stop the questionnaire at any point by exiting and closing your browser. At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked if you wish to participate in a follow-up online interview. If you are willing to be considered for this second stage of the study, you will indicate so by checking the box. Participation in Phase 2 is not required, and not everyone who volunteers will be selected for an interview. You may choose to participate in Phase 1 only.

Your identity will remain anonymous, unless you are interested in participating in the second phase of the research that involves an interview. Interested participants will be asked to input their name and email address, and this information will be stored securely on an encrypted USB key. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws. Access to study data is limited to myself and my supervisor, as well as the Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB), who may request access to study data to ensure that the researcher(s) have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research. GREB is bound by confidentiality and will not disclose any personal information. Data from Phases 1 and 2, as well as the code

file, will be permanently erased from the hard drive and encrypted USB key five years after study closure.

In addition, I plan to publish the results of this study in academic journals and present them at conferences. Participants are asked to consent to have direct quotes used for this study.

If you have any ethics concerns please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. If non-English speaking participants wish to contact the Chair for ethics concerns, translation assistance may be necessary, as the REB Chair communicates in English only.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Dr. Rena Upitis, at rena.upitis@queensu.ca or by telephone at 613-533-6212.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study. You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

By clicking the arrow below and completing the questionnaire, you are agreeing to participate in Phase 1 of the research study. If you do not wish to continue, please close your browser now.

Appendix C: Sample Letter of Information and Consent Phase 2

Study Title: Learning Through Spiritual Encounters

Name of Principal Investigator: Barbara Laing, Faculty of Education, Queen's University

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Rena Uptis, Faculty of Education, Queen's University

Thank you for completing Phase 1 of the study! Now that I have reviewed responses from the online questionnaire, I am connecting with individuals who volunteered to be interviewed for follow-up.

In the second phase of the study, I will be conducting online interviews with selected adult participants across Canada who have completed the questionnaire, and are willing to discuss their spiritual encounters with me in greater depth. Due to social distancing and public health recommendations, the interviews will be held via Microsoft Teams and will be audio recorded for transcription and data analysis. I am asking participants to commit to two interviews, each 1.5 hours. In the first interview, we will be discussing the spiritual encounter and context in detail. In the second, I will be presenting you with a written text (e.g. vignette) based on our discussion. We will read it together, and I will ask you to share various thoughts, responses, and changes that you would like to make as we co-create a written account inspired by your spiritual encounter and learning. We may also do some collaborative exploratory writing exercises together online. While there are no direct benefits to you as a participant, the results from this study may help educators better understand the role spirituality plays in learning, and findings may be published for use in teacher education, wellness centres, clergy and/or mainstream audiences. It will also help researchers better understand the impact of social distancing on Canadian adults' spirituality. You will not be paid for taking part in this study, however you will receive a copy of your vignette.

As in Phase 1, there is a risk that some of the interview questions may upset you. Due to the nature of this study some of the questions presented are about sensitive and personal issues, and may involve emotional or psychological risk. General contact information for counselling services in your area will be made available at the end of the interview in a debrief, which you may feel free to use at your discretion. There is also a risk that non-participants mentioned in the interview data could be identified by the public. Please note that you have the option of being named/identified in the study if you wish. If you do not wish to be named, your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws. I will do this by replacing your name with a pseudonym in all publications and a study ID number in all study records. Information from the participants that references other people (such as family members or congregants) will be made anonymous. An alias will be assigned to any mention of non-participants, and additionally relationship descriptors will remain non-descript (e.g. congregant, relative, friend). Even with pseudonym, please note that there is still a risk that you could inadvertently be identified (e.g, if you live in a smaller community). You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. During the interviews, you can stop your participation at any time by telling the researcher. Participation in this study

is voluntary. After the second interview, I will provide you with a final draft of the vignette by e-mail. You will have two weeks from that date to request any edits and/or changes. You may withdraw from the study up until March 31, 2021 by contacting me at 3bl6@queensu.ca.

