

Becoming, Being and Belonging to the Womanhood:  
A Qualitative Inquiry with Voluntary Childfree Women

by

Lisa Michelle Mortimore

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1993

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SUPERVISOR: Dr. Anne Marshall

### ABSTRACT

Dominant discourses of womanhood and femininity equate woman and mother synonymously, implying that motherhood is a woman's destiny. Childfree women need to create identities divergent of these dominant discourses. Traditional and some feminist psychological theories of women's identity development are based on women's biology and their capacity to reproduce, either implicitly or explicitly. Women who choose to be childfree fall outside of these theoretical models and illuminate the necessity to revise or expand our theoretical understanding of women's identity development.

In this qualitative inquiry, six voluntary childfree women were interviewed about their experience of being and becoming women. They shared their experiences of self discovery, living authentically, creating identities, and how being childfree impacts their sense of belonging to the womanhood.

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## Foreword

As I come to the end of this leg of my journey I reflect upon the complexity and philosophical quagmire I find myself if not working in, working around. Issues of context regarding the age cohort; my use of the concept of the womanhood which skirts around my perceived baggage of the concept of the sisterhood; the question as to whether choosing to be childfree is a choice or a process; and the long standing philosophical question of nature versus nurture lurk on the sidelines. I hope to briefly speak to these, not to answer them for the reader but to offer some thoughts so as they don't haunt the work.

I recall how it all began, how I ended up here...in this "sticky situation". I go back to June 2002, I'm at the International Human Science Research Conference in Victoria and Mary Gergen is one of the keynote speakers. In her keynote address, she tells us that when women turn thirty three they become invisible in the media – too old to be young yet not old enough to be seen as mothers. And I thought...‘what kind of a culture thinks that 33 is too old?’. I was thirty two at the time and I began to wonder, how can I be too old...and then, what happens if I don't want to become a mother – is there not a place for me as a childfree woman?’ This small piece of information was given to me at the ‘right time’...it propelled me into the unknown – about myself, about who I am, and about the cultural discourses of ‘woman’. And so this journey began, deep in the unknown and guided by an inner sense that I was unable to articulate.

It is important for me to speak to the context that my work is situated in. The study is located in a certain time and place. The women in the study were born between 1969 and 1975 and grew up in Canada. This is relevant in that they have shared a

common global context and Canadian social landscape throughout their lives. I recognise that other women, both within and outside of this age cohort, may have different experiences. It is significant that I am researching with women of this cohort at this particular time as they are in the first part of their thirties and I believe that at this time in history, women of this age face additional social pressure to become mothers. Often women of this age cohort find themselves in a different place than women of previous cohorts. These changes around marriage, career, and children are impacted by: an ever changing economic landscape; increased access to and the necessity of higher education; increased access to birth control; shifting social norms of sexuality and living arrangements; and an increased interest and necessity of career life, to name a few. It is also significant in that there is little or nothing written on voluntary childfree women of this age group.

Women in this age cohort have been fortunate to enjoy the gains of the women's movements, particularly those won by the second wave of feminism. The women's movement of the 1970s and 80s, like all political movements, was plagued with divisions and ideological differences which continue to exist today. This age group did not have the 'lived experience' of the second wave of feminism as we were children at the time. This is significant in that we enjoy the benefits gained by the women who fought before us but we come in with a different perspective.

It is a different time in the women's movement, one laden with its own ideological divisions but without the personal experience only the history of the second wave of feminism. This provides the context from which I chose to use the concept of the womanhood. Again, I am struck by the difficulty in articulating the complexity and

enormity of the concept of the womanhood and how the womanhood means different things to different people at different times. In using the term the womanhood to describe this concept of a collective consciousness of women, I feel that the concept of the sisterhood watches from the wings. I believe the sisterhood carries with it the flavor of the politics of the second wave of feminisms of the 1970s and 80s which is, like the concept of feminism or being political, alienating for some women. I understand the concept of the sisterhood and the concept of the womanhood to be similar yet different in that the womanhood is not specifically political in orientation nor does it carry the connotations of being political. I have deliberately chosen to use the womanhood in the hopes of avoiding what I perceive as potential hazard due to the political subtext of the sisterhood. I bring to mind 'womanist thought' and the term 'womanist' rather than 'feminist' used by some black American scholars. My use of the concept of womanhood rather than sisterhood is similar to the relationship between womanist and feminist in that it rearticulates "a consciousness that already exists" (Banks-Wallace, 2000, p. 36). The womanhood is a concept that I have not found clearly articulated in the literature myself but one that I know through my experience of being a woman and being in connection with women.

And I come the question about choice - is choosing to be childfree a choice or a process? I don't believe that they are necessarily discreet rather I believe that there is a relationship between them. First of all, I believe that reproductive choice lies on a continuum. Individuals' reproductive choice can be limited or expanded by: the social context in which they live and grow up; their access to healthcare; their financial position; their sexual and gender orientation; their intimate relationship status; and their

affiliations with religious communities. Reproductive choice creates a process that one goes through in coming to make a decision about remaining childfree or becoming a mother. Coming to know that one will remain childfree is a process; at some point in which the process necessitates an ultimate choice. This is not to say that that 'choice' is never re-visited by which one delves into the process once again. Even if one never actually definitively decides one way or another, one has exercised a choice in not choosing. Making a choice, whether it is mundane or life influencing, becomes the impetus that creates a process; this process exists to support one in coming to a choice.

Finally, I want to comment on the nature versus nurture debate. I have no illusions of this debate being resolved in the near future for how can anyone know for certain. Further, I have no illusions of pleasing both 'camps' or shifting their beliefs; I put my thoughts down only to increase the clarity of my work that can appear to, and perhaps does, have contradictions within it.

The very nature of my research question located itself in the nature, nurture debate; on one hand I put forth that a woman's biology should not dictate her destiny and on the other hand I draw essences from women's experiences and believe that there are unique and innate essences of a woman. In calling for a dismantling of the dominant discourse that links woman to mother(hood) I explicitly state that a woman's biology should not predestine her life. However, I write about essential qualities that women share because they are women; some of these essential qualities are tied to common experiences of a biological nature such as menstruation and the development of physical female characteristics. One may see this as a flawed conceptualization and a contradiction however, I believe that we can hold both.

I believe that humans have an innate way of being and beyond that, men and women have innate ways of being connected to their gender and separate from the experiences of culture. Which leads me here, into the middle of the great debate, not in the nurture or nature camp, but rather straddling them saying, why can't we hold both? Why can't women have essential qualities that are biological that shape who they are and how they are and still have the liberty to make choices about their biology? I believe that there is something intangible in each gender that is different and is far beyond this inquiry. These innate ways of being transcend our understanding of psychology and biology and I believe that the answers for each of us lies in the realm of our spiritual understanding.

And so I close, knowing that these questions will serve to further my growth and inform my future research. I pause, remembering that life is a process of moving between the known and the unknown and that very little is black and white, that life is a complexity of contradictions and that we have the capacity to hold both, to be both. I know that I don't have the answers to these questions now and perhaps never will and it is here I recognise that have become more comfortable in the unknown, living with contradictions within and outside of me.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview of Topic

A woman's identity is the essence or fundamental nature of who she is, of how she is, of how she presents herself and lives in the world. Who she is shapes her interactions, her experiences, and the meanings she makes in her life. Women whose lifestyles and identities are unorthodox face varying experiences: the benefit of being atypical can be invaluable and inspiring, yet the unconventional life has a cost (Safer, 1996). Women who choose nonconformist lifestyles must create an identity and future for themselves and deal with the fallout or negative social discourses of those atypical choices (Enns, 1991; Safer, 1996). A personal knowing of the self, a connection to one's authentic self, guides women in the creation of their identity and destiny.

Women who choose to be childfree threaten the discourse or dominant worldview that motherhood is a woman's destiny; childlessness can be viewed as an act of "political and ideological resistance" (Byrne, 2003, p. 459). They shatter the common assumption that motherhood will naturally be a primary focus of women's lives (Safer, 1996; Wickes, 1991) and challenge the convention of motherhood (Ireland, 1993). In doing so, they jeopardise their sense of femininity for "femininity and maternity have been entwined since the Garden of Eden" (Lisle, 1999, p. 170) and women's femininity is naturally expressed through motherhood (Campbell, 1985). Historically and traditionally women's social roles and the constructions of femininity have been "contextualised around the practices and symbolism surrounding motherhood" (Gillespie, 2000, p. 223). Women who decline motherhood risk their sense of belonging to or identification with womanhood, as woman and mother are synonymous in western culture: "motherhood and female personal identity are once again equated" (Ireland,

1993, p. 13). Childfree women will “always be fundamentally different from most other women” (Safer, 1996, p. 143). In creating a meaningful life and feminine identity, albeit atypical, voluntary childfree women need to “experience internal affirmation” (Ireland, 1993, p. 71) as they “carve out a sense of female identity which flies in the face of cultural expectations” (Wickes, 1991, p. 1). The experience of being childfree is complex and varied (Letherby, 2002): childfree women “step into an unknown space and begin to identify in new, different, and personal terms” (Ireland, 1993, p. 4). Some childfree women experience uncertainty and internal struggle in claiming their connection to being a woman, femininity and in belonging to the womanhood.

Despite the increasing presence of voluntary childfree women in the affluent Western world (Gillespie, 2003) and the feminist movement over the past four decades, there continues to be stigma and negative sentiment toward voluntary childfree women. Childfree women continue to be on the fringe of our culture (Ainsworth, 1995; May, 1995) and our psychological theories (Ainsworth, 1995). Ideologies of motherhood have become the truth and the facts of popular discourses and everyday understandings of women (Nicholson, 1993; Gillespie, 2000).

That the majority of the educated public, which also produces and consumes the products of mass media, learns so little about women’s development and within such narrow theoretical range is of consequence, especially to women, who must build their prospectus of adult life in large part from this knowledge base.

Gergen, 1990, p. 474

It is difficult to ascertain or detail the impact of these public ideologies of private lives of women and their social and self identities (Byrne, 2003).

Historical psychological views of adult female development, namely those of Freud and Erikson, testify that motherhood is an essential stage of full mature female adult development. Generations later, there continues to be an “implicit assumption that motherhood is intrinsic to

adult female identity” (Ireland, 1993, p. 1). Gergen (1990) articulates that the lack of flexibility in the theories of women’s adult development have obstructed the inclusion of differing roles, identities, and life experiences of women. This lack of diversity establishes and perpetuates socially and culturally prescribed roles for women by which motherhood is “a woman’s *raison d’être*. It is mandatory” (Russo, 1976, p. 144). Women who resist motherhood challenge the general assumptions put forth by these developmental theories (Morell, 1993).

Some women “silence their complaints and surrender their identities, consequently defining themselves and their relations with others in terms of the dominant discourse(s)” (Katila & Merlianen, 2002, p. 339) with a lack of awareness of the hegemonic understandings of femininity and womanhood. In contrast, some childfree women stand against socially constructed gender roles and “speak for the power to do more than acquiesce to sanctioned societal expectations” (Ainsworth, 1995, p. 12). As a result, women who choose to be childfree may find themselves struggling for acceptance due to their choices. This inquiry seeks to hear voluntary childfree women’s sense of belonging to the womanhood and explore how these women construct their identities as women and what their understanding of being and becoming a woman is when “there is no culturally sanctioned role, rite of passage, or respectful status afforded to the childless woman in our society” (Wickes, 1991, p. 7). Further, this inquiry seeks to explore women’s authentic knowing of themselves and how this knowing relates to their identity and translates into how they live in the world.

*Journal Entry – May 2001*

*My inquiry emerged as a creative endeavour was birthed from the essence of who I am. I reflect on a piece of my writing – a stream of consciousness. And from that piece of writing I began the quest for my research question – or questions. And I wonder, was it then that I began*

*the search for my identity? An understanding of how I understand who I am. An ability to articulate it? For I am as the researcher an 'insider'. Months later, I sit, old journaling exercises strewn about, and I see where that piece of writing has taken me – personally and in my academic inquiries. And for me they are so closely tied – are they one in the same – the personal is political – is it also academic – or is it that academia is personal? I have many more questions and I realise that questions are what propel us forward – in a quest for knowledge, a quest for experiences, a quest for life, we seek, we take action, we are fluid.*

I see that where I am now is in some ways where I began, unable to articulate what it was at that point. There was a gestation period before the question fully developed and formed – before it was birthed. Before it emerged as a part of me – of who I am, of what I seek to understand. Each journaling exercise, like an ultrasound, tracks the development of my creation. And it is interesting, these references to childbirth when the site of my inquiry is childlessness or unchilded women. My inquiry, a creative endeavour, seeks to hear the voices of women and capture their sense of the process of constructing an identity as women. What is their experience of becoming and being women and belonging to the womanhood? How does the authentic knowing of oneself shape this experience and understanding? And this is what I seek to understand within – how is it that I know that I am a 'woman'? How is it that I feel like I am a woman? When did it happen – or is that transition from girl to youth to woman still happening? What was my rite of passage? If there is no rite of passage, is it just an accumulation of experiences, of events, that propel one into adult status? Is adult status different from woman status? Is it purely age or time that shifts you – that has shifted me? If so, then what is the age? So my questions never cease – they drop deeper – emerging from a place closer to my core – resonating with the essence of who I am. And, that is what I hope to capture – the essence of

childfree women's stories, understanding, meanings of becoming and being women and belonging to the womanhood.

In recognising my own struggle and isolation in understanding and making sense of what it is to be a childfree woman I began dialoguing and connecting with women of various versions of what it is to be a woman. From here I recognised that there was a need for further understanding, articulation and sharing of not only women's experiences of choosing alternative lifestyles but more importantly of how those choices, hence voluntary childlessness, have shaped one's experience in becoming, being and belonging to the womanhood. The literature further provides support and encouragement for the direction of this inquiry. Over the past 30 years there has been a slow evolution of literature about childfree women; this, combined with an increasing number of women who are not choosing to be mothers, indicates a need for further inquiries on childfree women. (Ireland, 1993).

Currently society lacks a widely used term for voluntary childless women which, given the politics of language, indicates "that this identity is not acceptable and/or not yet defined" (Ainsworth, 1995, p. 17). The language used to define women refers to "mothers or children and defines these childfree women as lacking or rejecting their culturally assigned role and identity" (Ainsworth, 1995, p. 17). The options are childless, intentionally childless, voluntarily childless, unchilded, childless by choice, non-mother, not-mothers, or childfree. The term childfree has been reclaimed by women that hold the perspective that being childfree can be fulfilling (Bartlett, 1996). Even though the term childfree defines one by what one is not, I have chosen to use it for the purpose of this study. In this thesis, the term "childfree" refers to women who have chosen to be childfree.

## Research Focus

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore childfree women's experiences, understanding and meanings, and the essence of how they construct their identities as women. This inquiry seeks to explore and describe how childfree women experience becoming a woman, being a woman, and their sense of belonging to the 'womanhood': women's authentic experience of being women. More specifically, given the cultural context where the dominant discourse of woman links women to mother(hood), this inquiry asks, how is it that voluntary childfree women create their sense of self or identity? Given that question, I have asked women, what is your experience of becoming and being a woman and belonging to the womanhood.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to gain greater understanding and clarity of the subjective experience of women who choose a lifestyle atypical of most women, that is, they choose to be childfree, and provide an opportunity for these women's voices to be heard. The objectives of this inquiry are: to add to the literature on childfree women; to gain insight and understanding of the essential elements of childfree women's experience in relation to the dominant discourse that links woman and mother and to capture those fundamental elements or essences of becoming and being women and belonging to the womanhood; and to begin to address the clinical implications for therapists working with women.

The context in which the literature review situates the reader is political in that it is a critical review of the process involved in defining women and femininity. It illuminates the dominant ideologies that women, more specifically childfree women, face and sets forth the historical and cultural context of what it is to be 'woman'. Through the process of choosing to be childfree and living childfree, I believe that women come to know what it is to be a woman distinct from the

dominant discourses. Further, I believe that these dominant discourses present childfree women as one dimensional and through the connection and resonance of the women's voices in the study, childfree women will become three dimensional for the reader.

### Definition of Terms

The following definitions are offered to identify my interpretation of the terminology used in this study for the reader:

- *Identity*: the understanding or objectification of self that one is emotionally attached to (Holland, 1997, p. 162).
- *Childfree*: individuals who consciously choose not to have a child, adopt a child, or act in a parenting role. This term encompasses those who voluntary or involuntary choose.
- *The Womanhood*: is used to describe a collective consciousness shared amongst women throughout the world. It is experienced as a connection which is created through common experiences, though not necessarily similar, such as the physical development and processes of being female and living as a female in patriarchal society. The womanhood is difficult to articulate as it is not tangible and differs from the sisterhood in that it is not specifically political in orientation.

### Parameters of the Inquiry

This inquiry was confined to heterosexual participants, between the ages of 29 and 35, who were childfree and stated their commitment to remaining childfree. Heterosexual women were chosen because the strong social pressure to become mothers (Morell, 1993). This implies not looking at women who are mothers, infertile, undecided, and foster or step parents. Participants were recruited from Victoria, British Columbia. Lesbian participants were not included as they face additional and different challenges that need to be addressed in separate research; namely, that bearing children is socially discouraged (Morell, 1993), discourses engrained with homophobia and parenting, fertility issues, and the added unconventional experience of being gay are some examples of issues which necessitate separate research. This inquiry is also limited

to women's understandings of their experiences becoming and being a woman and belonging to the womanhood, in the context of being childfree. While one of the objectives of the research is to increase the visibility of childfree women, the findings of this study cannot be generalised for the "tendency to generalize may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 22). Nevertheless, some common experiences may be applied to understanding similar situations.

### Assumptions

I assume that in the process of the interview women's understanding or sense of their own femininity/womanhood identity, their sense of belonging, and their sense of becoming and being a woman will emerge and reveal to the "knower what she knows, possibly for the first time in her own words and from her own perspective" (Levesque-Lopman, 2000, p. 103). I assume that there are essences - essential or intrinsic elements - of experience and that through the process of interviewing I will be able to capture these essences. I further assume that there is a correlation between the essence of experience and authenticity: hence, when one articulates the essential elements of her experience she is connected to or expressing from her authentic self. I assume that the women participating in my study have free choice in being childfree and that reproductive choice is limited by dominant discourses which link woman and mother. I believe that women should be autonomous in making reproductive choices and in order to be autonomous the dominant discourses of femininity/womanhood which link woman to motherhood need to be dismantled. I further believe illustrations and articulation of divergent experiences of being a woman will expand the role of woman expressed through discourses.

## Summary

This inquiry was not undertaken as a critique of motherhood; rather, it used childlessness as the context in which to hear women's interpretations and understanding of their experience of constructing their identity as women, their sense of belonging to the womanhood and their sense of becoming and being a woman when they have chosen lifestyles alternative to societal expectations. It is the intention of this study to foster dialogue both internally and with others so as to educate and foster a culture that welcomes all paths and persons.

While this study looks at the experience of childfree women, it is not a rallying cry for women to choose childlessness. I seek to capture the essence of women's experience of being women who are not mothers and how this affects their sense of identity and experiences of being and becoming women and belonging to the womanhood . In no way is this inquiry in support of, or against, women choosing to be childfree.

This chapter has provided the general introduction to the topic of interest, including a descriptive section of how the inquiry emerged, a section addressing the use of language, a statement of the problem, and a description of the purpose of the study. In addition, definitions of terminology relevant to the inquiry were provided, as were the parameters of the inquiry, and an outline of the assumptions of the inquiry. The following chapter, Literature Review, outlines contextual and thematic areas I believe are imperative to one's understanding when researching childfree women and the essence of their experience in becoming and being a woman and belonging to the womanhood.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This chapter opens with a brief overview of the literature on childfree women. A historical background of childlessness in the twentieth century follows to provide a context for the study. The remainder of the chapter is broken into thematic sections in order to structure the literature in a format by which the integral components relevant to the inquiry are adequately represented. Following the overview, there is a summary of the current, applicable research, which is further followed by an overview of childlessness and the childfree woman, theories of identity development, a feminist view, theories of female identity development, authentic knowing, femininity/womanhood, motherhood and maternity, clinical implications, and finally, a chapter summary.

### Overview

While the phenomenon of women choosing not to be mothers is increasing, it is only recently gaining attention in the literature (Safer, 1996). Also deficient is research in this area of adult female development (Wickes, 1991); “they more than any human group, are missing from psychologists’ sights” (Gergen, 1990, p. 479). Specifically lacking are inquiries that focus on the unique way that childfree women find and express their identity (Wickes, 1991) and experience their own femininity (Lisle, 1999). This study of childfree women will add empirical knowledge of women’s subjective experiences of identity, becoming and being a woman, and belonging to the womanhood.

The second wave of feminism refuted traditional masculinist theories of women’s development and identity which held motherhood as a developmental stage essential for emotional maturity: “the traditional patriarchal ideology, which posited biologically rooted

essential differences between men and women, was discredited as a strategy for maintaining the subordination of women” (Morell, 1993, p. 301). However, feminist theories continued to view motherhood as an inherent part of female development, therefore there continues to be a lack of developmental literature on women’s identity construction that has not been marred by masculinist tendencies. Researchers inquiring into the lives and experiences of childfree women illuminate the flaw in theories of women’s development; as “only when the assumption that all girls must become mothers to fulfil female adulthood is challenged will a woman’s destiny truly be her own” (Ireland, 1996, p. 1).