The study data will be stored on an encrypted hard drive on Queen's University servers. The code file that links real names with pseudonyms and study ID numbers will be stored securely and separately from the data on an encrypted USB key. Access to study data is limited to myself and my supervisor, as well as the Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data to ensure that the researcher(s) have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research. GREB is bound by confidentiality and will not disclose any personal information. All data from Phase 1 and 2, including the code file identifying your pseudonym and study ID number will be permanently erased from the hard drive and encrypted USB key five years after study closure.

In addition, I plan to publish the results of this study in academic journals and present them at conferences. I will do my best to make sure quotes do not identify participants unless this permission is granted below. During the interview, please let me know if you say anything you do not want me to quote.

If you have any ethics concerns please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Call 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. If non-English speaking participants wish to contact the Chair for ethics concerns, translation assistance may be necessary, as the REB Chair communicates in English only.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Dr. Rena Upitis, at rena.upitis@queensu.ca or by telephone at 613-533-6212.

This Letter of Information provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study. By clicking the **YES** boxes below you are consenting to participate in Phase 2 of the study.

Appendix D: Online Questionnaire

Learning Through Spiritual Encounters Sample Questionnaire

Demographic Information

Q1 How do you self identify?

- Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other _____
-

Q2 Please select your age range.

- 18 - 24
 - 25 - 34
 - 35 - 44
 - 45 - 54
 - 55 - 64
 - 65 -74
 - 75 - 84
 - 85 or older
-

Q3 In which province/territory do you currently reside?

- British Columbia
 - Alberta
 - Saskatchewan
 - Manitoba
 - Ontario
 - Quebec
 - New Brunswick
 - Nova Scotia
 - Prince Edward Island
 - Newfoundland and Labrador
 - Nunavut
 - Northwest Territories
 - Yukon
-

Q4 What is your level of education?

- Less than high school
 - High school graduate
 - College Diploma/Certificate
 - Bachelors degree
 - Professional degree
 - Graduate Study (e.g., MA or PhD)
-

Q5 How would you best describe your current spiritual/religious identity?

- Religious. Please feel free to identify the tradition/denomination below.

 - I have a spiritual practice/beliefs but would not describe myself as religious.
 - I am agnostic/uncertain.
 - Atheist.
 - Other. Please specify. _____
-

Q6 How important a role did spirituality/religion play in your life before age 18?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not at all important

Q1 Now that you've agreed to participate and told me a little bit about yourself, you'll be directed to a survey on the topic of learning through spiritual encounters.

On this page you'll be asked a pretty big life question: **“Have you ever had a spiritual encounter that taught you something?”** This will, for some of you, perhaps, be the most challenging question to answer. It is a personal one. In answering it, I would encourage you to think about your own definition of spirituality and how it may connect to your own sense of identity in the past or present. Depending on whether you choose Yes or No, you will be directed to another set of questions that will ask you about your experiences and beliefs related to the topic. **Reasons you might choose No:** If, for example, you have had a spiritual encounter in your life, but don't believe you learned anything from it, you might choose No. Or, perhaps you had an extraordinary or profound encounter, but you don't feel comfortable calling it spiritual. Or maybe you've experienced neither, but were just curious about the survey. **Reasons you might choose Yes:** You have one or more examples of experiences that you feel comfortable identifying as 'spiritual' and believe that some type of learning has taken place. Learning here can be widely interpreted.

Looking at past research, some examples people self-reported as spiritual encounters involving learning include:

- *I had a dream which gave me the answer to a perplexing math problem.*
- *I had an epiphany about a life problem while climbing a mountain.*
- *The spiritual experience of giving birth made me want to preserve the planet for generations.*
- *I had such an awakening on a pilgrimage walk, I knew I had to quit my job when I returned!*
- *A friend gave me rare a book I'd secretly been searching for. How could she have known?*
- *I needed direction and asked for a sign from God, and I got one!*
- *A deceased loved one visited me in a dream and brought comfort and peace.*

Have you ever had a spiritual encounter that taught you something?

Yes

No

Yes Respondents

Q1Y Which of the following have you experienced as a *spiritual* encounter in your life?
(Check all that apply).

- Nature/the natural world (plants, animals, birds, gardening, etc.)
- Meditation/Silence
- Pilgrimage
- Artistic or aesthetic experience
- Dream/premonition or vision
- Synchronistic experience (i.e., meaningful “coincidence”) or chance encounter
- Epiphany (sudden insight)
- A healing (physical or emotional) of self or loved one
- Sexuality/Romance

- Answered prayer, unexpected blessing or miracle
 - Childbirth, Adoption and/or experience related to children
 - A visitation from a deceased relative or other being
 - A divine intervention or supernatural experience (e.g., angel encounter, experience with a saint)
 - Physical activity such as walking, sports, or yoga
 - Near death experience or 'close call'
 - Engaged in an immersive activity, project, or hobby (e.g., often described as "FLOW" state)
 - Other (17) _____
-

Q2Y Please take a moment to recall **ONE** example of *learning* through spiritual encounter you have experienced, ideally the most impactful or most meaningful for you. Please note that the story you choose may include more than one of the above. When did this encounter occur?

- Within the last two years
 - Within 3-5 Years
 - 6-10 years ago
 - More than 10 years ago
-

Q3Y To what extent did this encounter (including any learning that took place) surprise you?

	1	2	3	4	5
Please rate (1 = lowest)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q4Y How emotionally intense was this encounter for you?

	1	2	3	4	5
Please rate (1 = lowest)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q5Y What was the nature of the *learning* that took place as a result of this specific spiritual encounter? (Check all that apply).

- Changed personal beliefs
- Reaffirmed personal beliefs
- Received an answer/guidance to a problem or situation (e.g., a warning, advice, the solution to a math problem)
- Brought increased reassurance/peace/comfort
- Increased sense of wonder/awe/curiosity about the world
- Sparked a new creative idea or innovation (e.g., artistic project, business idea, etc.)
- Prompted action on an issue (i.e., related to personal life or social justice)

-
- Learned more about myself

- Learned more about another
- Brought peace or resolution to a relationship
- Made me more attentive/alert
- Made me more compassionate
- Deepened spiritual understandings
- Other (please specify) _____

Q6Y Do you feel that any of the following factors played a role in your spiritual encounter?
Check any that apply.

- Drugs (i.e. medication, psychedelics, etc.) or alcohol
 - Hallucination
 - Stress/Trauma
 - Medical Issue (including mental health)
 - Fatigue
 - Other _____
 - None of these apply to my encounter.
-

Q7Y How often do these types of encounters happen to you?

- Extremely Often
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Infrequently/Rarely
-

Q8Y What elements do you believe play a role in your spirituality? Check all that apply.

- Spirituality involves a faith practice/religion
 - Spirituality emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things
 - Spirituality involves a sense of mystery
 - Spirituality helps make meaning
 - Spirituality is always present with me in the work or school environment (even if I don't publicly acknowledge it)
 - Spirituality helps me feel more authentic
 - Spirituality involves symbolism, art, ritual or culture
 - Spiritual experiences often happen by surprise
 - None of the above
-

Q9Y Do you feel your spirituality been affected/impacted by Covid 19?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Might or might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not

Q10Y Typically, how comfortable do you feel sharing your spiritual encounters with others? Your comfort might be impacted by factors such as privacy, fear of ridicule, sense of sacredness, feelings of uncertainty or frequency of the encounters, etc.) Feel free to offer a reason in the text box.

- Comfortable
 - Slightly comfortable
 - Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
 - Slightly uncomfortable
 - Uncomfortable
-

Q11Y In the text box below, please provide a brief description of the spiritual encounter you used as an example in this survey, and the learning that took place as a result. Feel free to comment on any similar experiences you've had if you wish (optional).

Q12Y Thank you for participating in the questionnaire. Would you be willing to participate in an online interview? If you select yes, you will be redirected to a page where you can submit your

email address. Please select your answer and hit the arrow at the bottom of the page to submit your survey.

- Yes, I am willing to be contacted for a follow up interview and Phase 2 of the study.
- No, I do not wish to be contacted for a follow up interview and Phase 2 of the study.

Q1E Thank you for expressing interest in being interviewed for Phase 2 of the study. Please include your first name (feel free to use a pseudonym if you wish) and email address. Please note that not all participants who volunteer will be contacted-- however we thank you for the time you've taken already to contribute to this research.

No Respondents

Q1N I selected NO for this answer because...
Please choose the best fit.