### History of Childlessness

Historically childfree women were generally infertile or not married. There was little option for childfree women until urban industrialisation (Ireland, 1993). Roles such as spinsters, widows, nuns, and nannies traditionally

may have provided legitimacy for those who eschewed motherhood, (however), they were defined by loss, self-sacrifice, and/or the nurturing of others’ children. They failed to challenge, and even served to bolster, pronatalist cultural discourses that fused hegemonic femininity with motherhood.

Gillespie, 2003, p. 133

May (1995) writes that in 1936, childlessness was even more common than it is today and cites eugenic advocate Paul Popenoe who “wrote about the unhealthy ‘refusal’ to bear children and concluded that most cases were ‘motivated by individualism, competitive consumption economically, and an infantile, self indulgent, frequently neurotic attitude toward life’” (p. 194). After World War II, “pronatalism and procreation reached “mythic proportions” and the baby boom was born... intentional childlessness was so stigmatized...that it disappeared from view”

(Ainsworth, 1995, p. 5). During this time there was a strong sentiment that “motherhood was the true fulfilment of womanhood” (May, 1995, p. 187).

Following on the heels of the intense pronatalism of the post war baby boom, the rise of movements such as the counterculture movement, environmentalism, and the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, the childfree movement was born. The childfree movement “emerged in the wake of the baby boom because a growing number of young adults rebelled against the powerful postwar ideology of domesticity” (May, 1995, p. 184). The women’s movement responded to the “centrality of motherhood by championing all other alternatives” (Ireland, 1993, p. 6). During this time family, gender roles, and motherhood were redefined and childfree individuals gained some visibility; however, negative sentiments remained. The 1980s saw a revival of pronatalism which led into the 1990s which became “the decade of the child, baby, parent, pregnant woman, and ‘new’ aware and involved dad” (Ainsworth, 1995, p. 9).

Despite the pronatal “endemic in western society” (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000, p. 1) there is an increase in the number of childfree women (Ireland, 1993). Childlessness is a phenomenon in many developed countries. According to the United Nations, industrialised countries such as the United States, Ireland, Canada, Sweden, Norway, China, Denmark, Switzerland, Japan, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and France all have fertility rates below the population replacement level (Cain, 2002). Many statistics gathered by government officials for demographic trends do not directly query about childfree status; the ambiguity around the definitions of childfree and mother may further serve to confuse conclusions. In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that as high as 25% of the women born in 1973 will not have children (Gillespie, 2003, p. 122). Canadian statistics are hard to come by, though a recent study by the Canadian Social Trends claims, that 7% of women aged 20 to 34 don’t want children

(Stobert & Kemeny, 2003). In 1998 the National Center for Health Statistics reported that 16.5% of women in the United States had never given birth (Clausen, 2002). The U.S. Census Bureau June 2002 survey found that 26.7 million women between the ages of 15 and 44 were childfree, representing nearly 44% of the women in that age group, an increase of approximately 10% since 1990 (Women's Health Weekly, 2003). These statistics may serve to paint a general landscape of childfree prevalence in affluent Western societies even though the studies examine different aspects.

### Review of Relevant Research Studies

Veevers (1980) in her book, *Childless by Choice*, a seminal work in the area of childlessness, wove together essentially all of the material on childlessness to date in her exploration of childfree couples. Through in depth interviews of 156 childfree couples in their mid 30s, Veevers paved the way for others, though few to date, to confront and counter the opinion that being childfree was pathological and deviant. Just over a decade later Wickes (1991) in her dissertation carried out an inquiry that sought to understand how women feel about their lives within the context of being childfree, and asked the questions: how do these women define themselves; how do they sustain a sense of female identity; and how do they voice their experience? She discussed the importance of a "connection to an inner feminine source of wisdom" (Wickes, 1991, p. 166) for all women. In 1993, Ireland conducted in depth interviews with over 100 women: infertile, early articulators, and postponers. She created categories of *traditional*, *transitional*, and *transformative* to differentiate women by their reproductive attitudes. Ireland (1993) theorised that childfree women are "other"; they exist between men and women and thus destabilise the culturally prescribed roles of gender, thus revealing the un-lived potential of women. Ireland presented her study in a book called *Reconceiving Women*. Morell

(1993) interviewed 34 intentionally childless women “to paint a more contradictory picture of women’s development – one that allows for the wide variations in desires, talents, and orientations that actually exist among women” (p. 302). Her work challenged the fixed view of the “feminine” psychological perspective and her intent was to “fracture the ‘woman = mother’ equation” (Morell, 1993, p. 302). Ainsworth (1995) in her doctoral dissertation examined how childfree women of the baby boom cohort understand, construct, and experience the meaning of becoming and being childfree. Gillespie’s (2003) research “sought a fuller account of the meaning and significance of remaining childfree to the women themselves” and from her findings suggests that some women “experience a more radical rejection or push away from motherhood and its association with hegemonic notions of femininity” (p. 123). Essentially, she found that the women in her study displayed a fundamental shift from the discourse that binds woman to mother. With a steadily increasing body of literature that validates childfree women’s experiences and identities as ‘real women’, researchers “are finally beginning to ask who and what a woman might be if defined according to her inner sense of self instead of by the rules of patriarchy” (Hancock, 1990, p. 55).

### Childlessness and the Childfree Woman

The current socio-political climate emphasises ‘family values’ which “remove(s) the voluntary childlessness option from cultural discourse” (Park, 2002, p. 23). The prevalent descriptions of the childfree woman include popular negative stereotypes such as her being unnatural (Campbell, 1985; Safer, 1996); unfulfilled (Morell, 2000); selfish, cold, deficient in unconditional love, weird, withered, unnurturing (Safer, 1996); barren, unmarriageable (Ireland, 1993); abnormal, odd (Campbell, 1985); and with a tendency to pamper pets as surrogate children (Safer, 1996). These women may face questions not only about their lack of judgement

in choosing a childfree lifestyle but their femininity may be called into question (Ireland, 1993). Childfree women may also “experience a sense of marginalization” (Daniluk, 1999, p. 85) as they are the ‘other’ to mother (Letherby, 1999) or the ‘outsider within’. With the lack of a “culturally sanctioned role, rite of passage, or respectful passage afforded to the childless woman” (Wickes, 1991, p. 7) she must negotiate an atypical feminine identity. Connection, meaning, and care are typically found in women’s relationships and provide a sense of acceptance, connection and belonging. Relationships with family and friends are significant to women who choose not to be mothers and provide validation and affirmation of their identities (Lisle, 1999; Ireland, 1993).

Ireland (1993) referred to childfree women that have articulated a childfree lifestyle early in their childbearing years as transformative women; she is one of “a trail-blazer, creating a path through a thicket of meanings of what a woman ‘should be’ and yet often isn’t” (p. 70). In her extensive research she discovered that transformative women are committed to pursuing a destiny of their own and in doing so are giving birth to expanded notions of female identity (Ireland, 1993). The “lens of deficiency” that childfree women are viewed through (Morell, 2000) further distorts and limits the available identities offered to all women. However, the potential for fresh images of women are inspiring: “instead of living with the idea of an empty inner space, all women – especially childfree ones – can hold it as a symbol of internal fecundity, inner richness, and the possibility of renewable life whether we are sexual or celibate, with or without child” (Lisle, 1999, p. 180).

## Identity

Identity is a complex and fluid concept of how one relates to oneself, others and one's environment. More specifically, Byrne (2003) considers identity to have two aspects, a self and a social identity which are connected by one's sense of self. Essentially, one's self-identity

expresses individual values and preferences, specifying the uniqueness of the person, (while) social identity captures what we hold in common, what we share in terms of experiences with other people of the same sex, 'race', occupations, social positions or even stereotypes.

Fulcher and Scott, 2003 cited in Byrne 2003, p. 445

It is difficult to separate the social and self-identity as each aspect influences the other in a symbiotic relationship. Knowing this, the manner by which childfree women construct their sense of self, or self- concept, given the interplay between cultural discourses linking 'woman' to motherhood and self-identity is of particular interest.

## Theories of Identity Development

Absent from the commonly accepted theories of identity and adult development is the impact of context which in turn, limits the applicability to women (Petersen, 2000). Going back to the early theorists, Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, created a plethora of phallogocentric terms and references. The basis of his developmental theory is that females are the 'other' to male; hence, "woman does not have an identity of her own, but is defined as not-male, denoting a negative identity" (Ussher, 1991, p. 196). According to the psychoanalytic theory of development, the lack of a penis in women created trauma which inevitably created their desire to reproduce, as the infant was the replacement for the penis. Women who did not become mothers were depicted in a negative manner, as deficient, and deemed unwilling or incapable of fulfilling a feminine role (Ireland, 1993). Freud emphasised that in order for a woman to reach mature development she must "renounce masculine activity and accept her feminine nature,

which is governed by a principle of passivity”; her reward for accepting her femininity is realised when she gives birth to her babies (Gergen, 1990, p. 472).

Erikson (1968) defined women by their “inner spaces”, their wombs, and created a model of development based upon his observations and musings about the inner space. His theory was that a woman’s identity development was linked to her physical attractiveness and assumed that her identity would somehow be completed by her future husband and future children:

Young women often ask whether they can “have an identity” before they know whom they will marry and for whom they will make a home. Granted that something in the young woman’s identity must keep itself open for the peculiarities of the man to be joined and of the children to be brought up.  
Erikson, 1968, p. 283

He criticised classical psychoanalysis for its “infantile sexual theories”, and rejected the concept that females are plagued by the trauma of realising that they lack a penis. Rather than assume that women are defined by their lack of a male appendage, he defined women by their wombs, stating that “anatomy is destiny” (Erikson, 1968, p. 285). Erickson believed that the greatest and most important determinant of a woman’s identity was her “capacity to reproduce and mother” (Gergen, 1990, p. 473).

Erikson’s theory of identity development emerged from his own personal struggle to find and know himself (Hancock, 1989). His theoretical understanding of women’s development has been and continues to be controversial. Feminists have been writing and theorising on women’s identity and development for decades and have “attempted to correct inadequacies of mainstream theories and conceptualize women’s experiences in their own terms” (Enns, 1991, p. 209). One could generalise that a fundamental flaw of masculinist psychological theories of women’s development is the notion or the implicit assumption that males are the norm and that “anatomy is destiny” (Gergen, 1990, p. 473).

It all goes back, of course, to Adam and Eve – a story that shows, among other things, that if you make a woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble. In the life cycle, as in the Garden of Eden, the women has been the deviant.  
Gilligan, 1982, p. 6.

While feminists have put forth an abundance of criticism and alternate views of women's development, there continues to be a focus on woman as mother and a lack of attention to the role that childfree women play. Childfree women interfere with these theories of development and present a "less stable and more conflict ridden and contradictory view" (Morell, 1993, p. 302): "the woman who does not have motherhood as a positive adult female identity has been, and is, a complication in our theories of female development" (Ireland, 1993, p. 7). Instead of viewing childfree women, regardless of the reasons behind their childlessness, through a lens of deficiency, let us shift that lens and view our current cultural conceptions of womanhood as lacking (Ireland, 1993).

#### A Feminist View

The masculinist or singular view of adult development continues to be limiting and prescriptive in nature despite the significant advances of the women's movement; basically extrapolating women's developmental patterns from research on males. With the advances seen in the past four decades fuelled by the women's movement, the view of mother has significantly improved and the status has shifted to an acknowledgement of the blame, denigration, and low *status mothers have and continue to face*. To date, shifting the cultural discourses that devalue mothers' work has been one of the significant battles of feminism and has been instrumental in creating space in which the complex experience and institution of motherhood can be considered (Letherby, 1994). Some feminists "have long had an ambivalent relationship to motherhood, fraught with resentment over the social prescription that childrearing is women's 'natural'

vocation yet tinged with a keen awareness of the potential power that prescription confers” (Burkett, 2000, p. 150).

Unfortunately, there has been little activism around creating another equal way of being a woman; a childfree choice equal to motherhood, has yet to be embraced by feminism (Morell, 2000). Further, the growing research on childfree women has not been reflected in the current theories of female development (Wickes, 1991): “at the heart of these theories is the centrality of a woman’s role as mothering agent” (Gergen, 1990, p. 474). Morell (2000), indicates that reproductive diversity is an important political goal for feminists to work towards as patriarchy has a stake in keeping the roadway to childlessness invisible. Visibility offers a route to adult female identity, and would destabilise the necessity of motherhood, as “other-than-mothers” inherit the psychological task of redefinition. As increasing numbers of women remain childfree, either by choice or not, there is an urgent necessity to establish the validity of theoretical models of female development which do not assert that motherhood is necessary for all women in normative female development. An expanded view of female development that incorporates “aspects of nurturance and personal empowerment would result in a conceptualization of women as different equals of men” (Ireland, 1993, p. 7, 8) as well as a recognition of the diverse nature of women and what it is to be a woman.

### Theories of Female Identity Development

Theoretical models of female adult development are founded on the principle that men and women have different routes of development and exist in different cultural contexts. Earlier feminist writers, such as Gilligan (1982) and Chodorow (1974, 1978), asserted that the central difference between psychological theories of men’s and women’s identity development was that

women's development occurred through relation rather than separation. "Feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (Chodorow, 1974). These perspectives draw from psychoanalytic object-relations theory which emphasizes mother-daughter relationships and women's "relational abilities and desires" (Morell, 1993, p. 314). Embedded in these models is the implicit assumption that motherhood is part of healthy female adult development. Furthermore, these theories of relation judge childfree women's "desires for independence and self-expansion as 'male-centered' (and) cannot account for the impulses or orientations found among women who decided against motherhood" (Morell, 1993, p. 314). There has been no explicit address of female identity development for women who do not become mothers (Ireland, 1993). This lack of explicit address of non mothers' identity development serves to limit the breadth of acceptable difference and further support the oppressive discourses of femininity and womanhood for all women.

In sum, motherhood discourses can be seen to be drawn from, and enmeshed in powerful, hegemonic ideological doctrines. Experts and opinion formers constitute powerful elites who have been able to privilege their accounts of the natural inevitability of a desire for motherhood in women; of motherhood as women's principle social roles and crucially, the centrality of motherhood to understandings of feminine identity.

Gillespie, 2000, p. 225

Feminist writers have inadvertently alienated childfree women. It is necessary for new or revised theories of female adult development to emerge that explicitly speak to those women who are childfree, both with and without choice. In these new theoretical models of adult female development or women's self-definition, we must be cognisant in not presenting one model as the truth or assuming that there could be one truth for all women in all situations (Kaschak, 1988).

Hancock (1989) found in her research on women's identity development that it is circular rather than linear. Further, she found that contrary to Erickson's theory of identity being crystallised during adolescence,

women as adults reach back to girlhood to retrieve an original sense of self. Each women's identity – the identity each felt was authentic, real, and true to who and what she was – had been present, intact, in the earliest part of her life and had in the meantime been obscured.

Hancock, 1989, p. 20

Hancock's findings indicate that as girls mature they begin to layer upon themselves discourses of femininity which buries their authentic selves. This theory concurs with Westcott's interpretation of Horney's work which "shows how female personality comes to be lodged in an idealized feminine image rather than in the authentic identity a female possesses as a child" (Hancock, 1989, p. 201).

### Authentic Knowing

The knowing of the self, the essential core of 'who I am' that guides one in their everyday lived experience is authentic knowing. In this connection to the inner self, the core self, the Spirit, there is a personal knowing: "personal knowing contributes to a woman's identity through the refinement of her meaning system...(her) sense of discovering rather than creating meaning or direction for (herself) when (she) refer(s) to (her) new understanding as a revelation, discovery or recognition" (Keshet, 1997, p. 5). There is an intuitive element to this knowing, a deeper understanding of the self and the ways that one knows the self. Keshet (1997) writes about personal knowing, an intuitive experience or recognition of new ways to understand or know oneself where we find meaning rather than make meaning. Often, there are spiritual overtones to this knowing of the self.

The meanings that are made and the knowing that is held are all somehow connected to understanding of how the universe works, to the transpersonal realms that we are connected to. They are multidimensional meanings, holistic and linking the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional. This is authentic knowing:

the process of connected knowing...is essential to the quest for wholeness and integration that must precede transpersonal development if the split between spiritual and psychological development is to be bridged and the distorted relationships between mind and body, humans and nature, and “masculine” and “feminine” are to be healed.  
Wright, 1998 cited by Wright, 2000

### Femininity/Womanhood

Socially sanctioned understandings of femininity create “implicit cultural guidelines for women on how to behave in womanly ways, including how to be a ‘good woman’” (Stoppard, 2000, p. 92), and a “value system of niceness, (and) a code of thoughtfulness and sensitivity” (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 17). These guidelines are woven into the cultural fabric, which permeate most contexts of women’s lives. They are powerful in influencing the expectations of women both within our culture and within individual women’s psyches: femininity is defined in the language of “wifehood” (Hey, 1989) domesticity, and childbirth with motherhood is seen as an honour, a natural part of married life and evidence of adulthood status (Hey, 1989; Letherby, 1999). In point of fact, most traditional religions continue to perpetuate the link of femininity and maternity (Daniluk, 1999). These implicit modes of conduct, or gender roles, assign prescribed characteristics with male and female opposing one another. Women are ascribed such characteristics as emotion, passivity, co-operation and art, and each of these attributes associated with women is devalued compared to the male counterpart (Stoppard, 2000).

Traditional and contemporary discourses of femininity have “thrust a woman down a path that has little to do with who and what she really is, impelling her toward a destiny that is hardly her own” (Hancock, 1989, p. 32). Historically, what constitutes womanliness has rarely been agreed upon (Lisle, 1999), although characteristics of servility, nurture, and motherhood, (Hancock, 1989) are widely perceived as ways of women. This division within the self creates barriers to creating a meaningful, whole identity for women who live in patriarchal societies as they are “turned against womanly strengths that lie at the heart of (their) identity” (Hancock, 1989, p. 32).

Brownmiller (1984), writes that “femininity, in essence, is a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations...that always demands more” (p. 14, 15). Carpenter and Johnson (2001) in their study of self-esteem and feminist identity found that women’s self-perceptions can be either positively or negatively affected by their association with the ‘womanhood’. Further, they found that some women who have a sense of membership or belonging to a “gender group” derive significant self-esteem from their identification or alliance with it (Carpenter, & Johnson, 2001).

### Motherhood and Maternity

Woman, as mother, has long been a way by which women have found their place in the world, their traditional role, and a legitimate place in society (Safer, 1996) and remains ingrained in cultures that are industrialised, urban, and rural (Nicholson, 1993; Russo, 1976). Worldwide, motherhood is a fundamental aspect of most women’s lives (Nicolson, 1993) and there is an assumption that women will become mothers (Nicolson, 1993; Wickes, 1991) or will want to become mothers (Daniluk, 1999). Cultural discourses or dominant ideologies affect individuals’ experiences surrounding reproductive choice (Letherby, 2002) by communicating that the most

important venture for women is motherhood (Ireland, 1993) and that it is only a matter of time for those who are not yet mothers to choose motherhood (Campbell, 1985). Motherhood has been heralded as women's biological destiny (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000), with motherhood being an institution and mothers being icons from which women's identities are built (Safer, 1996): "motherhood is *still* a social institution, not a biological or psychological fact. As an institution in a male-dominated society, it continues to be oppressive to women whether they 'choose' it or not" (Morell, 1993, p. 315). "Under patriarchy...motherhood has a mythological, mysterious and powerful status" (Nicolson, 1993, p. 375); this has translated into prescribed rigid gender roles.

Consequently, the nurturance of children has historically been seen to be what women *do*, and mothers have been seen to be what women *are*, constituting the central core of normal, healthy feminine identity, women's social role and ultimately the meanings of the term *woman*.  
Gillespie, 2000, p. 225

Motherhood creates structure and a sense of purpose (Safer, 1996) and motherhood as an institution has been considered one of the key elements to women's oppression in patriarchal societies (Bleier, 1984); "motherhood was understood as a complex social role that reinforced patriarchal ideology" (Morell, 1993, p. 300). Furthermore, it has been characterised as a central component of woman's identity which establishes her status as an adult and as a woman (Ainsworth, 1995). Whether women choose to become mothers or not, "motherhood is central to the ways in which they are defined by others and to their perception to themselves" (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991, p. 13). With the array of negative assumptions and the seeming lack of acceptability of childfree lifestyles, women's ability to accurately evaluate the issue of motherhood continues to be limited (Ireland, 1993). Without a range of acceptable or fluid identity options, reproductive choice remains limited.

Maternity is often regarded as the rite of passage into womanhood (Ireland, 1993; Wickes, 1991) or “real adulthood” (Oberman & Josselson, 1996, p. 342). Pregnancy and childbirth are “social symbols of sexual success and mature womanhood on our culture” (Daniluk, 1999, p. 83). Russo (1976) close to three decades ago called for “a direct attack on the motherhood mandate”. This was not to be misconstrued as a direct attack on mothers or motherhood, but rather on the social and cultural forces that directed woman not only to become mothers but to have at least two children and raise them well. This assault was directed toward eliminating gender role stereotypes and behaviour and stereotypical depictions of women (Russo, 1976). Unfortunately, the battle against the non-conscious ideology of woman as mother continues, as evidenced by the growing literature of some feminist writers and researchers. “No woman, mother or not, will ever be free to fully explore her capacities as a human being if the only valid role which to feel she is an adult or ‘real woman’ is that of a mother” (Ireland, 1993, p. 7).