- I don't believe in the spiritual or have a spiritual practice;
 - I have a spiritual practice but have not had an encounter of this nature;
 - I've had at least one spiritual encounter, but am unsure if learning has taken place;
 - I have had spiritual encounters but I believe they were drug induced and/or a result of mental illness, hallucination, etc.).
 - Other _____
-

Q2N While you, personally, have not reported an experience of this nature, do you believe that people can learn from spiritual encounters?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Appendix E: Sample Interview Guide

Interview Guide: Learning Through Spiritual Encounter

Principal Investigator: Barbara Lorraine Laing

Length: max. 90 mins.

Date/Time:

Participant Pseudonym:

Interview 1: (Semi-Structured)

Introduction (Sample Script):

Thank you for meeting with me! I'm looking very forward to learning more about your spiritual encounter, and chatting about some of the information you provided in the online questionnaire in greater depth. Before we begin, I'd like to remind you that I'll be recording our conversation for purposes of transcription, analysis, and to help me write the story after our discussion. Please remember that you're under no obligation to answer every question, so if you feel uncomfortable, want to pass, stop the discussion, or need a break, please let me know. Sometimes topics of this nature can bring up emotion, so if you find yourself wanting any additional support after the interview, I do have information regarding local counselling services. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Sample Interview Questions/Probes

1. How did you first find out about the study?
2. Why did you agree to participate in this study?
3. How was the experience of completing the online questionnaire for you?
4. Here is a copy of the questions I originally asked in the questionnaire, and your responses. Let's review your responses together. Which question did you find the easiest/most challenging, and why?
5. Have any of your responses changed since completing the online questionnaire?
6. I'd love to hear a little bit more about your own definition of spirituality. What comes to mind for you when you use the term?
7. Have you always identified with this definition of spirituality? How has it evolved over the course of your life?
8. In general, how do you find your spirituality impacts your daily life? Has that always been the case?
9. I'd like to ask you to tell me a little more about the circumstances surrounding the particular spiritual encounter you described in the questionnaire. First, I'd like you to please tell me the story in your own words, and then I will ask you some specific questions for further clarification.
 - Generally speaking, how would you describe your life circumstances at that time? (i.e., age, employment/school, living arrangements?)
 - Can you please describe any relevant events leading up to the encounter?
 - Describe your spirituality at that time. Did you feel supported in your spiritual beliefs by friends/family/community?
 - When did the event occur?

- Where did it occur?
 - Was there anyone else present at the time of the encounter?
 - How did you feel in your body during the encounter?
 - What did you see, taste, touch, hear, smell, or sense?
 - To what degree were you surprised by this encounter?
 - What was the most surprising aspect of this encounter?
 - What was the most memorable aspect of this encounter?
 - What personal meaning did it have for you?
 - What, if any, learning took place from the encounter?
 - How did you know you had learned something?
 - What (if any) were the internal changes (beliefs, spirituality, personality, emotional) as a result of this encounter?
 - What (if any) were the external changes (problems solved, actions, creations, products, relationships) that happened as a result?
 - Have you shared your experience with anyone? If so, how did they respond?
 - Besides contributing to this project, have you ever written or created anything as a result of the project, like a journal, painting, song or poem?
 - How did you come to identify and label this as a spiritual encounter?
 - Do you believe that any other significant factors played a part in this encounter that we haven't discussed yet (e.g., drugs, mental health, etc.)
 - Is there anything else you would like me to know about this experience?
 - If you had to offer me three words to describe/summarize this encounter what would they be?
10. Please describe any other encounters you have had of a similar nature. If there are others, why did you select this particular encounter to focus on?
11. What does learning mean to you as an adult?
12. Do you feel that this type of learning took place as a result of your encounter?
13. When do you feel most alive?
14. Do you participate in any spiritual practices or traditions?
15. Where do you turn for spiritual fulfillment?
16. Please take a look at this 7-point definition of spirituality. Which, if any, of these key points resonate the most with you? Which do not? Do you think anything is missing from this definition?
17. Thank you for the information you've given me and for sharing about your story and life. As you know, I'll be creating a piece of text based on your story. Is there anything you feel should be emphasized? Is there anything you would not like me to include?

Sample Closing Script:

Thank you for your time. At our next meeting, I'll be presenting you with a draft of the story I've created based on the information you've given me. You'll have the opportunity to read it, share your thoughts, and add to it if you wish. If you think of anything else you'd like to share with me about your experience, we can chat about it at our next session, or please feel free to email me at 3bl6@queensu.ca. Thank you for your time.

Interview 2: Narrative Response

Introduction (Sample Script)

Thank you for meeting with me again. This interview will also be audio recorded for transcription purposes. As you know, I've taken some time to review to our first interview, think about your responses, and create a draft of the narrative based upon your story, which you have received via email. At this stage in the process, I'd like to hear your thoughts. I'll be asking you about your response to the story, and also asking some questions about your experience in this study and any learning that has taken place. It will be helpful if you have a copy of the draft handy during our conversation. Please remember that there are no right or wrong responses, and I'd like you to try to be as honest as possible. We're working together to co-create these stories and I'd like you to be happy with it, and to please let me know of anything you'd like to develop or change in the text. As in the first interview, you're welcome to take a break at any point, and can pass on any question. Any questions before we get started? Ok let's begin.

1. How did you feel the first interview went from your point of view?
2. Have you had any thoughts or reflections since our last interview?
3. What were your first impressions reading your narrative?
4. Which words or ideas/popped out to you?
5. Did you have any strong reactions to any of the words or ideas in the text?
6. Were you surprised by anything that I included or excluded? To what extent do you think it accurately captures the essence of your spiritual encounter?
7. OK, now I will clarify other details we may not have had the opportunity to discuss to help with our edits:
 - To what extent do you feel that it captures the emotional aspects of your encounter?
 - To what extent do you feel it captures the key factual elements of your story?
 - To what extent were the senses of sight, taste, sound, smell, touch explored effectively?
 - Was there any symbolism or imagery that could have been added or removed?
 - To what extent do you feel this story captures the learning that took place? Was it accurate?
 - Is there anything you think I am missing?
 - Is there anything you would not like me to include in the final draft?
8. In real-life, to what extent does your encounter have clear beginning, middle and an end? Do you believe that you are still learning from your encounter?
9. What (if anything) would you like others to learn from reading your story?
10. Who (if anyone) would you like to read your story?

11. How have you found this process so far? Have you learned anything from sharing your encounter with me? How likely would you be to participate in something similar in the future?
12. How (if at all) has this process shaped your understanding of how adults learn through spiritual encounter?

Sample Closing Script:

Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and feedback with me today. I will reflect on our interview and send you the final draft of the edited narrative when it's complete. At that time, you'll have two weeks to let me know if there's anything you would like me to change. Once we have the final draft, they will be included in my dissertation with the others, and will help shape a book about how adults learn through spiritual encounter. I appreciate your contribution.

Appendix F: Sample Debriefing Letter



March 2021

Re: Learning Through Spiritual Encounters Debriefing Letter

Dear Participant,

I am writing to thank you for your recent interview with me for this study. The information you have shared with me will help contribute to research which helps educators better understand the impact of spiritual encounters on learning in adults.

As indicated in the Letter of Information/Consent, we will now be working together to create a narrative account of your experience, and I will be contacting you for a second interview/check in.