### Clinical Implications

With the advancements and expanding acceptance of counselling, increasing numbers of individuals are seeking therapy. Women often seek counselling for issues concerning motherhood and their relationship to it (Wickes, 1991). With the ‘lens of deficiency’ through which childfree women are viewed (Morell, 2000) and prevalent association of womanliness with motherliness, childfree women “may wonder if (they) are truly womanly, or (they) may question how to relate to the ancient pattern of women’s lives” (Lisle, 1999, p. 167). Some childfree women are faced with stigmatisation and internal judgements that confuse them, as “the norm of parental sacrifice is so deeply embedded in the adult consciousness that even the childless appear uncertain as to whether their actions justify the ‘selfish’ label” (Campbell, 1985, p. 115). Strong pronatalist discourses create further confusion and isolation for women who

choose to be mothers. Doubts about becoming and being a woman in the sense of the implicit assumption that women are mothers, and belonging to the womanhood “can make (childfree women’s) struggles for self-acceptance intense, confusing, and interminable, since (they) are indeed intentionally or unintentionally violating epochs of female experience and even the laws of nature (herself) (Lisle, 1999, p. 167). Furthermore, Wickes (1991) indicates that “many successful women, having confused outer achievement and a fierce persona with a solid female ego, have no connection to a strong female core of being” (p. 20).

It is imperative that therapists are aware of issues surrounding reproductive choice and female identity and address their own personal biases in order to provide non judgmental counselling and support women in their unique expressions of being women (Wickes, 1991). This however does not mean to imply that counsellors need be neutral in the sense of a more global perspective; they need to be cognisant of the cultural discourses that maintain the norms of society. Feminists have worked diligently to forward the notion that neutrality supports the status quo which in effect, perpetuates sexism; “neutrality is implicitly supportive of the status quo, which in a sexist society, means that neutrality is an inherently pro-sexist position (Hare-Mustin, 1980).

Counsellors need to encourage women to explore and make choices based on their own desires and distinguish their identities rather than allowing others to define them (McBride, 1990). Further, through personal exploration women come to an authentic knowing of the self from which they can make choices that are congruent with who they truly are, from the very essence of themselves.

It is also the hope that counsellors, through advocacy and education, will further increase the visibility and validity of full reproductive choice and support social change. Both men and

women's options are held captive by prescribed social and gender roles: masculine traits or men are dictated to use analytical thinking, be independent and goal-orientated while feminine qualities or women are said to be feeling, interdependent, and process-oriented (Zweig, 1990). By shifting cultural expectations and prescribed gender roles, hence, the qualities attributed to men and women, it is the hope that characteristics will be equally valued and fostered across gendered identities. Bringing balance to the archetypal masculine and feminine energies will encourage "harmonious dynamic within the psyche" (Zweig, 1990, p. 9).

### Conclusion

This inquiry is not undertaken as a critique of motherhood, rather it uses childlessness as the context to hear the voices of women who have chosen lifestyles alternative to societal expectations and gain insight into their identity formation. There continues to be a lack of research and literature on childfree women's understanding, meaning making, and sense of self as they experience being a woman.

What it is illuminating is the constricting nature of the dominant discourses in which femininity and womanhood are linked to motherhood. These gender role discourses have influenced theories of women's identity development and served to limit the acceptability of diverse expressions of who women are.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

#### *Journal Entry – July 2003*

*The heart of what I seek is women's experience of authentically being themselves. I'm not interested in how being a childfree woman affects their day to day lives or why they have chosen to be childfree per se, what I am interested in is women's experience of being women, of creating identities for themselves without the culturally sanctioned rites of passage or normed behaviours such as motherhood. I want to know about their experience that is close to them, that is perhaps hidden from the world, this part of them that is authentic, that is the essence of the self - that holds their inner knowing, their connected knowing of who they are. It speaks to this personal knowing which "has been associated with specific areas of development most often spirituality or creativity, rather than viewed as an aspect of development which can occur in many areas of life throughout the life cycle" (Keshet, 1997, p. 2). That is what I am seeking – women's experience of knowing who they are and being who they are; the essence or essential core of the self. I am interested in, the way in which she experiences her sense of self; her meaning system, how she embraces her values, understands and creates her place in the world, and her way of understanding the universe, all of which form her foundation for "action, commitment, continuity and perseverance in the face of obstacles" (Keshet, 1997, p. 5). For, this is where liberty lies, in the spaces where we can know ourselves and be known by another.*

### Overview

The sections in this chapter include the qualitative methodological approach of this inquiry, and overviews of feminist research, of phenomenology, and of organic inquiry all of which informed the way in which this inquiry was carried forth. Other sections in this chapter include:

reflexivity and the role of the researcher; reflexivity and the self; embodied writing; participants; interviews; interviewing the women; data collection; data analysis; and a summary.

### Qualitative Methodological Framework

This research inquiry endeavours to capture the essential qualities of women's lived experience; to discover the meanings and understandings that participants have about their own process of conceiving their sense of self, their identities as women and how they hold their identities as they live in the world. A qualitative approach informed by feminist principles, phenomenological thought and organic inquiry was utilised in order to accomplish these goals.

A qualitative inquiry explores a social or human issue where the "researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). A qualitative approach facilitated the in depth exploration of the essential elements or essences of women's experience of being childfree and enabled, through the use of semi-structured interviews, specific points of interest to be covered. The qualitative design of this research inquiry enabled women to have an opportunity to connect with the meaning and essential wisdom of their experience. Furthermore, it was important for me as a woman, a feminist, a researcher, and a counsellor that women have the opportunity to voice their experience and be heard and in the process be seen or witnessed.

Qualitative research, informed by feminist research principles, has marked potential as an approach that is mindful of "starting from women's experiences (and) means learning to 'listen in stereo' –to listen with restraint to the meanings of the experience of the respondents" (Levesque-Lopman, 2000, p. 103). Moreover, it facilitates the exploration of women's issues and provides an arena for women to be knowers and have voice:

feminists use a variety of qualitative styles, but share the assumptions held

generally by qualitative or interpretative researchers that interpretative human actions, whether found in women's reports of experience or in the cultural products of reports of experience (film and so on), can be the focus of research. Olesen, 1992, p. 158

Researchers working from a feminist perspective "have an opportunity to affect cultural forms via the construction and dissemination of theoretical perspectives" (Gergen, 1990, p. 481).

Feminist principles serve as a foundation for qualitative research, particularly for inquiries which seek to explore the way in which the social backdrop, the dominant discourses of gender, shape individuals experiences and identities.

### Feminist Principles

Feminist research can be characterised by an awareness of the self and involvement of the researcher (Reinharz, 1992) which "aims to explore, rather than eliminate contextual and sociopolitical perspectives" (Lee, 1998, p. 172) that shape women's very experience and existence. Because the context in which women have grown up has been one burdened with historical and culturally engrained discourses of femininity and womanhood, there are many implications that are common to women (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). These implications that stem from culturally sanctioned discourses which indoctrinate gender characteristics, create situations of oppression and inequality for women. In contrast, women's experiences of oppression are characterised by difference (Stanely & Wise, 1990). Working from a qualitative paradigm informed by feminist research principles can address the complexity of commonality and difference by including women's voices and listening for the diverse and the collective experience.

Feminism is a nebulous term as there is much variety and complexity within those who identify as feminists: "there is no one set of feminist principles or understandings beyond the very, very general ones to which feminists in every race, class, and culture will assent" (Harding,

1987, p. 8). The tension between common understandings and divergent beliefs speak to the creation not of feminism but of feminisms. Fittingly, feminist research has more than one definition and various ways of inquiry and “rejects the notion of a transcendent authority that decides what constitutes “feminist,” consistent with the antihierarchical nature of many feminist organizations and much feminist spirit” (Reinharz, 1992). Despite the diversity and differentiation, there are three basic ideological principles of most feminisms: the personal is political, the belief in egalitarian relationships, and the valuing of female perspective (Butler, 1985). These principles of feminism serve to “promote sensitivity to the cultural aspects influencing womens’ development, as well as provide guidance about essential aspects in research with women” (Hartrick, 1994, p. 42). Most feminists would agree that the male dominated majority culture has, and historically have, created the conceptions of knowledge and truth that are accepted and recognised today (Belenky et al., 1986). The building of oppositional knowledge that challenges systems of privilege, both interpersonally and societally, is one of feminism’s most profound contributions (Travis, personal communication cited by Crawford & Kimmel, 1999).

Feminist research theory is concerned with investigating the power structures inherent in the research relationship, producing knowledge that has utility and is empowering for women, advocating social change, and it is political (Pillow, 2003). In essence, feminist researchers do not simply ““collect data,” they create knowledge, make social judgements about the applicability of that knowledge, and advocate for social change to benefit girls and women” (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999, p. 4, 5). Feminist research is more than:

recording one’s words, asking appropriate questions, laughing at the right moment, or displaying empathy...it is an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee that established mutuality and nourishes recall of the seen-but-not-noticed, revealing to the knower what she

knows, possibly for the first time in her own words and from her own perspective.

Levesque-Lopman, 2000, p. 103

By producing oppositional knowledge, feminist researchers endeavour to promote equality (Thompson, 1992) and give voice to those without one (The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1995) as “women’s accounts have validity in their own right as a source of knowledge” (Stoppard, 2000, p. 207).

Feminist researchers seek to expand the manner in which they raise and answer questions, shift the way that research is carried out, and find ways to make it more useful (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999). Some feminist research is concerned with doing research *with* women rather than *on* women and generally thought to be of value to the participants rather than of value strictly to those ‘professionals’ or those with ‘power over’ the participants: Harding (1987) refers to the need to “studying ourselves and ‘studying up’, instead of ‘studying down’” (p. 8). There can be an element of mutual, though perhaps not equal, benefit in feminist research inquiries.

As the ‘researcher’, it was critical not to veil myself behind the feminist claim of transparency of power and act in a manner that is customary to those in positions of power, oppressive: I needed to remain cognisant so as I did not fall into the trap of insisting on my “privilege to reframe the stories (I) hear(d), knowing full well that the interpretations (I) offer(ed would) go unchallenged by those who lives (I) describe(d)” (Andrew, 2002, p. 62).

Research informed by feminist theory articulates that research questions should originate from women’s perspectives and that it is meant to “expand the definitions of what it means to be a woman” (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 442). Crawford & Kimmel (1999) assert that “the ultimate aim is to contribute to a transformation of gender relations and the gender system” (p. 5). I believe that if we, as feminist researchers, can “understand how and why women regard

gender in the way in which they do, if we can acknowledge and work with the contradictions within and between all women, we will be strengthened” (Andrew, 2002, p. 74). I also believe that feminist researchers need to be forthcoming about how the research changes them, as individuals and as researchers. These feminist principles will serve not only as a guide for my inquiry but as the conceptual foundation of the inquiry.

### Phenomenology

A further influence in the present inquiry is phenomenology. Phenomenological research is discovery oriented (van Manen, 1990) and reaches for the ‘lived experience’ of participants: studying the lifeworld of the participants in the way that they experience it (van Manen, 1997). The individual and “his or her surrounding environment are regarded as inextricably intertwined” (Valle & Mohs, 1998, p. 96). Phenomenological research endeavours to capture the essence of the experience, the underlying meaning, and draw attention to the “intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). The aim of phenomenological research is to create a textual expression of the essence of one’s lived experience; that essence is one that we recognise in retrospect rather than introspectively (van Manen, 1990). The essence is the meaning or the significance of the phenomenon: the “embodied structure or essence exists as an aspect or a dimension of each individual’s *Lebenswelt* or life-world and emerges at the level of reflective awareness *as meaning*” (Valle & Mohs, 1998, p. 98). When phenomenological research is well done, the essence that is captured will resonate with readers:

a good phenomenological description is something that we can nod to, recognizing it as an experience that we have had or could have had. In other words, a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience-is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience.  
van Manen, 1990, p. 27

This does not imply that phenomenology simply iterates what is already known: rather, it “seeks a transcending theoretical understanding that goes way beyond lived experience to situate it, to judge it, to comprehend it, endowing lived experience with new meaning. Without this transcendence, phenomenology would be superfluous” (Burch, 1989, p. 192).

Van Manen (1997) indicates a good phenomenological inquiry is one that will illuminate something in a manner that enriches our understanding of everyday life experiences. Further, “phenomenology never purely coincides with lived experience in itself, but by probing its ultimate horizons and seeking to grasp the englobing sense of what appears within them, renders lived experience anew” (Burch, 1989, p.195). When a phenomenological approach is informed by feminist research theory, it has extraordinary potential to bring voice to women’s lived experience. This was important to me in that it satisfied my desire to bring voice to women’s experience and it was congruent with my appreciation of researching lived experience and meaning. And equally as important, the nature of the questions of the inquiry were phenomenologically inclined, thus phenomenological methodology informed the process.

### Organic Inquiry

An additional influence to this inquiry is organic inquiry. Organic research emerged from feminist and heuristic approaches (Braud & Anderson, 1998). It was created and articulated by four women with a collective vision and desire to craft a “methodology that uses the personal experience of the researcher and coresearchers to create a sacred work that offers transformation and healing to all who engage in it, researchers and readers alike” (Clements, Ettlign, Jenett, & Shields, 1998a, p. 114). They felt feminine creativity was a necessary component of research (Clements et al., 1998a). Essential to organic research is the “transformative power of inviting,

listening to, and presenting individual participants' stories...(in their) own voices and words as much as possible" (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 259). Organic research emerges from the researcher's own process and has five characteristics: the sacred, the personal, the chthonic, the relational and the transformative (Clements et al., 1998a & 1998b). These characteristics apply to all stages of the research (Clements, Ettl, Jenett, & Shields, 1998b).

The sacred refers to the groundwork one must undertake before engaging in organic research, either as the reader or researcher, calling for an expanded awareness and bringing of consciousness to the process: "allow(ing) for the sacred to emerge...this work requires honouring ourselves, our collaborators, our readers, and the context in which we work" (Clements et al, 1998a, p. 117). The personal speaks to the connection of the researcher to the research: the research initially emerges from the researcher's own insightful experience. The researcher's story become a "point of beginning" and works as a "filter for other stories" (Clements et al., 1998a, p. 118). The personal voice of the researcher is encouraged as it "immeasurably deepens the research and increases its transformational potential for the reader" (Clements et al., 1998a, p. 119). The chthonic phase of the research symbolises trust in the process; a knowing that the process of the inquiry will create a life of its own which offers immense richness and depth (Clements et al, 1998a). In Jungian work the chthonic is connected with the Feminine (Clements et al, 1998b). In the chthonic phase of organic research, the researcher "trusts the dark, the mysterious, and the unknown" (Clements et al, 1998b, p. 35); "one must trust in the power and mystery of the Feminine" and allow the unconscious to emerge to the conscious (Clements et al, 1998b, p. 36). Though the inquiry "begins with responsible intent, the methodology often evolves and changes during the research because of

synchronicities, dreams, intuition, or other manifestations of inner knowing. The researcher is urged to pay attention to expressions of the unconscious” (Clements et al, 1998a, p. 119).

Rather than having a procedure of predictable steps, a starting place is established and from there, the inquiry emerges: “we’re trying to say, begin here and see where you go” (Clements et al, 1998b, p. 9). The characteristic of relational refers to the personal nature of the research: the stories of the researcher and the co-researchers (Clements et al, 1998a). The research reaches beyond the story bringing into account the natural world or environment which adds depth and speaks to the embodied person: “context is important; stories communicate not only to the thinking brain but also the body, the heart, and the soul” (Clements et al, 1998a, p. 120). The transformative element of organic research speaks to the intention that the research will foster change in those that engage with the research:

the fruits of organic research include transformation of the researcher, the coresearchers, and the readers, so far as each is willing to engage in both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the work and so far as each is willing to be changed through their involvement.  
Clements et al, 1998a, p. 120

One of the strengths of this methodology is the freedom to allow the process of research be guided by the “exigencies that develop during the study, unhampered by strict preexisting structures governing what is to be done and how the work is to be accomplished” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 260).

Organic inquiry informed my research in that the topic of my inquiry originated within my personal experience, emerging as a profound question that stirred, encompassing both the sacred and personal characteristics. Further, the manner by which my research surfaced and continued to transform, both the topic of inquiry and the process of research, is characteristic of the chthonic process. The manner in which the stories spoke to me, and influenced and continue to

influence who I am and who I am becoming speak to not only the relational but the transformative elements of organic methodology. Further, the intention that I hold as the researcher is that this inquiry will touch and shift those that choose to engage with it; this is attuned with the intentions of organic research. Where I move away from the fundamental nature of organic inquiry is through the thematic interpretations and implications that I draw in my analysis; this is in contrast to organic inquiry which emphasises an idiographic approach where “there is minimal interest in extracting themes or commonalities across stories” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 260).

### Reflexivity and the Role of the Researcher

As a feminist researcher, I cannot be objective and “bracket” my values as I believe that “we cannot unlink *what* we know from *how* we know it” (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999, p. 3). Hence, there is a recognition not only that value-free knowledge is never possible nor desirable (McCormack, 1989) but that feminist researchers influence the results of their research analysis with their cultural beliefs and behaviours no less than sexist and andocentric researchers (Harding, 1987). Furthermore, the role(s) of the researcher in the creation and implications of the research – the question, the setting, the findings and the interpretation (Pillow, 2003) is recognised. It was essential for me to use reflexivity as a resource to guide the research process “because the people who construct and articulate the research findings inevitably shape knowledge, feminist researchers must reflect upon and be explicit about their subjective role during the research” (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 442).

Reflexivity has been described as disciplined self-reflection of our selves; of who we are, of how our identities, whether it be our western perspectives, our ethnic, religious or political affiliations, our gender, age, or social economic status, or our sexual preference, influence our

work and how our work influences our selves (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999); the relationship between the researcher and the research is symbiotic (Cutcliffe, 2003). In developing critical practices of reflexivity, one's identity and experiences in life are "used as assets and tools for interpretation" (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 442). Reflexivity can be used as a methodological tool in feminist qualitative research "to deconstruct the author's authority in the research and/or writing process" (Pillow, 2003, p. 179). When one is reflexive they recognise that they are part of the social world of which they are studying (Frank, 1997); the researcher critically exposes what is familiar or known and brings forth what is unknown or hidden.

### Reflexivity and the Self

As an insider to this inquiry I tracked my responses and process throughout, exploring my personal experience of becoming, being, and belonging to the womanhood as a woman who has chosen not to be a mother. Before interviewing the women in my study I sat down to journal my own experience of being a childfree woman.

#### *Journal Entry July 2003*

*I knew that I wanted to explore my experience of being and becoming a woman and belonging to the womanhood. I was seeking to find what I understand, the meaning I make as a woman, not as a researcher. I wanted to allow what I know to come forth, not what I have read and gleaned from the literature. Initially, I intended to do an autobiographical exploration of my research questions. As I wrote my thoughts, in journal format, about my personal or 'lived experience', my story emerged, my narrative, and it meandered through various related topics never quite getting to the experiences I was seeking. It seemed that my narrative overrode the essence of my experience. I never quite addressed the questions that were posed, the questions*

*of my research. It was here that I questioned my choice in journaling when I was asking my participants to be interviewed, to share intimate details and meanings of their experience with another person. I was seeking to explore experience and find out how to do that without experiencing being interviewed myself. And so I was.*

I arranged to be interviewed myself with questions similar to the one I would ask. Not only was I interested in experiencing first hand what it is like to share such intimate knowing of myself with someone else, I also believed that this experience would provide tremendous insight into my own understandings and interpretations of my authentic experience of becoming and being a woman, and belonging to the womanhood. This experience proved invaluable as I came to know myself in a new way.