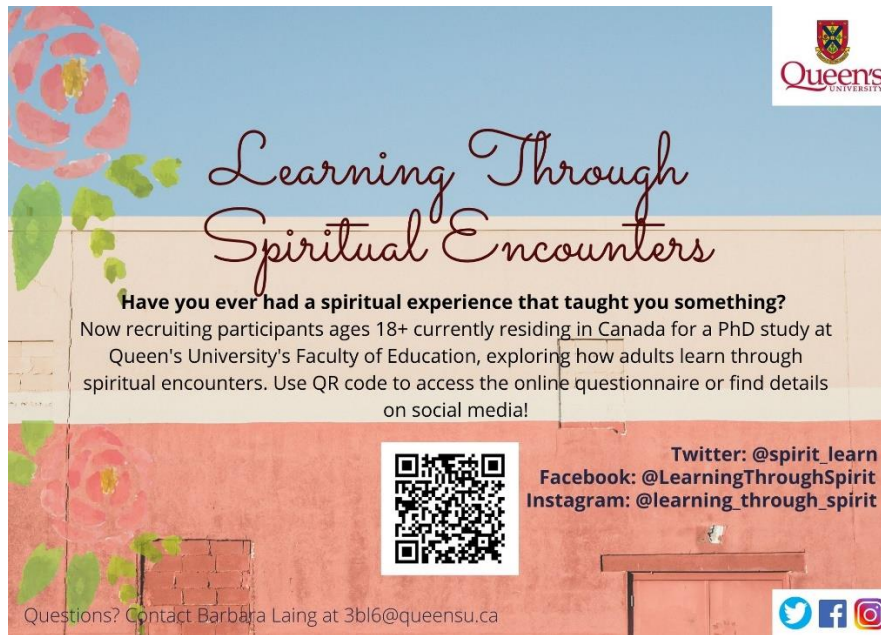
Just a reminder that if at any point, you wish to skip a question in a next session or need to withdraw from the study, you are free to do so at anytime up until March 31, 2021.


I would also like to provide you with some general contact details for counselling services in your area below to consider at your discretion. Should anything we discuss in either interview be difficult or sensitive, and you feel you need additional support, please call Crisis Services Canada at 1-833-456-4566

Sincerely,

Barbara Laing


Appendix G: Sample Recruitment Ads






Learning Through Spiritual Encounters

Have you ever had a spiritual experience that taught you something?
Now recruiting participants ages 18+ currently residing in Canada for a PhD study at Queen's University's Faculty of Education, exploring how adults learn through spiritual encounters. Use QR code to access the online questionnaire or find details on social media!



Twitter: @spirit_learn
Facebook: @LearningThroughSpirit
Instagram: @learning_through_spirit

Questions? Contact Barbara Laing at 3bl6@queensu.ca







Have you ever had a spiritual experience that taught you something?

Learning Through Spiritual Encounters

This November we're still welcoming adults ages 18+ residing in Canada to share their stories for a PhD study at the Faculty of Education exploring how adults learn through (self-identified) spiritual encounters. Consider completing the brief online questionnaire to contribute to the research today!
Scan the QR code to the anonymous survey, and follow us on social media!



Twitter: @spirit_learn
Facebook: @LearningThroughSpirit
Instagram: @learning_through_spirit

Questions? E-mail Barbara Laing at 3bl6@queensu.ca



Appendix H: A Priori Codebook

Code	Description/Note	Example
Term/Phrase:	Involves/Relates to:	From participant:
aesthetic experience	art/beauty	<i>To see this beauty that was there...</i>
angels	angelic encounter/experience	<i>I was visited by an angel...</i>
answered prayer/blessing	responses to prayer	<i>Through the power of prayer...</i>
art	visual art; art making	<i>It was art-making that led me...</i>
attentiveness	directed attention	<i>Their spiritual needs also needed attention</i>
awe	a sense of profound wonder	<i>I have a more profound sense of awe...</i>
bodily response	physical response	<i>My body started moving on its own...</i>
challenges	difficulties/problems	<i>I had some cognitive challenges...</i>
childhood	early spiritual life	<i>I would say my bedtime prayers...</i>
children and parenthood	parent/child relationship	<i>Knew I needed to have kids...</i>
clairaudient experiences	hearing a voice/presence	<i>The clear voice of God....</i>
comfort	relaxation, comfort, sharing	<i>Immediate relief and comfort followed...</i>
compassion	empathy, kindness, etc.	<i>I was trying to find compassion for myself...</i>
connection	interconnectedness, energetic	<i>My first connection with a horse...</i>
COVID-19	pandemic-related	<i>During the pandemic, I have been...</i>
cultural	rituals, celebration, rites, etc.	<i>I attended an Indigenous sweat lodge...</i>
curiosity	wonder, questions	<i>“What is it?” I said curiously...</i>
current religious/spiritual	participants current practices	<i>I am living in gratitude many times a week... led me to a deeper understanding...</i>
deepened	richer understandings	
dreams	visitations, information	<i>I had a dream one morning and heard...</i>
emotional intensity	strong feelings	<i>Strong emotional and visual intensity...</i>
energy	interconnectedness/vibration	<i>The energy in the room was like....</i>
epiphany	sudden insight	<i>The epiphany was when I realized...</i>
evolution of identity	over time	<i>That made me change forever...</i>
faith /religious practice	traditions, activities	<i>Based on a variety of ancient pagan faiths...</i>
FLOW state	immersion/meditative state	<i>This is how I judge that I am in the flow...</i>
frequency	how often to these occur?	<i>I have frequent spiritual encounters when...</i>
guidance	providing information	<i>Asked my guides for any guidance...</i>
healing	physical/spiritual/emotional	<i>With the intention of healing some anxiety</i>
impact	effect/influence of spirituality	<i>Seems to have impacted who I am now...</i>
ineffability	difficulty speaking/describing	<i>Set me on a journey to find words...</i>
interconnectedness	togetherness, connection	<i>I am connected to this great web...</i>