*Journal Entry July 2003*

*My experience of the interview was unexpected. I was surprised at what came out of my mouth, at what my experience is, at what meanings I make and understandings I have. It wasn't that I hadn't thought or talked for that matter before but the connections that I made were stirring. I knew that in my research, in the process of the interview, women's understanding or sense of their own femininity/womanhood identity, their sense of belonging, and their sense of becoming and being a woman will emerge and reveal to the "knower what she knows, possibly for the first time in her own words and from her own perspective" (Levesque-Lopman, 2000, p. 103). On some level I knew that that too would be my experience. There was a certain 'magic' in having someone listen, hear, witness me as I shared. Somehow there was a sacredness to it, something divine that allowed me to know myself more in the presence of another. For me, this parallels counselling. And yet, I didn't know that I would come to know on such a spiritual level, an authentic truth that is mine if only for that moment in time, for I am fluid.*

*My experience brought me to a knowing, a personal knowing. I had this inner sense that this process of answering my own research questions would be stirring; I recognised that I was in process long before I sat down for the interview. Keshet (1997) writes about personal knowing, an intuitive experience or recognition of new ways to understand or know oneself where we find meaning rather than make meaning. And, I did find meaning. The meanings that I hold about women, about childfree women, about being, becoming, and belonging, all connect to a larger picture, something of a spiritual nature...of knowing oneself, of being true to oneself, of bringing life to the moment, of celebration of life. These spiritual overtones remind me of the importance of what I know as a woman and of what I am researching.*

*The meanings that I make, the knowing that I hold, are all somehow connected to my understanding of how the universe works, to the transpersonal realms that we are connected to. They are multidimensional meanings, holistic and linking the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional. Perhaps this is connected knowing: "the process of connected knowing...is essential to the quest for wholeness and integration that must precede transpersonal development if the split between spiritual and psychological development is to be bridged and the distorted relationships between mind and body, humans and nature, and "masculine" and "feminine" are to be healed (Wright, 1998 cited by Wright, 2000). And again, I return to what I know. And for me, this research is personal and political: I am an insider.*

*We are insiders and outsiders, shifting back and forth between these two modes of cognition just as, on another level, we involve ourselves in some issues and remain apart and satisfied to observe others. At the same time we are capable of reflecting on ourselves, correcting our own errors, recognizing our own biases, and selecting future direction. What we do then in our professional roles in the sciences is a more reflexive and systemic version of processes which go on normally and naturally throughout our lives.  
McCormack, 1989, p. 14*

*And above all else, I am a woman.*

I see the interview as reflexive practice, perhaps not conventional, but bringing insights forth for me to know: “the process of asking meaningful questions allows for a passionate knowing of oneself to emerge” (Wickes, 1991, p. 40). And in the process of being interviewed there was that point of convergence, at some point there was a cross over – when what I sought became what I knew. New insights emerged and clarified what it is that I was seeking. Since I began writing my thesis I’d had this inner sense of what it is that I am seeking but there were no words that adequately described it. In the same way that Belenky et al, (1986) describe that “the stories of the women drew us back into a kind of knowing that had too often been silenced by the institutions in which we grew up and of which we were a part” (p. 20) so did my own interview; that knowing was deepened, reclaimed perhaps and in that connection I was able to better articulate what it is that I was seeking in my research.

### Embodied Writing

Embodied writing can be translated into a way of being from which one writes. As ‘crafters’ of qualitative research, embodied writing aims to have the writer ‘present’ or connected to their body as they write and likewise, have the reader ‘present’ when they read (Anderson, 2001). Embodied writing not only is a skill “appropriate to research, but a path of transformation that nourishes the enlivened sense of presence in and of the world” (Anderson, 2001, p. 83). By bringing the experience of the body to writing and reading we relay or experience “human experience *from the inside out*” as the body is an inner realm of knowledge (Anderson, 2001. p. 83).

Embodied writing seeks resonance which can be thought of as when reading a story or text, the experience of the words striking a chord within and in turn, deepening one’s understanding

(Anderson, 2001). Anderson (2001) writes that the practice of embodied writing has a “capacity to call forth the writer’s particular qualities, even a kind of essentiality of expression...bring(ing) forth the particular or unique qualities of the writer” (p. 86). It is the slowing down and focus on resonance of the body from which this emerges and brings “a ring of authenticity” (Anderson, 2001, p. 92).

Anderson (2001) identifies seven features of embodied writing: the vivid depictions of experience which invites communication through resonance; the valuing of internal and external data; writing from the inside or allowing the body to speak through words; rich description of senses and a slowing down to allow the nuances to be captured; attunement to the body; centred on personal experience; and the valuing of rich description over ‘literary artfulness’.

The way in which embodied writing informed my research inquiry was through the focus of presence as a writer, attunement to the rhythm of my body, and the way in which the voices of the women resonated with me, bringing a deeper sense of knowing and connection to the work. Most importantly, the theoretical underpinnings of embodied writing validated the way in which I work; allowing space for expansion and the process to emerge, creating time to slow down and connect deeply with the rhythm of my body, being attuned to the wisdom that emerges from within, and ‘listening’ for resonance and allowing the reverberation of the resonance to inform the process.

### Participants

There were six participants in this inquiry. All of them were heterosexual women, 29 to 35 years old, who are committed to remaining childfree. One woman identified herself as First Nations and the other five appeared to be Euro-Canadian. The participants are childfree yet biologically able (as far as they know) to bear children. Women of this age are considered to be

entering or in their early adulthood with 30 as the age of transition from adolescence to adulthood (Sheehy, 1995). Sheehy (1995), best-selling author of pop psychology, refers to them as the Endangered Generation and Foot (1996), renowned Canadian demographer and economist, refers to this generation (1967-1979) as the baby bust. The relevance of this population is that these women have recently or are currently transitioning into their first stage of adulthood: “today the transition to the “Turbulent Thirties marks the initiation to First Adulthood” (Sheehy, 1995, p. 52) when marriage and family building become a focus (Sheehy, 1995). Furthermore, with “the absence of role models, age 30 seems a turning point as women are reminded of their failure to meet conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood” (Adams, 1976; Burnley, 1979; Peterson, 1981; Stein 1981 cited by Byrne, 2003, p. 446). At the individual interview the women were invited to choose a pseudonym to be used in the research.

The participants were recruited via posters and email advertisements. Posters were placed around a local university campus and the downtown core. Emails were sent through a local network of students and professionals. As participants came forth and contacted me we had a brief informal conversation over the telephone or via email. At this point, if the woman was interested in participating and she fit the criteria, we set up a time to meet in person. In the first four of the six interviews we had an initial brief meeting to go over the informed consent and go over any questions. We then set up a time to meet for the interview. It seemed that the initial meeting was unnecessary as the organic process of connection and rapport building began with conversation around being childfree rather than in the initial meeting. Given that, with the last two interviews the initial meeting began with the informed consent and then moved into straight into the interview.

## Interviews

Each woman participated in an individual interview which took place before the group interview. The interviews were in depth and semi-structured and lasted approximately ninety minutes. The semi-structured questions emerged through months of writing about what it is that I am truly interested in and addressed key areas of interest including how did you come to know your choice to be childfree, what is your experience of being a woman, does being childfree bring new or other meaning to being a woman (see Appendix 2).

In depth interviews were selected as the instrument for various reasons. First of all, a level of trust is paramount for participants to genuinely share their experience, being in the presence of another will either build or lessen trust, depending on the trustworthiness of the individual, hence, the researcher in this instance. Secondly, experiencing connection and the sharing of one's process and knowledge between women can be validating and healing as well as allows for the possibilities of new discoveries and insights for both the participant and the researcher. With the knowledge being conscious-raising for both myself as the researcher and the participants; I "was also the one (being) investigated, the interviewer (becoming) the respondent" and because of this I "could not objectify others because (I) could not objectify (myself)" (McCormack, 1989, p. 15). Moreover, "life stories of women contribute to our psychological understanding, and the process of asking meaningful questions allows for a passionate knowing of oneself to emerge" (Wickes, 1991, p. 40).

Four of the six individual interviews were held in offices or rooms on campus, one was at my home and the sixth interview was at the woman's home. The group meeting was held in a meeting room on campus.

The group meeting emerged from my belief that childfree women are an invisible minority and one of the implications is that there is a lack of community or support building opportunities as non mothers don't have a common responsibility (for lack of a better word) as in children which gather them into identifiable groups – i.e.) at the park, schools, etc. I believe that it is important to bring together women with common experiences to potentially further their insights and meaning making process, to build connection between women and to foster a sense of belonging. Further, the group meeting provided an opportunity to present the collective themes that emerged from their individual interviews. The group interview was informal. Four of the six women were able to participate. As I presented the themes that had emerged, the women were creating individual collages that represented who they were as childfree women. The impetus for the collages materialised in the process of my analysis as I wanted to have the women represented in my study by something that reflected them that I would not be interpreting. I wanted an opportunity for the women to present themselves without the researcher as editor. The question I asked women to respond to in creating their collage was “who are you as a woman, a childfree woman?”. These collages are found at the beginning of each of the woman's profile. The collage making, was optional and three of the four women at the group meeting chose to do one and the fourth chose to have one image included as a representation of who she is.

### Interviewing the Women

*Journal Entry July 2004*

*Sitting with each of the women was moving. The way in which they invited me into their inner lives, their stories, was welcoming and confirmed what I know about women, about humanity. There was laughter and connection and as each woman invited me into her*

*experience through her words, I resonated with parts. I resonated, she spoke in words that I might use...I resonated with what it is like to be a woman. And with the resonance came stirrings of emotion.*

*Journal Entries March 2004*

*I cried as I drove home...I didn't know why...I just went to the car after the interview, not compelled to write but to drive...kind of holding a bit...and as I drove and reflected I began to cry...tears of gratitude, of knowing, of connection – feeling deep connection with the Divine. And with these tears I wonder if there's hope...the hope that the womanhood is alive...that somewhere deep inside women there is a remembering...some of us remember, know...perhaps unable to articulate it fully but there is a sense, maybe a felt sense. And today I feel aligned with Her, the Goddess. And perhaps that is what the tears and connection are – feeling the loss of being disconnected for so long. The grief that our world has turned away from the Goddess, the Feminine. And I wonder what next...how can I grow?...I feel full yet fragile inside...like with each interview I'm going deeper and deeper – fleshing out different parts of me – of women – of being a woman. And as I write I feel as if it is shifting my sense of the sacred...the mystery. How does woman, mystery and the sacred intersect?*

And the shifting continued after each interview; emotions stirred and I knew that I was changing. *And, it's been with me for a while...2 days...and when I remember back to our interview emotions stir inside...I feel connected...I feel hopeful...I don't feel alone with my knowing – it has expanded...transformed into something bigger, grander, there was a sacredness – I remember it being sweet...but it was different than sweet – sweet is somehow too human of a descriptor. I'm brought to my own knowing, my own sense of Spirit...my own sense and understanding of the world, of women, of life. And mother...perhaps mother is not the issue –*

*children or not – perhaps humanity has misinterpreted the word to mean with child rather than the innate role of woman, childed or not. And I wonder if the impetus for this research, my research, that has changed and transformed as I have, has been about knowing that I, as a woman, am not alone. Alone in my quest to shift the consciousness and embrace the Goddess within.*

As the interviews happened I waited, wondering if experiences I have had would emerge: *And, the authentic self...she's surface...the existential angst has emerged, has been spoken of, a process of inner work. Woman as healer, profound...healer of the earth, our world, woman energy... After another interview I wrote: And the womanhood is alive...the Goddess has emerged...and with it life...hope, power, energy, and love.*

#### Data Collection

The data was collected through individual, in depth, semi – structured interviews. Each interview was audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. Technical difficulties abounded. One interview was garbled throughout; about 25% of it was lost. This interview was redone only to have the second interview not record at all. The transcript from the first interview was used. A second problem arose when one of the tapes sent out to be transcribed was accidentally erased. This interview was redone, taped, and transcribed successfully.

Copies of the transcripts were given to participants for review. I asked the questions: “does this reflect your experience and the interview? Is there anything you want to change or add?”. Most of the contact was done via email. From the individual interviews I wrote profiles of all of the women which summarised their experience of being a woman, being a childfree woman, becoming a woman, and belonging to the womanhood. The profiles were forwarded to the individual women and I asked, “Does this fit, does it reflect who you are and our interview?”.

Overall themes or essential elements of women's experience emerged as well as implications for practice. The group meeting was audio taped but not transcribed. All tapes and transcriptions were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office.

### Data analysis

During the research process, reflexivity was used as a continual means of tracking my understandings, interpretations, and questions. Because this inquiry is seeking women's experiences of authentically knowing themselves through their experiences of becoming and being women and belonging to the womanhood, there is great emphasis on the validity of all ways of knowing. Given this, the manner by which I carried out analysis of the data was by following my authentic knowing of the material thus, I refer to the analysis method as authentic knowing. Some would say it is unorthodox, thus fitting for the nature of the inquiry, the authentic experience of women with atypical lifestyles.

Authentic knowing is similar to direct knowing, a way of knowing common to transpersonal research methods (Braud, 1998). Direct knowing "can be achieved through the concentration, contemplation, and absorption of attention, consciousness, and awareness on different 'objects' – that one can know directly by merging or becoming one with the object of one's intentionality" (Braud, 1998, p. 53) in this case, the data. I understand authentic knowing as an analysis method, as an intuitive process of coming to know what the data says, what the inquiry has found, to be women's experiences. After sitting with the data, the essence or essential points emerged and were known. I sat with the data for three months, delving into it and then stepping away, writing my thoughts, questions, reflections, engaging in the business of life and returning to it, reconnecting with the words, the stories, each woman's voice. At the end of the three

months I arranged for ample time in my schedule to write the analysis. During this time I moved between writing and my garden, hands in the dirt, working the land, out of my head and in tune with the rhythm of my body. At times, I created art to foster movement within and facilitate a deeper connection to my rhythm as it shifted through the process. This was necessary for me to write authentically and embodied. As crafters, researchers creating qualitative research need to be embodied ourselves so as we can produce authentic work. Connections and themes emerged through conversations, contemplation, and writing. When I sat to write, the connections were there – the essences, the meanings, understandings – the themes and implications. I followed my own sense of authenticity, my own internal sense of knowing and rhythm, my internal cues or impulses. These were informed by feminist ethical practice and principles which provided the conceptual framework as guidelines to what I was seeking in a manner that is congruent with the research question. As the common elements surfaced, I went through the transcripts of the individual interviews, finding quotes which resonated with the intention of the theme. During this process, themes shifted and were combined. After presenting my findings at the group meeting, I sat with the women's feedback and allowed it to move me, to speak to me and to settle as I moved through my life. Again, I returned to the writing. I was connected to the material in a new way; the resonance was deeper within my body.

### Summary

This research inquiry was undertaken to find new understandings and knowledge to add to the limited literature on women's identity and more specifically, childfree women's experiences of becoming, being and belonging to the womanhood. Furthermore, this research seeks to identify and articulate the essential qualities of childfree women's identities in order to expand the current theories of female development to include women without children. It was my

intention to further the participant's and my, the researcher's, liberation to be ourselves in the face of oppression and share that knowledge with others, women and men, adults and children, so that individually we can act from a emancipated sense of self and collectively we can create social change via a shift in the dominant discourse of gender roles.

This research inquiry is further intended to add to the growing body of knowledge and offer practical implications for counsellors, educators and those in the helping professions, to educate and debunk the negative stereotypes and hegemonic discourse which much of our current knowledge perpetuates. The path to reach each person's potential will only be made easier when individuals are free to choose to express themselves and their identities in a culture that truly welcomes diversity and unique expression.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PROFILES

### Overview

The profiles of the women were created from the individual interviews. During the group meeting, three of the four women able to attend created individual collages to represent who they are as women and as childfree women: the fourth woman chose to use one picture to represent herself. Copies of the women's artwork are at the beginning of their profile. I have not included a large amount of specific demographic information in order to protect the women's anonymity.

The four areas of awareness that were highlighted came directly from the focus of the research itself – being a woman, being a childfree woman, becoming a woman, and belonging to the womanhood. It felt important for me to use these four areas directly taken from my overall research questions rather than create themes as I wanted an opportunity for each woman to be represented individually. I felt this was the best way to introduce each woman and her experience with the least amount of interpretation. It was through this decision that my rationale behind the collages emerged: I wanted the women to have an opportunity to represent themselves without me interpreting it through the words that I choose to quote or the thematic interpretations that I create. In order to facilitate the voice of each woman to be heard, their words are woven throughout the text in italics.

## Donna

### *Being a Woman*

Donna's experience of being a woman is "*multi-layered*" and "*great*". Despite encountering sexism and discrimination Donna feels "*women can do anything*". One of the great advantages to being a woman is the range of 'characters' one can explore, from fishing garb to ballroom dancing; "*we can put on these ...different personalities and test them out, these different faces*". Donna strongly identifies with being a person more so than a woman and notes that it is the biological differences between the sexes that is most definitive for her; "*other than the fact that I menstruate and have breasts and can have a child or carry a child, that's really the only defining character for me*". In terms of her feminine identity Donna associates it more with her sexuality and sensuality.

Donna finds women to be intelligent, wise, and builders of connection and community; many women have an "*ability to look at the structures critically and I think that's where a lot of wisdom rests...as they get older they do this...an ability to reflect on their lives and situations and...grow*". A symbol or metaphor that represents women for Donna are "*prehistoric fertility figure(s)...big and fat and they're about to give birth*" yet they don't speak to her sense of being a woman. For Donna, the image that comes to mind to symbolise herself as a woman is "*somebody who is strong physically, who's strong mentally...my image is of myself with my black belt (marshal arts) ...a sport that has been male dominated yet...(as a woman) I bring different things to*" the sport.

## *Being a Childfree Woman*

Choosing to be childfree has been a progression; *“ever since I’ve been able to reproduce...I’ve spent all of this time trying to prevent becoming pregnant...it’s basically...been an evolution of the fact that I’ve been pursuing other things”*. Donna also had an inner knowing of being childfree before making her decision a conscious choice. She shared for a lot of the big decisions in her life she had a sense of what was to come or *“kind of always knew (what was to come), but having a child has never been one of those things...my choices have just never included having a child”*. Donna shared other reasons which have influenced or supported her choice to be childfree; *“I don’t want to be seen as weak and disabled or you know as a burden to anybody...I can’t be superwoman ‘cause I’m not superwoman...childbirth scares the hell out of me, I think, why would I want to put my body through that?... economically it doesn’t make sense for me to have a child”*.

Choosing to be childfree has influenced who Donna is and who she can become; *“I wouldn’t have done my Masters, I wouldn’t have traveled the places I’ve traveled to...I wouldn’t be thinking of pursuing a PhD...my relationship with my husband would probably change, I mean we wouldn’t have the time we have together”*. It has also been significant in that she has not followed social convention of becoming a mother. While she recognised the expectations of being a mother inherent in our social and cultural norms she *“just always needed to be who I am”*.

Choosing not to have children has enabled Donna to pursue her passions in life, one of them being art. As an artist she gives *“birth to ideas”* and is clear that if she were a mother the time, energy and space needed to create would not be available to her: *“in order to produce art that has any meaning for me I need a head space...that allows me to develop my own ideas...think*

*about concepts and how I'm going to represent these concepts in individual language". She connects her art to creation; "I'm not having children physically, I'm giving birth to these other projects and creations". Much of Donna's energy has been directed into her academic career as she earned her MBA and more currently, her professional aspirations. Her work with Aboriginal governance is invaluable to communities locally, provincially, and across Canada.*

As a childfree woman Donna recognises her opportunity to bring a new dimension or perspective to women's ways of being specifically with her niece: *"I'm very different than my sister so I think that my niece gets a different sense of what it is to be a woman than what she gets from my sister because we have such different lifestyles".*

Donna has had two unplanned pregnancies; one ending in a miscarriage and the other through an abortion. In her short experience of being pregnant, her experience of being a woman shifted; *"when I was pregnant I didn't like the fact that I had no control over my body, that really bothered me and I didn't like the way I felt...with being pregnant, you have no control, it's just what your body is doing naturally which is strange to me...very foreign...it gave me a different appreciation".*

Donna's experience of being childfree has been *"simple"*. Donna notes the lack of validity women have when they don't have children; *"I don't have baby status"*. Most notably she shared the lack of validity and celebration of the successes in her life: *"if your friends get married you buy them a gift and you celebrate and then they're pregnant so you buy them a gift and celebrate...they have a baby so you buy them a gift and you celebrate...(in the) meantime, you're...not celebrating your life in the same way they want you to celebrate theirs. It's sort of like you want to ... write to them and say, I'm having an opening, this is an invitation to my opening, and I expect you to buy me a gift because...we've celebrated over the last 10 years all*

*these accomplishments in your family so, I think that when you're choosing not to (have children) it's (your life) not recognised in the same way".*

In choosing to be childfree, hence unconventional, Donna expressed her experience of being judged and misunderstood: *"I think sometimes there are communication hurdles... some people have a tendency to judge unconventional people but so what...I need to be true to who I am...I'm helping people and not hurting people and that's a good thing and you know I'm not status quo and status quo isn't working I mean look at our world right, so let's try and figure it out and maybe do something that's different".* In reflecting upon women and mothers Donna wonders if *"maybe some women just aren't meant to be mothers"?*

### *Becoming a Woman*

Donna's experience of becoming a woman has been *"hard...my relationship with my mother was very rocky...it was almost like we competed with each other...and having a sister who was so different and so much like my mom was very, very difficult...we were like oil and water, it would have been easier...to maybe have been a boy in that household...than being another girl...I think if I had been a boy I wouldn't have been in competition (with her sister)...I was different".*

In reflecting upon significant milestones, Donna talked about beginning of her menstrual cycle, her first sexual experience, turning 21, graduating from university with her degree and then her MBA, getting married, and buying a house. Her process has been rich with learning and she believes *"in life long learning...I never want to be at one point in my life where I say, okay, I know everything...I always want to keep my mind open to learning and to new ideas.* Following this sense of the ongoing process of life, Donna's anticipates her experience of becoming a woman will continue throughout her life: *"I still feel really immature as a woman".*

### *Belonging to the Womanhood*

In general, Donna does not have a strong sense of the womanhood. Growing up she was aware of the womanhood but never felt drawn to, interested in, or a sense of belonging when the women in her community gathered at the “*stitch and bitch*”. Her interests and life path was divergent and “*I could not relate to what any of the women were saying or doing because it was all about their babies and the child... not what I was into or interested in*”. Today, when she’s in a women’s only event or gathering, she “*always think(s) it’s an odd environment*”. In thinking about the women in her life and the connections or commonality; “*they are all so different, they all have such different life choices and situations...a common thread, well we all have a uterus...and breasts*”.

Rhonda

*Being a Woman*

Rhonda's experience of being a woman has been one of freedom in the choices she makes and the opportunities she has. She is a graduate student and describes her self as very independent, compassionate, empathic and maternal, and a learner: "*I'm a student, I'm a thinker, I'm a social activist...I'm just an ordinary person...a daughter...a friend...a girlfriend*". She sees herself contributing by using her privilege and education to make a difference in our world. In her experience of being a woman Rhonda also relates to being in a relationship and having that influence who she is as a woman.

When Rhonda thinks of woman she associates it with women who have great strength of character, who have overcome adversities and triumphed. She thinks of women like Helen Keller, Sue Rodriguez, Anne Frank, "*...strength, courage, have overcome limitations...I look at my mom...so strong of a person...friends and what they've gone through and what they're still going through and just there's so many good women that have done such good things and they have such a good heart*". Good friends also come to mind; "*supportive friends...strength, courage, doing what they want to do*".

In characterising women's ways of being Rhonda is quick to note socialisation as shaping generalisable ways of being: "*I think it is just based on the fact, gender roles growing up I feel that women have in general more to contribute in terms of compassion and...different ideas that women bring to social action...we need both perspectives*".

In terms of expressing what she feels is her identity as a woman, the strongest association is her sense of being independent. Her feminine identity is mostly associated in relationship:

*“being intimate with a partner... I’ll consider myself being feminine or I’ll think of myself as being feminine is with a partner”.*

### *Being a Childfree Woman*

Choosing to be childfree is significant for Rhonda: *“it makes a huge statement... my view it’s accepted”*. Rhonda characterises it as easy and uneventful; *“I’ve had no criticism for it...not even people joking with me...it’s been very uneventful”* unlike some of her friends who have experienced negative comments about their choice to be childfree, *“no one has looked at me as I’m less of a woman for that decision”*.

Numerous factors contributed to Rhonda choosing not to have children. Foremost she shared that she has never had the urge to have children. She gave several other factors which support her decision: the fact that there are many children in the world; *“it’s not that we lack children in the world”*, financial considerations, not having a support network around her to help raise a child, not being in a strong enough committed relationship, experiencing physical and emotional abuse by a step-parent as a youth and not wanting to continue the cycle; *“I don’t put up with abuse from men anymore, I definitely wanted to break the cycle with myself, I didn’t, I’m not having children but I want other people or children around me to see that this isn’t right”*, having other priorities and interests, having had an illness and surgery as a youth which have left her ability to conceive in question, having become accustomed to a simple life without stress and chaos, having some fear about being pregnant and giving birth and finally, the lack of desire to have children of her own.

Being childfree *“has just evolved for me, it’s just come about, it wasn’t like a decision and this is the rest of my life, it’s just been the way it’s been...spiritually...I believe this is my life path, it was meant to be”*. In being a woman who has made atypical lifestyle choices, *“I see*

*myself as playing that strong role model for the rest of my life. I definitely need that purpose, that role in society, if it's not going to be mothering it definitely needs to be something else, I can't just sit at home and do nothing".*

Interestingly she thinks motherhood is an intrinsic part of being a woman, *"I think motherhood is innate"*. Rhonda expressed how as a childfree woman that innate mothering is expressed for her: *"I do think my role in society has a connection to motherhood without (my own) children but... (through a) maternal caring instinct"* toward people who may have mental health issues, disabilities, multiple barriers, and/or live in poverty. *"I can do something about it...that caring mothering...there's just no face to it like a child"*. In talking about her choices, future and spiritual understanding, Rhonda articulates: *"I mean I do have a sense I was put on earth to do something ...that purpose of helping communities...I don't think I could do near as good of a job if I have kids like I think it would be one or the other"*.

Rhonda feels that it is significant that she is childfree in that she has more control in her life: *"I have responsibility for myself, not for children...to be a mother would be such a huge responsibility...I see my own mother and the responsibility she still has with helping me... I mean that bond is just so strong...(being childfree) has a huge impact on my life now and my life in the future"*. In terms of who Rhonda can become in the future as a childfree woman she talks about having more opportunity to advance in her career and more time and energy to devote to an intimate relationship with a partner.

### *Becoming a Woman*

Rhonda's experience of becoming a woman was a long, difficult yet rewarding process of self-discovery: it was *"...setbacks and not seeing your way out of it for so long and then finally just getting out of it...growth and the freedom and making your life work for you...with not*

*having children allowed me that...I definitely wouldn't be the person I am today...overcoming the(emotional) abuse that occurred...trying to define who (I am) as a person, as a woman and how (I interact)...with other woman, relationships... it was a huge part of my life to overcome so that's definitely a sense of being a woman...I knew I had to work through my own life no matter what to not be like that... it is to do with being a woman definitely and being a role model of saying well this is really horrible but you know you can overcome it”.*

Rhonda also anticipated that she would have maternal longings to have children; “*my friends were saying ‘oh it will just hit you over the head, it’s just like all of a sudden one day you have to have kids...the desire is so strong’. So I was expecting ...this would just happen, that it happens to so many people... everyone said in my 20s you know it’ll happen, ...I thought okay I’m 30 it’s going to happen, I kept waiting and it hasn’t happened”.*

Other milestones or rites of passage Rhonda recalls in her experience of becoming a woman were moving away from home at 19 to a new province on the East Coast and then moving to the West Coast and at 25 choosing a new direction for her career by returning to school at university.

### *Belonging to the Womanhood*

Rhonda has a sense of the womanhood as being groups or support networks of women, for women who are in survival situations; “*I just envision it’s that strong bond”.* Her awareness of the womanhood has been more focused on women creating community in other countries, particularly developing nations; “*womanhood to me means more, another culture, another country where they (women) need to band together to survive”.* While she has a sense of the womanhood she does not feel a part of it. In terms of the sense of womanhood in her community Rhonda has some sense of it but hasn’t felt the need to seek it out: “*in terms of here, in terms of*

*being the dominant white female, I don't have, I don't have an oppression where I feel I need support to, it's just more of an independence, I guess".*



Kate

*Being a woman*

Kate experiences being a woman as positive in her life; *“my sense of being a woman is that it’s a good thing to be, I’m glad I am one...I feel strong as a woman”*. One of the advantages of being a woman is the permission women have in our culture to be expressive and open with emotions; *“I can be... more emotional...it gives me more strength to express ...I feel that I have a strength that as a man I wouldn’t have...I think as a woman I have...a better chance of getting over negative things in my life sooner...I don’t have to hide (it)...I see that as a positive thing about being a woman.*

In describing her knowing of women and women’s ways of being, Kate is quick to talk about the role of socialisation of both genders and the difficulties in generalisations. Given that, Kate finds women to be gentle, caring, less aggressive, and emotionally sensitive to our own and other’s responses. Women are *“more gentle, I don’t want to say more caring...we’re more gentle because we can be, it’s accepted in society”*.

As a woman Kate *“bring(s) caring to the world...that’s who I am...I care so much about everything and everyone and that’s something that the world needs”*. This caring nature is a way of being for Kate, one that has influenced who she is and who she will become; *“it’s hard to see into the future, what you’re going to do in your life or what’s going to happen but it will and has influenced my life”*.

*Being a Childfree Woman*

Kate’s decision to not have children has emerged over time; *“I fell into it over a series of events over my life... it just kind of happened...I never had a plan... I always leaned more towards not having children”*. Like many women, growing up Kate assumed she would have

children “*I just thought I would just because of the type of family and community I came from...if they can conceive they do...so I just assumed it would happen...it was never a big focus... in my head... it was just, I’ll have babies, that’s what women do*”. At 27 Kate returned to university; her studies were engaging and having children became less and less of an inclination. Today she is a researcher and an Adult educator and finds the connection with her students a fulfilling part of her career.

Citing the decision to be childfree as one of the questions that brought her to know herself better, Kate shared “*I feel like I am a woman for sure but maybe there is a difference between me and other women who will and do have children. And maybe it’s just because of where our sense of responsibilities are*”. In making this decision, Kate noted “*some people...perceive you as being a hard person...or not a caring person...I don’t let it bother me anymore... but it would be nice if they could understand that some people are just different*”. Kate spoke about an energy women have that is generally focused on raising children and a sense of duty; laughing she said; “*a feeling like inborn responsibility...I remember at age four and five, I just felt responsible*”. As a childfree woman Kate can focus this energy and sense of responsibility towards creating positive change in our world: “*there’s so many places you can use that energy...not that you can’t with children, but it takes a lot of time...you just physically can’t because you have this big responsibility*”.

In translating this sense of duty or perspective of contributing to the world one’s sense of purpose may come into play; “*I think my purpose is...care as much as I can and do as much as I can for people and nature...the world and find some happiness in it because I think the purpose of being here is to have a fulfilling experience, learn, grow...figure out who you are*”. When Kate speaks of caring, connection, and contributing to the world she speaks of her love and bond

with nature and wildlife; *“I worked at a wildlife rehab centre for years and everyday when I would come home, there was this amazing feeling just from getting all of those injured or orphaned animals through another day”*.

Connection with her own family is important to Kate and being different has been a challenge in finding common ground to strengthen their connection. Kate shared that her mother, while accepting of who she is, believes that the experience of having children is special and one that she doesn't want Kate to miss *“but now she knows that I'm different and maybe different than what her idea of what a woman is”*. One of the hopes Kate holds is that the subtle division between women who choose to be childfree and women who choose to be mothers narrows: *“it's not an important difference...I'm still a woman, you may have ten kids, I have zero, we're still both women and it shouldn't matter”*. Being childfree makes Kate different from many women and at times this can be challenging: *“everybody wants to be accepted...at least by most people that they have to deal with in their life... as soon as you show difference, it makes people nervous”*. Today, Kate lives authentically despite the costs; *“I still see chances where my life would improve if I did (follow the status quo), but...I've decided not to because I don't want to be uncomfortable with myself”*.

### *Becoming a Woman*

Kate recalls becoming a woman as a long process of self-discovery that happened much later than her passage into adulthood: *“an adult to me it's more an outside thing...when I bought a house and started a business and all those things, I got married...I was an adult. But I don't think I became a woman until I knew who I was”*. The impetus of this process was that she wanted to learn who she was, what she believed, what were her values and opinions: *“...in my 20s more and more...feeling contradictory...(questioning) why do I believe this... and really*

*trying to figure out who individuals were around me to see who I could trust and who I couldn't".* These years were emotional, painful, and difficult; Kate characterises them as a time of *"struggle, pain, fear, mostly it was fear of the reaction of my family to my change because my friends were my friends and some stay and some come and go and you hope that at least a few stay for a while but it was more because the values and things that I was challenging were from my parents and I wanted to be able to have a relationship with them but have them understand why I'm different and that I am different"*. This time of introspection spanned about two years, 28 and 29; *"there was a lot of crying and soul searching and asking questions, asking people to be honest with me and then trying to be honest back"*. And having come to that, a knowing of the self, Kate describes a sense of freedom; *"freedom...now that I actually feel that I am a woman... I feel strong now that I know who I am more in my life and I guess part of that...of being a woman is that I've had to make a lot of choices that men don't make, that women make"*. Her journey to herself has created an openness that she never had before.

### *Belonging to the Womanhood*

In talking about her knowing of the womanhood Kate addressed the implicit division of the sexes when one speaks of the womanhood; *"to me the ideal world is a place where there is no sisterhood and brotherhood...not in two different groups... struggle between the two"*. Acknowledging that, Kate shared she didn't know much of the womanhood; she spoke of the caring and connection that she felt to women around the world: *"I feel a connection toward them"*. She also spoke of feeling connected to women from her partner's Middle Eastern culture which is different than her own: *"when I meet women from my partner's culture too, who at first don't usually like me...I feel like I need to be accepted by the women for some reason – to let them know that I'm, at some level, I'm the same as them"*. In reflecting about women around the

world being connected, Kate spoke of the mutual learning opportunities from each other; *“if the good things are focused on I think it can bring a lot of women more self confidence and more comfort... it might not change their situation because we all have to live in the societies we are in, we can be different but, and there’s things that go along with being different whether you’re here or in another country. It’s difficult to be different”*.

During our conversation Kate spoke of other experiences of connection, one of them sharing a visit with a close friend and her baby. The connection she saw between mother and daughter was touching, *“there’s something very special about it...it’s beautiful*. Showing her sense of humour Kate spoke of the brief moment of longing she felt *“I even sometimes do have this longing, it doesn’t last long, it’s a shorting (rather than a longing) really...the answer is always no”*.

Kate’s choice not to be a mother has influenced her sense of belonging to the womanhood, particularly when she has been confronted with others’ beliefs about women’s purpose: some women *“are very sure (having children) is a big part of our purpose here, that we procreate”*. The message is sometimes subtle when women inquire about how many children she has rather than does she have children; *“when I meet people randomly and they find out how old I am, they say how many kids do you have, they don’t say, do you have children? It’s how many kids do you have?”*. Other comments are more forthright; *“I have a friend who has told me, Kate you’re missing the most important experience of life if you don’t do this. She said...you won’t have fulfilled your life if you don’t have a child...you have to feel what it feels like to have a person growing inside you and you have to feel that connection that a mother has when she holds her new baby...she’s sure of this...I know that she doesn’t mean it harshly...she thinks my life is worthless if I don’t”*. Kate is left wondering how many women feel like this: choosing to be

childfree “*it can impact a relationship with other women for sure*”.



Sarah

Sarah

*Being a Woman*

In general, Sarah feels good about being a woman. Some of her challenges have centred around the lack of strong women role models, the societal pressure and obligations of women such as aesthetic and gender role expectations, and generally the oppression women as a group endure; *“women basically are an oppressed...group so my sense of being a woman is that I personally am always fighting to not be oppressed”*. Sarah, a nursing student, links the oppression of women to professions such as nursing *“it’s also an oppressed group...it’s always been primarily women and it’s seen as a calling (rather than)...your profession”*.

Sarah is very independent and at times it is difficult for her to ask for help; *“I saw my mother as being very dependent on my dad so I’m not dependent on anyone, be it a man, be it anyone”*. For Sarah, independence has a freedom to it *“freedom kind of gives you the freedom to be selfish...I think selfish and selfless are congruent...you have to be selfish to be the best person that you can be in order to be selfless to everybody else”*.

In addition to being independent, Sarah speaks of a nurturing and caring quality within herself and women in general. Interestingly, *“it’s kind of the same thing, being independent and being the nurturer, is the same thing because you are looking after someone else, they’re not looking after you so you’re independent to care for them and nurture them you’re not relying on them to do the opposite”*.

When Sarah reflects on what she brings to the world as a woman she talks about a having a gentle or healing presence; *“I bring lots of nurturing to the world...people feel comfortable around me...empowering presence...I connect really well”*. She also spoke to a sense of needing to always do or give more *“I always want to be doing more”*. Sarah also spoke of the

unconventional or atypical part of her; *“that’s part of who I am... I don’t see things in a negative aspect but I question everything”*. When she thinks of women and women’s ways of being she uses gentle, intuitive, trusting, caring, nurturing, perceptive, attuned to other’s states of being and their own body energy, to characterise, these resonate with her knowing of herself.

### *Being a Childfree Woman*

Growing up, Sarah cannot remember wanting to have children and in her mid twenties being childfree became more of a conscious choice; she made *“the conscious choice that I wasn’t going to have kids... (because) there were so many kids in the world that were not taken care of...there are so many out there that need”*. Over the next few years Sarah became more involved in her education, increasingly self aware, and came to know that despite her love of children, *“I like them too much to bring them into my life because...I think I’m too selfish to give a 100% of myself...maybe too selfish but at the same time it’s kind of a selfless act to not just randomly and without responsibility and without thinking about it, just accept the fact that okay I’m female, I have to have kids”*.

It is significant to Sarah that she has chosen to be childfree; *“it’s huge, it’s probably one of the biggest decisions you ever make in your life, as a woman”*. And that choice comes with a price: *“I think from society’s point of view it creates a totally different meaning to being a woman...you’re not as much of a woman if you don’t have children in other people’s view”*. This perspective or discourse that links woman to mother is so ingrained into some women’s psyche’s that Sarah commented that despite her commitment to being childfree, *“there’s still a part of me that still (says), but I have too... there’s a little bit of sadness... sense of loss –I don’t think that any woman could make this decision without feeling somewhat of a loss”*.

In knowing who she is and making this choice, she's also had to be prepared to contend with other people's questions, opinions and disapproval. She's also aware that being childfree has influenced who she is and who she can become; *"...constantly setting more goals...I think I'll become more career focused or more career driven and I think that I'll become someone that can really contribute a lot to the community...rather than just my little family unit"*. Coming to this place in her life has *"got me to know and question myself... it's also helped to develop another self that might not have fully developed...if I hadn't made that decision"* to not have children. Sarah also has the sense that she'll have the space to continue to pursue her personal development; *"I'll get to know myself a lot better...I'll just have a lot of time to work on myself"*.

Interestingly Sarah spoke to the need to define herself as a woman; *"if I were going to have kids, I think that that would really define my life, then, I would be a mother"*. And the existential questions spill forth: *"so I don't know what I'm going to be, if I'm not a mother, I'm just me right and is that enough? Is it enough to just be me"*? And it is here that she goes within to find her answers just as she did to find her decision to not have children.

### *Becoming a woman*

Sarah connects turning 30 with becoming a woman. Her 20s were a time of struggle by which she came to know herself *"you just find so much in your 20s and you go through all the craziness"*. She also recalled as 30 approached having to renegotiate what it meant to be 30 as her familial and cultural messages were incongruent with her experience; *"pressures from everyone...oh my God, you're supposed to feel awful about it...and then...I remember...the day she (her mom) turned 30, I remember going into her room and she was crying and doing sit ups...I really did a lot of work with myself...30 is going to be great, 30 is going to be the best time, those are going to be the best years and there's nothing wrong with being 30."*

Another remarkable point in time at which Sarah associates with becoming a woman was when she came to a decision that in fact she would not have children; *“it was probably right around 30, well...31, 32...I’m going to decide now I’m not going to have kids”*. Sarah’s experience of becoming a woman was one of self-reflection, coming to an inner knowing of what was true for her, and living from that knowing.

### *Belonging to the womanhood*

Sarah’s knowing of the womanhood was one of a community of women in which one can relax and there is an openness and understanding environment; *“the atmosphere...it’s good energy...because I think we are so caring and nurturing”*. Her sense of the womanhood was likened to a softer, gentler way of feminism without the harshness and bitterness seen in some branches; *“more pleasant collectives of women”*. Sarah noted that not every woman chooses to be a part of the womanhood and the concept of womanhood itself somewhat vague and difficult to describe, She also noted her sense of it’s universality in that it existed for women around the world. She also spoke about the sense of trust she felt amongst women; *“I could trust a woman”*.

In terms of belonging, Sarah noted that not only is she unlike most women who have children but the fact that she’s not in a relationship is another way in which she feels set apart; *“I don’t always fit into it...most women in my life...are married or in serious relationships...sometimes I think that maybe that means that I don’t necessarily fit...because I’m not...nurturing and loving a man right now”*. Because she is always conscious of fighting against oppression and she is so independent, Sarah feels as if she doesn’t have the softness of a woman: *“maybe I’m not as soft as a lot of the women...I feel like I have to really fight to just be,*

*to survive without the help of a partner or whatever...I don't feel like I can ever exhale and just...be soft and harmonious".*

Being childfree also contributes to Sarah's sense of not belonging to the womanhood; "*there is an expectation that you have to have kids or you don't belong*". However, Sarah's found in talking with women there is more acceptance; "*women are starting to respond...good for you for making that decision, it's a responsible decision to make... when you talk to them and give your reasons why you, you gain more acceptance*".



Sasha

Sasha

*Being a Woman*

Sasha's experience of being a woman varies depending on the context or the company she is in; *"sometimes it feels great, sometimes it feels terrible...sometimes I love being alive and I think, thank God I'm a woman"*. Sasha knows women to be caring, hard working, independent, tenacious, compassionate and she finds *"women to be quite nurturing in general, I think that in itself has a healing quality to it"*. She also finds women to be *"devoted and dedicated"* at times to a detriment; *"even if things aren't really going well for them they'll just stick with it, I'm not so sure that's a good quality"*. Sasha notes that women *"have a lot of matters of the heart that are pressing"*.

In describing herself she used *adaptable, free, open, flexible, tenacious, sometimes fearful and uncertain, introspective, real, creative, and nurturing*. Sasha is creative and expressive; she works as a hairdresser and music and dance are a part of her life. Our conversation shifted to the search for the authentic self: *"authentic...I think maybe I'm searching for my authentic self"*. Sasha aspires to live from her authentic self and find joy; *"I don't feel like I have a great sense of joy in my life that's sustaining...I think where am I going to find my joy?... ultimately in your(self)...the source is everywhere...I mean that feels to be my ultimate work, to uncover that (joy) and I think that ties into the authentic self...listen to the things that intrigue me or that interest me and choose to explore those things"*. And Sasha describes a time when she feels most connected to her authentic self; *"I love dancing in my room, just putting on my favourite music and dancing...after this letting go, a certain kind of energy comes through and it almost just takes over...I'm in touch with just very natural, inherent energy...when you can be uninhibited and let that energy flow"*.