kindness	attitudes, acts, gestures	<i>The kindness of Kate, a beautiful...</i>
language	metaphor, writing, oral	<i>Without language but full of wonder...</i>
learned more about other	gained outward insight	<i>The nurse asked who Mary was...</i>
learned more about self	gained inward insight	<i>Transformations in others and myself...</i>
learning	explicit/implicit	<i>Travelling and learning about different...</i>
meditation	practices, retreats, etc.	<i>I learned that meditation is...</i>
memory	past events, short/long term	<i>That are now etched in my memory...</i>
mentor	guide	<i>To act as an Elder....</i>
mystery	unknown, unanswered	<i>The mystery resides in the space between</i>
nature	the natural world	<i>Walking in nature...</i>
Near Death Experience	close brush with death	<i>I had a horrific car crash...</i>
out of body experience	body/spirit separation	<i>Best I can describe it...partial out of body...</i>
paradox	absurd/contradictory	<i>Offers space for holding the contradictions</i>
participation	involve/service/volunteer	<i>Only way to witness it...via participation...</i>
peace	contentment, calm	<i>There was a great peace and a letting go...</i>
personal beliefs	values, priorities	<i>If I was more open about my beliefs...</i>
pilgrimage	spiritual, in nature	<i>She had promised her guru she'd make the pilgrimage...</i>
premonitions	pre-cognition	<i>I had a vision...</i>
professional change	related to career or vocation	<i>Led to the decision to retire...</i>
prompted action	took a step, acted, etc.	<i>Vocation to the priesthood...</i>
reaffirmed beliefs	confirmed a prior idea	<i>I went there and it was true....</i>
relationship	connection to beings/things	<i>I had been in turmoil about my relationship</i>
relationship influences	e.g., friends, family	<i>Changed...the lives of everyone around me</i>
response to spiritual	reactions	<i>Nobody's going to burn me at the stake...</i>
ritual	habits, practices	<i>This included a men's ritual...</i>
school	related to education	<i>Back when I was in high school...</i>
sense of purpose	conviction, the "why"	<i>I am here because God wants me here</i>
sensory elements	sound, touch, sight, etc.	<i>Blue spaghetti strap dress...</i>
significant life events	marked moments	<i>I was raped....</i>
silence	quiet, retreat	<i>There is this profoundness to the silence</i>
social issue	e.g., social justice issue	<i>It's what undergirds my activism...</i>
sparked creative idea/ innovation	new invention, project, etc.	<i>I am a lot more creative as a result.</i>
spiritual Identity	perception of own spirituality	<i>I've become deeply spiritual...</i>
surprise	shock, unexpected, coherence	<i>This surprised me...</i>
symbolism	representation/meaning	<i>The dream was heavily symbolic.</i>

synchronicity	“meaningful coincidence”	<i>At just the time my father died...</i>
therapy	related to counselling	<i>Led to a lot of work in therapy...</i>
time	boundaries, perception, etc.	<i>Everything happened very fast...</i>
visitation from deceased	e.g., in a dream, vision, etc.	<i>Dad looked up... said ‘Get on with your life’...</i>
willingness	choice, decision, “yes”	<i>My willingness was the main ingredient...</i>
wonder	astonishment, curiosity, etc.	<i>Something in nature makes me stop and WONDER...</i>