Sasha connected the ocean metaphorically to woman: *“mother ocean...she can really pummel you, don't mess with her, yeah the wrath but also (she) can be the most amazing, buoyant, supportive and beautiful place to be. It's interesting to think of it that way because that's what I think of woman, you know, can be very intense, very cold, very destructive but at the same time can be very nurturing and very caring, supportive”*.

### *Being a Childfree Woman*

From a young child Sasha has known she did not want to have children; *“I was probably about six years old, and I came upstairs and I put my hands on my hips and declared to both my parents that I was never getting married and having children”*. Choosing not to have children hasn't changed for her; *“there were a few times where I... thought oh wow that would be really neat...thinking of it romantically but the reality...it doesn't draw me in, it hasn't changed”*. Choosing to be childfree has brought Sasha to question how it is that she's going to direct her creative energy if not through having a child: *“What are you going to create? You've got to create something still, you are a creative being and so I put my focus into that”*. Sasha spoke of the energy of women and women that are mothers; *“we all have the mother energy but we channel it in different ways...I would probably more so say that we all have women energy that we channel in different ways”*.

Sasha's choice to be childfree has been put to the test; she's been pregnant before and chosen to terminate the pregnancies; in particular, one of the decisions was difficult due to family pressure to have a baby. In retrospect, Sasha has no regrets and knows she made the right decision. Other than those instances, Sasha says she hasn't *“thought about it much”* or *“questioned it”* until more recently as many of her friends have become pregnant or mothers and

*“I’m sitting with them and their children are doing this that and the other and I’m watching them and I’ve watched how they’ve changed and they are kind of looking at me like you’re so lucky, you have free time, oh how nice it must be to wake up at 10 and...it just makes me think, oh I am lucky to have all this time”. Even though, “I just think oh wow, I love, I think pregnant women are really beautiful but I’m thinking, I’m sure glad that’s not happening to me”.*

For Sasha, part of her decision to not have children stems from a sense of responsibility to end a cycle of familial violence: *“growing up...my mother was very violent...I don’t want to continue that pattern...brought down through generations. I almost feel like I’m being responsible to just stop that, just stop. So I think that’s definitely influenced my choice to not have children”.*

Having *“always known that I didn’t want to have children”* has *“set me apart from most other people, most other women... it just felt like I’m different”*. In sharing this choice with friends, the responses have frequently been one of shock and questioning as to why. Often Sasha has heard *“ why, I always see you as the earth mother, you know I think you’d make such a good mom and I’m like, what, really, wow, that’s so interesting that you see that, I don’t know that I see that”*.

Making this choice is significant in that *“my life isn’t suddenly going to be in a sense preordained”*. She is not going to be a mother and with that, she is going to have to create meaning and find fulfillment in other ways. In a sense, she is going to have to create an identity for herself: *“sometimes I just feel like, I’m blowing over, I’m blowing out there in the wind trying to make a life for myself, find joy for myself, feeling like okay, how am I going to create for myself”*. Sasha spoke about searching for her authentic self and her journey of self-discovery and purpose: *“my purpose is...to connect with who I really am and what I mean by that, that*

*energy that is sustaining me that wakes me up each morning*". Sasha's sense of purpose expands: *"I've always wanted to become a very powerful healer"* and believes that *"our movements do impact the world, however subtle, like little ripples and they go out"*.

As a childfree woman, relationships have come to the forefront for her: *"relationship is really important to me...I don't intend to walk alone in that I recognise that relationship is one of the top priorities in living for me on planet earth"*.

### *Becoming a Woman*

Sasha talked about various points in her life that she connects with her process of becoming a woman including her first menstrual cycle and her first sexual experience. She recalls, *"I was more tomboyish when I was younger, I remember...I didn't want to get breasts, I didn't want to get hips, I was really bummed out about the whole thing. It took me forever to wear a dress and feel comfortable in it"*. Sasha also connected being in touch with her healer within as a marker of becoming a woman, that *"pure energy that's in all of us"* and connecting with it initially *"dancing on the beach, sort of shadow dancing and just having that energy come through ...definitely having a connection to an energy"*. She also spoke of learning to surf and how surfing *"in some ways...brought out more of a masculine energy in me more than anything"*. For Sasha, surfing provided an avenue to explore ways of being, particularly other than those prescribed for girls and women: *"I surfed, I felt that set me apart...there were no women surfing so, I think I felt like I had to develop this edge, this edginess"*. Her experience in part was a means for her to connect with a new sense of what a woman could be: *"I feel in some ways it just makes me a stronger woman"*. As Sasha learned to ride the waves and be attuned to the ocean, she learned to be fluid and move with the rhythm rather than trying to tame or control; this she likened to a woman's way of being, one of fluidity.

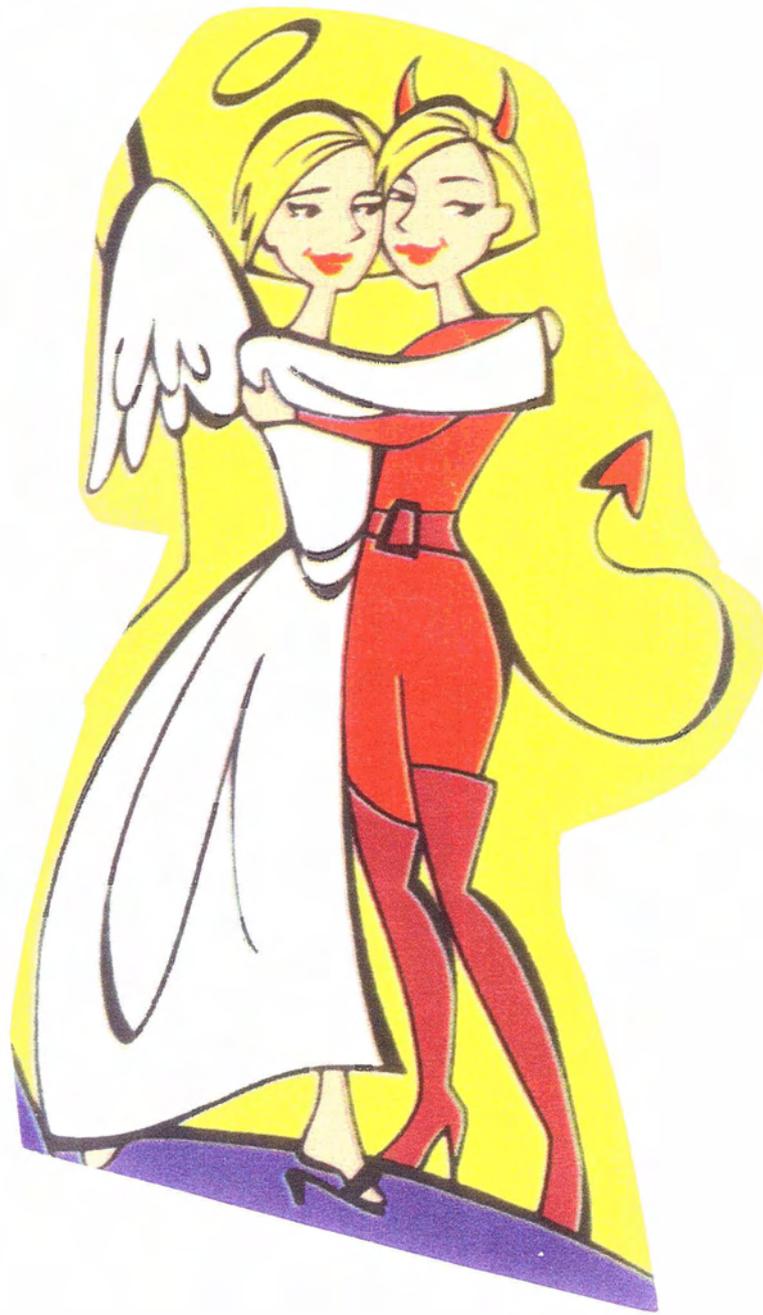
In talking about her process of becoming she shared, *“I feel the fullness of myself won’t be...there’s so much to travel through yet”*. And in looking at her life and who she is right now, Sasha shared about the process of becoming and how that translates into the world: *“they feel like small movements and maybe they don’t feel big enough in a way that I feel like well, I’m really making progress or I’m really getting somewhere so that’s when I think well maybe when you’re 50”*. Sasha recalls women in her youth that were not mothers and makes this connection; *“I totally respect them, I totally admire them, cool women, very neat women, very creative, very free and somewhat eccentric and they seem to be natural healers and so it’s interesting that I think about that right now because I think those are things that I want to be or that I’d like to move into...or that I’m becoming. I think right now I’m just feeling a little bit confused about what it means to be on this path”*.

#### *Belonging to the Womanhood*

Growing up, the presence of the womanhood was known to Sasha: *“growing up in a small town...you’re part of the community and they’re very much around you and there was definitely a strong sense of woman tribe so to speak, and there were lots of ceremonies or just neat gatherings, lots of gatherings or women’s circles...and it just felt that they were there if you needed them”*. As an adult, she moved to another small town hundreds of miles away and remembered *“a strong sense of womanhood (there) as well...and noted the difference: “the people there are quite different, they have different values and are different in the way they approach life but, women still gather and get together and talk and it’s still very much a circle there too, it’s just different...there’s still those circles but they’re just different”*.

While Sasha is aware of the womanhood, she doesn't connect with it very much; "*I don't really feel like I have a strong sense of belonging*". Unlike women who become mothers, Sasha felt as if she has to create her identity as a woman; "*I think having children you're going to naturally have that all of a sudden, it's kind of an easy way to get that*".

In talking about her women friends, she described them as "*they're very real, straight up, stick around in situations, there are pretty straight up about how they're feeling*". Sasha expressed that she is generally more comfortable sharing authentically with a woman than a man "*because I'm assuming that they will be more understanding and they won't feel like they have to fix it or anything, they're just understanding...they can appreciate moodiness or emotionalness*". She spoke about an authentic way of being between women, a genuineness; "*if you open up with women, I think it's kind of easy to let some things fall away*".



Max

Max

*Being a Woman*

Max enjoys being a woman: *"I'm happy I was born as a woman"*. Her experience of being a woman has changed over time yet is anchored in her femininity; *"I like pink...I am a girly girl in a lot of ways, and always have been, I wear dresses and skirts, rarely wear pants, but that's just me, that's not all women by any means...for me, personally...I very much have the two go together, femininity and identity as a woman"*. While this is the way Max expresses her femininity and sense of being a woman, she is very clear that not all women do, nor should there be an expectation for women to express as she does; *"as much as I am into this particular femininity, I love the girls that are just saying fuck that. I personally enjoy it, but for those that don't, I am so behind them... there's still a lot of societal pressure that being a woman means being feminine"*. Another layer of her experience is embodied in her physical form as she connects her sense of being a woman to her body; *"I have a very female shape, curves, big boobs...a comment that I often get is, 'now, there's a real woman.' A ridiculous comment to make, but I have this perfect thing going on, however abundant that may be"*. Another part of the physical connection is to her period.

Max is very independent and speaks of the satisfaction of being strong and capable and not needing men to step in when she's doing more typically male jobs like lifting; *"I totally pride myself on being the one to haul them (things) around...I'm a woman and I'm strong"*. The contrast Max encompasses of being very feminine yet autonomous, capable, and strong discredits the stereotype of the 'feminine woman' as helpless. Max feels most like a woman when *"I feel most empowered, or in my sense of empowerment, or power, which I think is when you're feeling really in yourself, in your own skin"*.

In talking about women and women's ways of being in general, Max refuted that women were more emotional than men. The difference, one that she personally enjoys, is that women are more open and willing to communicate what is happening and how it is impacting them; *"if I'm going through some kind of challenge or have a bad day... not only do I have a partner to talk to, but half a dozen women at least that I can pick up the phone and say, 'hello, this is my day'"*. She knows women as strong, independent, and intuitive and has *"an expectation that women should be more the peacemakers, the healers"*. Max sees the Goddess as a metaphor that speaks to her with reference to women, who women are, and who she is as a woman.

### *Being a Childfree Woman*

Max, from a young girl had a sense that she wouldn't have children; *"I always kind of knew, when I was a little girl I certainly was all over being mommy to my dolls...but I'd also say that maybe I wasn't going to have kids...as I got older... it's just been a definite thing"*. For Max, being childfree is significant in that it's a statement in where women are; *"being able to be child-free and coming under relatively little pressure to have children, that adds meaning as part of a generation of women that are allowed to make these choices...I feel like there is no limit to being a woman"*.

In terms of how this choice has influenced her and will continue to influence her, Max talked about having more of a focus on her relationships, particularly with her partner; *"my relationship with my partner is one of the things I'm most proud of"*. She spoke of a freedom not only in what she can do today but in planning for tomorrow; *"I can think differently about where I'm going because I'm not thinking about children...it impacts who I am...it gives me other places to get, I do a lot of community work in the arts...I'm going to give my love in some other places"*. The ways in which she contributes gives her life meaning; *"it's all around what I have given to*

*the community...those stand out as my accomplishments, and what has given meaning to what I do*". She recognised that many women do both, have children and contribute to our communities but she has chosen not to; *"I have the luxury...I just don't want to have to do both"*.

In reflecting on her choice to be childfree, she talked about it not stirring questions within her self as to why she wasn't interested but more so a curiosity as to why others chose to have children; *"I'd really like to know, I can't ask that question without being totally offensive... I want to understand what they're seeking"*. Max talks about being childfree *"as a lifestyle choice...there are a lot of things that I'm not going to experience... it's not like I feel that I'm missing out...I don't deny that it's an amazing experience...as long as someone is doing it...we all have our role"*. Max, a writer, metaphorically related her creative process and involvement in the arts to a mother's role in the life-cycle of a child.

Max talked out finding the humour in people's nosiness and judgments; *"I get bits of it, and it's pretty funny...it's interesting, at this age, people start to ask...it's amazing who will ask"*. The comments that people have made to her have often been judgmental and inferred that she doesn't know herself or that she won't get to fully experience being a woman if she doesn't have a child; *"I hear, oh you'll change your mind, or you'll regret it, or we'll wait and see... people think that you're frivolous or indulgent or immature...I won't fully know what being a woman is like"*. Conversely, Max has also experienced an openness and acceptance as well: *"I've got a lot of support from people"*.

### *Becoming a Woman*

Max recalls getting her period as one of the rites of passage to becoming a woman and with that came secrecy and shame; *"there was a lot of shame about what my body was doing"*. At

this time her father, who she was very close with, withdrew; *“I used to be Daddy’s little girl...I turned 12, I get my first bra, get my period, he had nothing to do with me anymore, which is the experience of so many little girls, where their fathers don’t know what to do with them anymore”*. Both of her parents, like many parents, were *“afraid of me being a sexual being...they did things with good intentions, but unfortunately they also, by not talking about these things, left a lot of strange blanks...so I got into some really bad places with boys because I didn’t know what was supposed to happen”*. On the other hand *“I didn’t learn that sexuality was my only power”*. In the process of becoming, Max also spoke of learning about her sexuality and resisting the shame she felt about her body and its natural, feminine ways of being, somewhat of a reclamation.

Other significant markers include times when she is conscious that what she is doing in the moment is traditionally woman’s work, like housework and a pregnancy that was terminated; *“I can’t deny that a marker of being a woman was when I was pregnant, when I was 21, which I chose not to have... that was definitely an experience where you go, wow, it is an amazing thing”*. Max shared another marker being *“making cut-out cookies...these are moments when I feel like my mother, I go, aha, I must be a woman, I can make cut-out cookies”*. Conversely, *“moments when I don’t feel like my mother, are markers...I feel like I’m defining it, for what it is for me”*.

### *Belonging to the Womanhood*

Max has a strong knowing and connection to the womanhood which she knows as the sisterhood rather than the womanhood; *“I know there’s a real sisterhood there, and I know that that can come together in a snap”*. Like her experience of being a woman, Max’s experience of

the womanhood has shifted; *“in my early 20s especially, I believed I was very much in tune with...the goddess. The girls that I hung out with, we were very goddessy”*.

Max describes the womanhood and her experience of it as *“fantastic, I’m really, really blessed with the friends that I have in my life to know that they’re there”*. She also spoke about the remarkable women that she has in her life and the way in which women in community connect that is important to her; *“what an amazing group of women...and a lot of amazing men, too, but in all honesty...the most amazing people that I know are women...it’s because of how they process, that’s what makes the difference”*.

In describing her knowing of the sisterhood (or womanhood), Max talks about her experience; *“there’s so much strength there, when I think about that, I feel really full...I love knowing that that’s there”*. Expanding on that, *“the sisterhood that I have been with, there have been times when, things that have gotten in the way, different relationships...men...we try to stick together...we’re there for each other”*. She talks about the nurturing and the naturalness that is present; *“there’s a real freedom in it, we are all women who will hug, we will (adorn one another), we will do each other’s makeup, we will do each other’s hair, we will pet each other, we will rub each other, those kinds of things, there’s also a comfortableness of the physicalness”*. Max feels a full sense of belonging to the sisterhood and choosing not to be a mother hasn’t impacted or impeded that sense of belonging particularly because she has many friends that are mothers who she honours and they honour her.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE ESSENCES OF THE WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

### Overview

Several common categories emerged from the analysis of the experiences of the individual women. Initially, I grouped the data categories into themes and presented them at the group meeting; this was done in order to authenticate my interpretation. These initial themes were elements that were implicitly or explicitly articulated by the women in the individual interviews. After the group meeting my analysis shifted several more times, some of the themes were combined, and it became clear to me that these themes were in fact the essence of childfree women's experiences in reference to their identity and the discourses of womanhood and femininity. The collective essential elements or essences are: Pioneering an Identity; Becoming as a Process; Ethic of Care; The Heartbeat of the Womanhood; and Bonding and Belonging.

### Pioneering an Identity

The women's stories illuminated the necessity or desire to create identities for themselves as childfree women. They spoke of not fitting into the culturally constructed identity of woman as mother and needing to forge their own way of being and belonging. Themes that were strongly associated with pioneering an identity were liberation, independence, autonomy, and authenticity.

Woven through each of the conversations was a sense of freedom in choosing not to have children for these women. Some spoke of the significance with regards to the historical context, others about the freedom that being childfree allowed them, and still another spoke about her fight for liberation.

In our conversations, many of the women spoke about the freedom or the significance of their reproductive choice, a choice women in other cultures may not have or at other times in history have not had. Max was explicit about the significance of the time and place in history that she finds herself in: *“by being able to be child-free and coming under relatively little pressure to have children, that adds meaning as part of a generation of women that are allowed to make these choices, without coming under major critique from others”*. For Max, being childfree and having the freedom to make that choice was a statement as to the power women have: *“it’s significant because I can”*.

Rhonda, also specifically remarked on the historical context: *“I like the way our society is and the age that we’re in that I have the freedom to choose, I can’t imagine living even fifty years ago where you get married to the boy next door, you don’t travel and you cook and clean, I would be very, very unhappy so it’s the freedom that I have in society that allows me to be who I am as opposed to other countries where I see the oppression...I can’t imagine...what it must be like for those women to be treated so differently”*. Further Rhonda states; *“it makes a huge statement to myself, to everybody around me to the whole world ...to have this freedom”*.

Sarah spoke about her fight for liberation in her fight against the oppression of women; *“I personally am always fighting to not be oppressed”*.

Other references to freedom were common with regard to the freedom one has when they don’t have children. The freedom allowed these women to pursue those things which are priorities in their lives; from education to art to career to community work to deep intimate relationships. Sarah spoke about the space that being childfree has allowed her to pursue other interests, particularly school: *“not having kids influenced me to just go as far as I can...in a sense pushed me to go further than I may have if had decided to have kids”*. Max, along the

same vein, remarked: *"there's definitely more freedom in not having kids...career, creativity, those are my things"*. Sarah made reference to freedom in terms of the way one can choose to be: *"freedom to me...it's got lots to do with independence...if you have the freedom to choose...why would you do it if it's not going to make you happy?"*. Rhonda felt that being childfree enabled her more liberty: *"I have control of my freedom, more control of my destiny"*. Sasha echoed Rhonda's sentiments about destiny: *"my life isn't suddenly going to be in a sense preordained"*.

Every woman spoke of being independent or strong or knowing women to be independent or strong. Some shared their struggle for autonomy and while others experienced being independent and strong as part of their upbringing. Part of the strength the women spoke about was in following their authentic knowing, the inner wisdom that guides one; some spoke specifically of being authentic or searching for her authentic self. In living authentically the women shared about the need to define who they are as a childfree woman. The women spoke of their unconventional identities and/or attitudes towards being a woman, and how they needed to pioneer an identity. There was a general sense of coming to know one's self and create an identity other than mother. Some of the women also posed existential questions essentially asking "if I'm not a mother, then who will I be and how will I contribute?". The phrase, "pioneer an identity", was suggested by one of the women at the group meeting and it was agreed that pioneering an identity as a woman was an essential element of being a childfree woman; there was also a sense of this generation of childfree women being trailblazers and expanding what it is to be a woman. In all of the interviews there was a strong sense of needing to find meaning and fulfillment in life as part of one's identity.

Rhonda, in talking about herself and what she identifies with: *“my identity, strong... independent”*. Similarly, Max shared: *“I have a lot of pride around, I’m a woman and I’m strong”* and Donna: *“I’ve always been very independent and raised to be very independent”*. Sarah shared that her sense of being a woman was being *“very independent...for the most part I’m very, I don’t need a man in my life, and it’s not that I don’t like men or anything, ‘cause I really do... it’s more that I don’t need them”*. Sasha knew women to be *“independent”* and Kate was clear that women are and have been strong and that strength has furthered the fight against oppression in inequality: *“to get to where women are today in our society...has been a struggle and there was a lot of...strength involved”*.

In terms becoming autonomous, Rhonda shared: *“I was different...I really wanted to travel...so I didn’t settle down with the boy next door, I never did get married which has led me to become very independent and very happy with that”*. Kate spoke about her experience in defining herself apart from the beliefs and values passed down from her family and through that process coming to trust herself. She speaks of a freedom in being authentic or true to herself: *“now I trust myself...freedom for sure because now I can...be whoever I want...they’ve never tried to impose their values on me but they’re just inherent, I was born into them, raised in them”*. One of the experience’s in Sasha’s liberation to autonomy was through surfing; *“that set me apart...I feel in some ways it just makes me a stronger woman.”*

All of the women either implicitly or explicitly spoke to living authentically; following an inner sense of truth in their lives. Donna shared, *“I just always needed to be who I was”*. Kate talked about being true to herself: *“I’m comfortable with who I am...it’s important to me. I think everybody would be happier if they did because I know people who don’t and they’re not happy people, they don’t sleep at night”*. Sasha specifically spoke about searching for her authentic

self: *“I feel maybe the self I’m kind of moving with is just a fragment of myself, my real self is still in there and kind of aligning with it, ever so slowly... that feels to be my ultimate work...listen to the things that intrigue me”*.

Existential questions surfaced for some of the women; questions as to who are they as women and how will they find meaning and fulfillment in life. Sasha wondered about how her decision not to have children would be in the future: *“I really want to feel that belonging or I want to feel like I have some deep purpose and am I kidding myself about not having children...I don’t think I’m going to wake up one day and feel really regretful...I think having children you’re going to naturally have that all of a sudden, it’s kind of an easy way to get that”*. And questions about meaning surfaced for her: *“I’m like well, what are you going to do...I mean I think having a child is really hard work. But I think going on this path too is also really hard work there’s less distraction”*.

Sarah talked about the need to define herself as a woman who is not a mother: *“I feel like I have to...define my life in another way”*. Sarah shared how being childfree made her feel like less of a woman: *“I don’t want to say it because it’s kind of a sad thing to say but maybe I don’t feel like I am as much of a woman if I don’t have children...that’s what I kind of feel sometimes but rationally I know that’s ridiculous”*. She also shared her existential angst, speaking about the freedom to pursue whatever she wants because she doesn’t have children and on the other hand, Sarah questions who is she if she is not a mother: *“I’m always thinking so what am I going to do...what am I going to do with my life...and always being able to say, and I will be able to do that because I won’t have kids, anything that I want to do or think that I want to do, I will be able to do it because I won’t have kids and I think that kids would really limit, but then I would be a mother. So I don’t know what I’m going to be, if I’m not a mother, I’m just me right and is that*

*enough? Is it enough to just be me?”. Donna also put forth similar questions: “that’s a hard question...you’re grappling with that whole case so if I did have a child I would be a mother but would I be able to still...no I know if I had a child today, I wouldn’t be...doing a lot of things I do right now today”. Rhonda shared about fulfillment and purpose “I think if you have your children that’s your purpose and of course you can also have your career...if you’re childless, I think in order to have a fulfilling life you would have to have another strong purpose...I have a purpose and it’s not motherhood”.*

Kate in talking about being childfree commented: *“there’s a lot of problems out there in the world and one of them isn’t that some women are deciding to not have children”*. Kate spoke about the responsibility she feels and how that may be different from women who choose to have children. She talked about how that responsibility translated into contributing to society and how that will influence her identity: *“for me not having children, I’ll be putting, I’ll continue to put my energy into other things around me so that for sure is going to have a big effect and has had a big effect...on who I am”*. Sarah shared that coming to the decision to be childfree has facilitated a knowing of other parts of herself, ones that may never have emerged if she had become a mother: *“it’s helped me get closer to developing another self than I would have if I hadn’t made that decision (to be childfree)”*.

### Becoming as a Process

In talking with the women it was clear that their experience of becoming a woman was a process rather than an event or turning point in their lives. Interestingly, there were some common rites of passage such as menstruation and first sexual experience for many of the women. Three of the women had experienced being pregnant for a short time and all spoke of that being significant in their process of becoming a woman. Even more noteworthy was the

sentiment that becoming a woman was a process of self discovery rather than a discrete event. This experience was either explicitly stated or imbedded in the stories.

Kate shared that her experience of becoming a woman was a journey of self discovery; of discerning who she was and in that finding freedom and truth. This path was long and arduous and took place during her late twenties and early thirties. She shared that *“becoming a woman was very emotional, not becoming an adult, but becoming a woman...I was in my late 20s...I needed to know who I was, what were my values...that’s when I became a woman”*. Once through this part of the journey with a strong sense of herself, Kate said, *“that was freedom”*.

Rhonda’s experience of becoming a woman was in part leaving an oppressive home life and healing the wounds from childhood abuse. Her journey, lengthy and at times painful, was also about making it on her own: *“it was a very long process... it was that step of moving away from home, being on your own, having no one to rely on”*. She also spoke of the process of coming to feel comfortable with herself: *“it was a long process to be comfortable with who I am... that’s the freedom to grow...very painful and very up and down...define who you are as a person, as a woman and how do you deal with other women, relationships”*.

Sasha spoke of her journey to becoming a woman and envisions that it will continue. She spoke about her search for her authentic self and named events such as first menstruation, first sexual experience, surfing and becoming aware of the healing energy that resides within as markers or rites of passage. Sasha continues to grow and change, ever increasing her sense of being a woman and hopes by 50 to have arrived; *“I don’t feel like I’ll even be a woman until I’m 50...(maybe then) you’ll feel more solid in who you are”*. Aptly, Sasha believes her purpose is to come to know herself and connect to her life energy: *“I feel that energy in itself is very joyful*

*and vibrant and I feel like a lot of people seek children for that and I want to seek it in myself ultimately”.*

Donna recalled the markers or rites of passage that she connected with becoming a woman to her first sexual experience, turning 21 and having a celebration party thrown in her honour, graduating from her undergraduate and graduate studies, getting married and buying a house. Like Sasha, Donna sees becoming a woman as a long process that will continue throughout her life: *“I’ll be arriving at being a woman for the rest of my life”.*

Max recalls the process of becoming a woman beginning as she began to physically develop. She remembers this as a difficult time for the close relationship she shared with her father inexplicably changed: *“it was very rough...when I was 12 and got my first period...I had to struggle with it, I didn’t understand why I had lost my Daddy...I really felt a huge sense of loss from that”.* Max also shared that learning about her sexuality and defining herself as a woman were markers of her process of becoming: *“moments that I feel like my mother, feel like markers, and also, there’s moments when I don’t feel like my mother, are markers. I’m like, okay, now I feel like I’m defining it, for what it is for me”.*

Sarah’s experience of becoming a woman was one of self discovery. She spoke about struggling in her twenties and through that coming to know herself in her early thirties. Sarah named 30 as the turning point: *“when I turned 30...I struggled so much through my 20s...when you reach 30 you just have a better sense of yourself”.* Sarah also experienced coming to the decision to not have children as a marker in her process of becoming a woman: *“right around 30, well ...31, 32...that’s when...I’m going to decide now I’m not going to have kids”.*

## Ethic of Care

It was moving to hear each women talk about their sense of contribution to the world and how they find fulfillment through that. Most of the women spoke about the importance of the work they do in terms of it making a difference on a humanitarian level. There was also a general sense of the passion which fuelled their work. It became evident very early on in the interviews that these women, and perhaps all women, have an ethic of care for our planet, our communities, and our well being which translates into a way of being.

Connected to that ethic of care or way of being was a notion of mother as an innate way of being. What surfaced was the insight that women naturally embody what it is to be mother whether or not they are mothers themselves. Whether they nurse, tend, look after, nurture or care, these are the characteristics inherent in mothering. All of the women spoke of nurturing or caring for others, projects at work, or creative endeavours. Two of the women specifically used the metaphor of birthing with reference to the work they do in their lives. Many of the women spoke of having relationships with children in their lives and a general sentiment was that there were enough children in the world in need of love. It was also common that these women felt that they would make good mothers if they had chosen to have children. Many of the women spoke about loving children. The ethic of care as a way of being speaks to the innate force within that moves one to bring life force into the moment; to be tender with the spark of life where ever it is found; and to nurture what it is that sustains life and fosters growth.

Kate spoke about the strong sense of caring and responsibility she feels: *“I care about almost everything...in my days I always try to do extra things, they might be really small, but I always look for places to help and I think a lot of people don’t...I enjoy it, at the end of the day it feels good”*. She spoke about having time and energy to direct into the world and as a childfree

woman, having different priorities: *“there’s so much chaos out there...you have so much energy and ability...we can show caring, we can make a lot of changes in the world...(childfree women) can shift that (maternal) responsibility to society or whoever you need”*. Kate’s sense of responsibility and caring are significant to her knowing of her purpose on earth: *“it doesn’t feel like work, caring, it takes energy...the purpose is to figure out who you are and if you can figure out who you are, you will learn and grow and do good things – you’ll have enough inner peace that you can do those things”*.

Rhonda has clarity about her purpose with regards to not being a mother; *“I’m meant to do other things”*. She expands upon her purpose; *“I definitely want to do work to help other people or something to do with compassion empathy, try to make the world a better place”*. Sasha shared about her experience of being a woman and that nurturing quality she feels: *“I like taking care, I like being able to be...nurturing and take care”*. Donna spoke about how her work makes a positive impact in our world and how her contribution, or way of being, is congruent with herself: *“it’s who I am...the work I do benefits a lot of people...it’s self serving to say it benefits a lot of people but I think it does”*. Much of her work is with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal learners *“most of our students are women, 80% are women and they’re making the difference in their own lives and the lives of their families and the lives of their community”*. Max talked about her choice to not have children allowing her to commit her time and energy to something she believes in: *“I do a lot of community work in the arts and I wouldn’t be able to probably do as much if I had a child”*. Max also spoke about meaning and finding meaning in her life through the work that she does: *“I think a lot of people have children because they’re searching for meaning...whether or not that’s right or wrong, and everybody searches for*

*meaning... part of my meaning, if I look back at my 20s, what did I achieve, what are my accomplishments, it's all around what I have given to the community".*

Sarah spoke about the innate nurturing quality of women: *"I think that a quality within us...I think it's a quality that we are, we're caring, nurturing, give of ourselves kind of people".* She shared how her choice to be childfree would intersect and impact with this way of being: *"I'll become someone that can really contribute a lot to the community, I'll be able to volunteer...and really contribute to the community rather than just my little family unit. I think I'll be able to give a lot of myself...to other people...I'll serve a better purpose doing something...I feel like I'll be able to make more of a difference in...kid's lives or just in the community, in doctors without borders or something if I don't have kids...I feel like there's kids and people that need help in the world and I feel if I don't have kids then I can contribute a lot".* Interestingly, both Kate and Sarah spoke of feeling a sense of responsibility to care, to contribute, to make a difference. Kate shared, *"I know I've felt it all my life"* and Sarah echoing those sentiments, *"I always want to be doing more, I always feel like I should be doing more"*.

Rhonda spoke of being maternal, her love of children and mothering: *"I'm very mothering in terms of other people's children if that opportunity is there, it's not that I don't love kids...I'm very maternal...I know I'd be a good mother"*. Sasha spoke about mothering with reference to cooking for and nurturing people, something that is important to her *"wanting to nurture someone is really important to me"*. Sarah spoke about her deep love for children: *"I love kids more than anybody, I love kids...I think I'm too selfish to give a 100% of myself to them and I feel like if I had them I would absolutely have to, it would be all about them"*.

Most of the women referred to children they have connection to in their life. For the most part, these women were interested in being in a child's life. Donna spoke about being a part of

her niece's life and showing her a different perspective of what a woman can be. Kate spoke about her nieces and nephews and about her connection with her partner's children who are nearly adults and do not live with them. Sarah spoke about her strong connection to her sister's children, Rhonda spoke about being in a past boyfriend's children's lives, and Max spoke about being in her nephew's life and involved with the raising of some of her friends' children:

*"there's hundreds of children around, I can borrow them, I can give them time...there's a few little kids that I'm totally in love with, and happy to (be involved in their lives)"*.

Some of the women spoke about their connection to animals. Sasha shared her experience of caring for her cat which gave her an outlet for her affectionate mothering and unconditional love. Laughing, she told me, *"I'd much rather have a cat...my cat just passed away a couple of years ago and I had him for 16 years and he was the best baby I could ever have and I felt like in terms of maternal instinct he was very nurturing for that, if I had any of that, give this creature some love and they love you back and it's a lovely exchange, it's the best"*. Donna also spoke about her connection with her cats: *"maternal instinct...I think I have it with my cats...you have these little animals and you just want to care for them"*. Kate talked about her affinity for nature and wildlife: *"I have a really strong connection with animals and if I'm in a forest and...there's no human sounds and I see a beautiful bird or squirrel or a deer or any kind of...even just the plants themselves, I'm so happy"*. She spoke about her connection with animals; *"I don't know if that's as strong as a connection though as a mother has with her child but it's something that I get a lot of joy out of and it feels like a connection to me...I have no idea if you can compare it"*.

Some of the women spoke about the innate nature of "mother" in women. Rhonda shared: *"I definitely think it's innate and I do think my role in society has a connection to motherhood without...children...there's just no one little face of a child"*. Sasha shared her views on mother

energy and women energy: *“I suppose being a woman that includes mother energy, or it can and so in that sense, and I think of mothering energy of being nurturing and being supportive and I think that’s quite inherent in women”*. Sarah spoke about the energy of creation and redirecting it for other endeavours: *“it doesn’t get lost...it’s transformed into something else...it could definitely be used and that’s and maybe that’s why I feel so motivated to, to help people to make a change or try to anyway”*.

Max and Donna used the metaphor of birthing or giving birth when they spoke about creating projects or art. Donna talked about her art and the creation of the ideas was like *“giving birth to ideas...giving this time to my creative process and nurturing my creative process”* and with reference to the projects she does at work, *“it’s sort of like my child and I give it the attention and the time, you know all my energy goes into that”*. Max likened her experience of creating a project and completing it to the cycle of mothering: *“metaphorically, creativity and projects and working in the arts, I’m very often in gestation, in birth, in raising, in grief because now it’s over”*. And Rhonda referred to her work as her baby: *“we need so much help in society, there’s so many issues to choose from that it’s endless...I feel that’s kind of like my baby, that helping role...it’s a maternal thing too, where you know you want to help, you want to give”*.

### The Heartbeat of the Womanhood

The womanhood, the sisterhood, the collective of all women, was a concept that was known with much diversity of experience to the women. Some were initially unclear as to what I was referring to, another was unaware of the womanhood and largely most women had different understandings or ways of articulating their understanding of it. Some of the women were aware of it and for one woman, the sisterhood was common in her experience of the world of women. I

chose to use the womanhood rather than the sisterhood as the sisterhood has taken on a politicised meaning through the women's movement beginning in the 1840s and 1850s (Mills, 2003). I term it as a heartbeat because in some cases it was faint, another only known through connection to past experience, and for others, the strength and awareness varied from a moderate pulse to one which can be felt throughout the being. Fittingly, the metaphor of the heart, the giver of life to the body, and the connector of women throughout the world.

Rhonda in speaking about the womanhood shared her knowing which was connected more to women working together to ensure survival: *"I have a sense of it but I don't necessarily feel a part of that...I feel more independent"*. Sasha's experience of the womanhood was more expanded and less tangible. Her awareness of the womanhood has fluctuated throughout her life and at times its presence was stronger. Here she speaks about the womanhood in her youth: there *"was definitely a strong sense of woman tribe so to speak and there were lots of ceremonies or just neat gatherings, lots of gatherings or women's circles...it just felt that they were there if you needed them"*. Sasha shared further about her more current experience: *"I do feel like there is a sense of womanhood, I don't really connect with it very much"*. She spoke about the womanhood being slightly different in the different communities she's lived in: *"there's a strong sense of womanhood, I'm sure there are in other places too. I think it's different. I think there are different kinds of people on the island than say Alberta or Saskatchewan...the people there are quite different, they have different values and are different in the way they approach life but women still gather and get together and talk and it's still very much a circle there too, it's just different...there's still those circles but they're just different"*.

At first, Donna did not identify with the term womanhood or have a sense of it. However, earlier in our conversation she had referred to what I would refer to as the womanhood when she

spoke of the women who gathered at the church. When that connection was made, Donna shared that her experience of the womanhood has been of women gathering to share and find support around child-rearing and other traditional womanly endeavours in which she was not interested. In relating it to her women friends, Donna finds it difficult to imagine them sharing a common bond *“I have so many different female friends that are all so unconnected and just I can’t even see...them all sitting in the same room and agreeing on anything because they are all so different, they all have such different life choices and situations”*.

Kate, identifying the thread of caring, *“caring...is...very big”* acknowledged that she did not know much about it, *“I wouldn’t say it’s a strong (her knowing)...I just have a connection with people and you know a lot of them are women”*. She wondered if this vague knowing rather than an explicit knowing of the womanhood was connected to her challenge of forming close ties with people when she was growing up. Even so, she talked about her notion of the womanhood as spanning our world and she feels it when: *“(I) watch all these programs where, in developing countries they show all these women who are struggling and raising all these children...doing a lot of everything for themselves”*. The womanhood resonates even stronger for Kate when she meets women from another culture and makes efforts to connect with them: *“I feel a connection toward them...when I meet women from my partner’s culture too who at first don’t usually like me, I mean they don’t know me but there’s stuff they’re not sure about me, they don’t know if they trust me...I feel a connection because I want them to see that they can where as with the men I don’t feel that...but I feel like I need to be accepted by the women for some reason, to let them know that I’m, at some level I’m the same as them”*.

Max knows the womanhood as the sisterhood. Her experience of the sisterhood was positive and an essential part of the fabric of her life. She shared about her experience in her early

twenties when she and her women friends were in harmony with the Goddess and the way of the Goddess: *“I was very much in tune with the cult of the goddess, not the cult, I was very much into the goddess...and so there’s that kind of philosophy that shows women as being the empresses, the ever-fertile, abundant, full, nurturing, and we are, to a large extent”*. Max shared that the women in her life continue to be a strong presence and about her confidence in the sisterhood: *“I am so strongly influenced by the girls that I have in my life, girls, women...I’m really, really blessed...what an amazing group of women they are...there’s a real freedom in it...there’s also a comfortableness of the physicalness”*.

Sarah knows the womanhood to be *“a good place to be...just really relaxing...it’s easy to talk to women, it’s easier to talk to a lot of women, not all women and I think that...(we) have a better understanding of each other”*. Sarah likened the womanhood to collectives of women that are softer and gentler than what one might classify as feminist collectives of women.

### Bonding and Belonging

As women who chose not to be mothers when the vast majority of women choose to become mothers it is important to consider childfree women’s experience of belonging to the womanhood or feeling accepted by other women. Five out of the six women identified varying experiences of belonging to a lesser degree because they are childfree; the sixth felt being childfree did not influence her sense of belonging or acceptance.

For Donna, she found that she felt like she could not find connection or have an interest in participating in the women’s gatherings; *“it just didn’t interest me”*. Sasha, one of the women who had a stronger knowing of the womanhood, shared, *“I don’t really feel like I have a strong sense of belonging and that’s an interesting thing...in some senses I feel very rooted but in other senses (I don’t), and I think too that’s where my spiritual path is very important to me because I*

*feel that's my rooting and because at times it's really challenging it feels like it's not rooted, but...when it comes right down to it, it is rooted".*

One woman, interestingly Max who has a strong sense of the sisterhood, did not feel that being childfree impacted her sense of belonging; *"I feel like I totally belong... I'm like yeah, this exists and I know all these amazing, strong, powerful persons that are women...I'm honoured to be part of that."* In terms of being childfree, mostly what Max is aware of are times when she becomes aware of the difference: *"there's times when a conversation, if it's all mothers...there'll be moments when I realise that, for them, it's all a night off...I get to go out anytime... I sit back and totally honour them for that".*

Kate is aware of the separation or distance that can be felt between women who are and women who are not mothers. Personally, she's experienced disconnection rather than connection with women who feel that being a mother is a purpose rather than a choice: *"it impacts it for sure because and it's not because of my perception but I think because of other women's perception not all but I think some are very, are very sure that is a big part of our purpose here, that we procreate, to make a baby and no matter how I try to explain why I don't think it's for me, why I know it's not for me, they can't understand because for them it's a very important".*

Sarah experiences not always feeling as if she fits into the womanhood; *"I don't always fit into it".* Part of this experience of not fitting in she attributes to being different or in a different situation than most women in her life: *"most women in my life...are married or in serious relationships... sometimes I think that maybe that means that I don't necessarily fit in to that whole, to the whole womanhood because...I'm not nurturing and loving a man right now".*

Sarah, because she makes her way in the world as independently as possible doesn't feel as fluid or soft as other women: *"I have to really fight to just be...I don't feel like I have that...softness".*

Coupled with this experience is being childfree which further separates Sarah from many women. This impacts her sense of belonging: *“I...have a sense of...not belonging...because (being a mother is) such an expectation but then at the same time...the more you talk to women...you gain more acceptance.*

## CHAPTER SIX: KEY CONCEPTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND EMERGING QUESTIONS

### Introduction

This chapter is the culmination of the insights, questions and comments which surfaced in the course of my inquiry. Included in the chapter are: strong or noteworthy connections between the literature and these women's essential experiences; the concepts that I believe are key in terms of theoretical understandings of women's identity development, their implications and the questions that have emerged as I have integrated the fundamental elements of women's experience of being childfree with reference to identity from the interviews (chapter five) and literature on childfree women (chapter two) and my theoretical understanding of women's identity development (chapter two); and discussion around the discourse that links woman and mother and the implications of that discourse to women's lives. I have made reference to the literature where appropriate and indicated the areas where I believe future inquiries may be beneficial. I have also included a practical application of this inquiry for counsellors and other health professionals. Finally, I have commented on the methodological process of this inquiry and significant points of interest and learning. The areas of discussion are as follows: essential elements of women's identity; women's identity development; an expanded role of 'woman'; commonality amongst women, mother or not; the womanhood; implications for counsellors and other health professionals; and methodological thoughts and learning.

### Elements of Women's Identity

The essential elements or the essence of these childfree women's experience addressed in this inquiry were the focus of chapter five, *The Essences of the Women's Experiences*. Briefly, the essences or essential elements were: pioneering an identity; becoming as a process; ethic of care; the heartbeat of the womanhood; and bonding and belonging. These concepts, thoughts

and questions emerged from my integration of the essential elements of women's experience from chapter four and five and the literature on childfree women.

The women strongly identified with being independent as part of their identity. Ireland (1993) speaks to this: women who choose to be childfree are "more likely to have organised (their) identity around autonomy" (p. 73). The women also expressed an attitude of pushing against or redirecting the negativity found in discourses that link woman and mother. Ireland (1993), in her research, found that childfree women are more likely to respond to criticism with "her own query as to why a woman's life must be bounded by the institution of motherhood" and deflected the negative social judgments about a childfree lifestyle (p. 71). The sentiments expressed by the women in my study seemed to be less divisive in comparison to those expressed through the nature of Ireland's language. Interestingly, the sentiment of 'pioneering an identity' and being trailblazers, expressed explicitly by the women at the group meeting and implicitly in their individual interviews, was supported in the literature (Ireland, 1993).

Other noteworthy elements which were similar to the current research were feelings of struggle in coming to know oneself as highlighted in the theme in chapter five, becoming as a process. Keshet (1997), in writing about authentic knowing expresses that as women come to know themselves and their meaning system, they are creating an identity; this was echoed by the women in my inquiry.

### Women's Identity Development

Historically, Freudian and Ericksonian theories of women's identity development were based upon the patterning of men's identity development. Emerging from the women's movement was a new perspective on women's identity development. These theories emphasised women's development through relation or connection rather than through separation or

disconnection (Chorodrow, 1974, 1978; Gilligan, 1982) and implicitly stated that motherhood was a natural part of a woman's development. The stories in my inquiry are a "particularly rich source of counterhegemonic insight" (Morell, 1993, p. 304) and raise some interesting questions. Foremost, I am led to believe from the experiences of the women in the inquiry, that there is a difference between becoming an adult and becoming a woman.

While both transitions are marked by indicators, physical and psychological in nature, the locus of control differs. In British Columbia boys and girls reach the age of majority at 19; legally they become adults. Generally by 19 they have completed high school and the majority of their physical maturation has occurred. I suggest that the transition to becoming a woman is different, in that the process is not delineated by an external source of authority but rather by an internal knowing of the self. The process by which the women in this inquiry articulated their experience of becoming women denotes a long process of development, both physical and psychological. Gilligan's (1982) and Belenky et al.'s (1986) theories of women's development "all presume that maturation is the consequence of appropriate interaction between the environment and the individuals and that these transitions are made gradually" (Enns, 1991, p. 212). The experience of these women's process of becoming a woman spans several years with the pivotal element being the knowing of oneself. Morell (1993) found in her study that "women's development does not just "proceed" in some orderly fashion" (p. 305).

With the distinction between adulthood and womanhood as outlined above, there is a need for further inquiries into this phenomenon. In essence, this inquiry brought into question the assumption that female adults and women were the same. One must wonder if this experience of becoming woman is confined to the six women interviewed and myself, the researcher, as this

too was my experience. While it seems unlikely, further research is needed, before further meaning and speculations can be authenticated.

Further research is also needed to ascertain whether women who choose not to have children and women who become mothers in fact have different patterns of identity development. As the women expressed pivotal points of self determination of their woman status occurring right up to their early thirties, further research will need to take into consideration women who have children before and after that point. It will be interesting to see if women who choose not to have children travel on a different developmental path to womanhood. Moreover, future research may want to inquire as to whether other unconventional lifestyle choices influence women's identity development. It would be interesting to look at women from various generations and determine whether the process of becoming a woman is in fact fluid and continues throughout a female's lifespan and whether different generations have different experiences and notions of becoming shaped by the social backdrop. Finally, it would be fascinating to speak with women from other cultures about these notions.

#### An Expanded Role of Woman

Not only did this inquiry challenge the long standing assumption that female adults and women were the same, it specifically challenged the discourse that links woman to mother(hood) and expresses woman and mother are synonymous (Morell, 1993). Women expressed their experiences as women who are not mothers and their way in which they "mother" in the world: questions emerged from the data as to the meaning and implications of innate capacity of women to 'mother'. Vissing (2002) found that most of the women in her research expressed nurturing was an important part of their character. The connotations of mother and mothering expressed by childfree women could be expanded as these women shared about their metaphorical role as

mothers and their experience of the life-cycle - conception, gestation, birth, and death.

Following from that metaphor, one could say, these conceptions of mother and women are in the pregnancy stage; they have been conceived and are preparing to be birthed into the world of research and academia.

The implicit assumption that woman and mother are synonymous (Morell, 1993) is deeply embedded in our cultural discourses of gender. As women are the bearers of children and reproductive freedom is relatively new, the notion of woman as mother has existed as historically the vast majority of women became mothers and currently the majority of women become mothers. This implicit assumption, has rationally emerged from historical context, however, it has been endorsed and reinforced by oppressive patriarchal ideology (Gergen 1990; Morell, 1993) which continues to influence gender role expectations which essentially limit women's reproductive choices and thwart attempts to claim power by non-mothers (Gergen, 1990). This is not to say that women or even the majority of women will choose not to have children; what an expansion of reproductive choice will offer women is the freedom to choose to have children rather than growing up with the assumption that they will have children.

With this shift of gender expectations, I believe that it is possible we will see significant movement in the rights for women. It is plausible that women will not be expected or expect themselves to be extraordinary people or "super women" when having children is not believed or prescribed as an inherent part of being a woman. Emerging from that shift, it is possible to deduce that women who have children will be able to carry a more balanced existence. With the separation of the term woman and mother, it may follow that fewer children are born to parents that are uncertain as to their motivation in having children other than that it is what women do.

I anticipate that with a shift in the cultural discourses that prescribe gender roles, the word woman would be “revolutionised” to an expanded meaning which would offer women who choose not to have children less societal presumptions and judgements to navigate: “we must work to make *woman* a more spacious word” (Morell, 1993, p. 316). With this expansion, more women will have the liberty to create identities from their inner sense or authentic self rather than by external notions of limiting cultural discourses. It would follow that the psychology of women which asserts that “‘a woman is her body’, specifically its reproductive capacity”, and advises women that significant meaning and fulfillment in their life is derived from these capacities (Gergen, 1990, p. 478, 479) would expand and encourage or support women to locate their identity outside the biology of their gender. Women may feel liberated and experience greater authenticity, flexibility, and fluidity in their experience of being women and becoming women. Further, women whose identities are currently on the fringe and feel a lack of belonging to the womanhood or a separation between themselves and other women may find, with an expanded notion of woman, that they feel more ease and acceptance. Furthermore, as we look to the future, societies will require expanded diversity from both women and men as they will be “based on humanity rather than gender” (Ireland, 1993, p. 92). The notion of expanding the meaning or connotation of mother to include the nurturing of others, projects, creations etc. is farfetched though highlights the commonality of mothering as a woman’s way of being.

I have become curious if we use “mother” to describe those actions or feelings that are wholesome, idealistic, and virtuous. Further to that, I wonder if childfree women, myself included, name their experiences of caring, creation, or nurturing as an innate mothering energy

because we have been indoctrinated through discourses that elevate mothers to lofty positions of distinction (from which they inevitably must sacrifice themselves or fall) that attribute all that is good and womanly to mothers. Do childfree women, in response to feelings of separation and in attempt to find equal footing, express notions of lofty idealism in order to meet or compete with the enhanced standing of those women who choose to be mothers? Do we inadvertently perpetuate the heightened position of mother as good and pure and while doing so, continue to diminish ourselves as non-mothers by continuing to engage with the discourse of motherhood? Or do we continue to engage in the discourse of motherhood as we pioneer our identities and expand the perception of what it is to be a woman?

#### Commonality Amongst Women, Mother or Not

One of the hopes of this research inquiry was to bridge the gaps between women who choose to have children and those that do not and illuminate the places of connection or commonality amongst women rather than the places of difference. Inferred by some of the women in the study was a separation between themselves and women who have children. I understand and articulate this as an “energetic divide” that happens if not explicitly through questioning, implicitly drawn by hesitation, judgment, or assumptions. This “energetic divide” may be difficult to distinguish, articulate, and therefore renegotiate. One of the inherent difficulties in building connection is healing past divisions: in this circumstance, there may be residual threat as some women may feel childfree women’s choices invalidate their choice to be mothers. Furthermore, some of the women shared situations where they had come face to face with individuals who believe that being a mother is a woman’s role: this mind-set is supported by many religious doctrines either implicitly or explicitly (Daniluk, 1999). These sentiments only further divide women, pitting childfree against mothers and solidifying “the notion of a stable

and monolithic “feminine” orientation” (Morell, 1993, p. 306). This rigidity of gender roles only serves to oppress and thus assert dominance and control over individuals, men and women alike.

Many of the women in the study expressed tremendous respect not only for the women that choose to have children but for the miracle of birth. They articulated that they too share a deep caring and compassion for life, for bringing and sustaining life in this world and find meaning and fulfillment through those commitments. While the focus or recipient of these “mothering” actions differ, the essence can be construed as comparable. It is through the stretching or reaching for connection that I believe women will find commonalities by which they can build understanding, cooperation, and connection. It is through cooperation and connection that the division between women will lessen and women will unite and fight oppression and find liberation.

### The Womanhood

What I know from the study regarding the womanhood is that there is much diversity in how these women knew and experienced the womanhood. I know the womanhood to be a collective consciousness that women share which extends understanding, connection, support, and commonality amongst women. I know it to differ from the sisterhood which includes a political or feminist consciousness that works towards common goals of women’s equality in general. The concept of the womanhood has been difficult to articulate; there is something unwritten about it, an unspoken communication or frame of reference that unites woman despite their differences. There is an understanding, a solidarity that crosses borders, social strata, language, and culture. The lack of clarity or common understanding about the womanhood that was revealed in the interviews points to this lack of awareness of it and supports my belief that it is

essential to begin rebuilding the connections between women; strengthening the commonalities rather than highlighting the differences which breeds competition and reinforces hierarchy.

It was also telling to hear the stories of feeling separate or as if childfree women did not fully belong. This divide once again is anchored in the differences rather than the similarities of women. I believe the general state of the womanhood speaks to the manner in which North American women have had to survive and excel in a world theoretically and practically based on a white middle class male model, patriarchy; which in fact serves to oppress the majority of individuals in one way or another.

#### Implications for Counsellors and Other Health Professionals

The practical application for counsellors and other health professionals that has emerged from this inquiry relates to working with individuals as well as educators or advocates in the larger community. Concepts of equality, authenticity, self-awareness and scope of practice are included and the need for counsellors to act as advocates is briefly addressed.

The women's experiences of becoming revealed a process of self-discovery through which they became congruent with themselves and their choices; they expressed a search for authenticity. It would follow that women with similar circumstances may go through the same process of becoming a woman. Further, in the process of making a conscious choice to remain childfree, some women may experience a struggle between their inner knowing and social expectations (Ireland, 1993; Wickes, 1991). As we have seen an increase in the accessibility and acceptability of counselling, it would be prudent to foresee women who choose to be childfree seeking support from counsellors as they traverse this part of their journey of self-discovery.

As counsellors, we must be ever aware of the inherent power imbalance of the client/therapist relationship. With the "lens of deficiency" by which childfree women are seen

(Morell, 2000) and the cultural discourses that intrinsically link woman and mother, counsellors must be cognisant of their values and beliefs, both underlying and known. It is not enough for counsellors to ‘think’ that women *should* have reproductive choice, they must come to know what reproductive choice actually means to them. Moreover, counsellors need to recognise where these understandings and their values ‘spill over’ into their counselling relationships and address themselves either through personal counselling or supervision in order to provide non judgmental counselling and support women in their unique expressions of being women (Wickes, 1991).

In order to facilitate self acceptance and awareness for childfree women, counsellors must be aware of the complexity of the issue, the implications of the decision (Wickes, 1991) and the context of women’s lives. Further, they must understand the subtle nuances that go along with the territory; the inner dialogue, judgment, unasked questions of others – the psychic response to childfree women. Enns (1991) paralleling concepts in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, writes about *midwife counsellors* as those who

assist clients with the birth and elaboration of their own ideas and solutions to life events. By conveying to clients that growth emerges out of their own efforts and the latent knowledge of themselves, counselors provide support for their maturing concepts of self.

p. 212

Enns’ “midwife counsellor” would be one model in working with women who have chosen atypical lifestyles in that these choices would be supported through an exploration of their own desires. This support would encourage a freedom for women to distinguish their identities from their internal sense of knowing, or authentic knowing, rather than having others define them (McBride, 1990).

Counsellors are in the position to advocate for and educate both clients and the community at large through connections with other health practitioners as well as their everyday experiences. It is my hope that the counselling profession will shift its general political stance of supporting the status quo (Hare-Mustin, 1980) and become more politically motivated to advocate for systemic changes and view the context in which people live as contributors to the issues. Until such a time, a “neutral stance” will continue to support the indoctrination of individuals through gender role socialisation and we will continue to see individuals held responsible and the oppressive social backdrop in which we are situated will continue to go unaddressed. Counsellors need to advocate for the revamping of socially constructed gender roles, hence, expectations and ways of being allocated by gender in order to increase the diversity and freedom of individuality and authenticity for human beings.

#### Methodological Thought and Learning

This experience has been rich with learning; in many ways it has been a journey of self discovery, of learning what it is to be a researcher or more importantly, who I am as a researcher. In choosing to draw from phenomenological thought, organic inquiry, and feminist principles I was able to work congruently and in a manner that was authentic for me. In working with the women who generously shared from their hearts deeply personal experiences, I feel gratitude.

My greatest learning was that for me, research takes time and space, emotional space. I trusted the process, knowing it would emerge, but quickly learned that in order for the next step to materialise, I needed to be open and receptive, in a head space or more accurately, an embodied space where I could move with the research. Upon reflection, I would have changed many things to make the road a little smoother however, it may have been in those big potholes

that I learned the most about myself, about research, and how the sacred unfolds wherever it is invited.

*Journal July 2004*

*I sit, the study is written, but not over...the experience is with me, it whispers like the wind, moving inside, settling and shifting me as I integrate. I have been changed, transformed by the process, by the women, by the voices that resonated deeply within, inviting movement, inspiring deeper connection to myself and with others. I feel expansive as I remember the points of convergence, I am hopeful that you, the reader will find places of connection, resonance, and transformation.*

*I reflect on what I know about women, what I've come to know and what I am waiting to know...and I notice a softness in my belly...I recognise it as familiar, a wisdom that relays 'it will unfold as it should, all in good time' ...I wonder how it is that this energetic divide between women will heal – like the Berlin wall – do we need a revolution to find commonality and connection or is it there, like the blue of the sky, a backdrop only missed when it's hidden by the clouds. And I search for that hope within, hearing the voices, remembering how I felt as each woman's story told part of mine. My eyes tingle as tears fill the lower lids, I notice a slight tightening of my throat...I drop inward, connecting with my rhythm, and connecting with what I know to be true.*

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## APPENDICES A

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA  
OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH  
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

*Participant Consent Form*

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*Becoming, Being and Belonging to the Womanhood:  
An Inquiry of Voluntary Childfree Women*

You are being invited to participate in this study that is being conducted by myself, Lisa Mortimore. I am a graduate student in the department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria and you may contact me if you have further questions by email at [lmortimore@yahoo.com](mailto:lmortimore@yahoo.com) or at 250-721-4413.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a MA degree in Counselling Psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Anne Marshall. You may contact her at 250-721-7815 or [amarshal@uvic.ca](mailto:amarshal@uvic.ca).

The purpose of this research project is to explore voluntary childfree women's experiences of becoming and being a woman. There is limited research in this area, particularly looking at the lived experience of being a woman who has chosen not to have children. The objectives of the research are:

- to explore childfree women's experiences, understanding and meanings of how they construct their identities as women.
- to gain a greater understanding of the subjective experience of women who choose to be childfree, and provide an opportunity for those women's voices to be heard.

This research is important because it seeks to add to the knowledge about women's experiences who choose not to be mothers. This knowledge may inform counselling practice.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a self-identified voluntary childfree woman who is interested in being a participant in this study. I am seeking heterosexual women who have chosen not to have children and not to parent and are committed to staying childfree. I am looking for women who are interested and willing to share their personal experience, reflections and meaning making of their experience of identity development as voluntary childfree women. If you fit the above-mentioned criteria the only other criterion is a willingness to participate in an individual interview and a group interview with the other participants. The individual and group interviews will be conducted by myself.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an individual interview which will be one to one and a half hours in length as well as a group interview which will be about 2 hours. Some sample interview questions are: What is your experience of becoming a woman? What does it mean to you to be a childfree woman? What was your experience of transitioning into adulthood? What is your sense of your feminine identity?

The individual interview will be audio taped, then transcribed onto paper. You will also be asked to review your transcription between the individual interview and the group interview. The group interview will be informal: it will be video and audio taped and transcribed. I will present my preliminary findings from the individual interviews and pose a general question such as “who are voluntary childfree women?” If you have used any journaling, art or other self reflection tools you can bring them to the first interview so we can talk about them, but I won’t be keeping them.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including loss of time. Due to the sensitive topic of this inquiry some women may experience upset or emotion during the interview. If this does occur, I will support you in coming back to a place in your self that you feel safe and grounded. I will also provide a list of three counsellors/agencies in the Victoria area that you can contact if you’d like to further explore this issue. One of the hopes of this research is that each participant will benefit from participation in some manner; often, new awarenesses, meanings, and personal insight are discovered through the interview process. Further, your participation in this research will contribute to the understanding of atypical lifestyles as well as an increase in autonomous reproductive choices for women.

Each participant will receive a small gift in appreciation for their time. It is important that this gift does not influence your decision to participate in this study. If you would not participate in the study were it not for the gift, you should decline participation in the study.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed where possible (i.e. the individual interview audio tape) and your information will not be used for the study. However, if you participate in the group interview and then decide to withdraw I cannot destroy that video tape and will be using it but I will not use your information/participation from it.

In order to assure myself that you are continuing to give your consent to participate in this research, I will ask you at the beginning of the group interview whether you are still willing and comfortable to proceed.

Your identity will be known to other participants in the group, to myself and possibly to a hired typist. Your name and other identifying details will not be transcribed from the taped interviews. Each participant will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym. It is an expectation of participation that you will respect the confidentiality and anonymity of other participants in the group interview.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected. Only myself and possibly a hired typist will have access to the taped interviews. The tapes will be destroyed after my Master’s defense. The transcripts and any notes taken during the interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed after three years.

All participants will receive a summary report of the findings. With your permission, I will keep your contact information and tell you when the summary report is available. Participants can

request a copy of my thesis when it is complete. It is anticipated that the summarised results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: through my Master's thesis, articles for publication in academic journals, presentations at conferences or in class presentations.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and/or my supervisor, Dr. Anne Marshall at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4362).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Thank you for your interest.

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## APPENDICES B

### Interview Questions

1. *How did you come to know your choice to be childfree?*
2. *What is your sense of being a woman?*
3. *How do you experience being a woman?*
4. *How do you feel about being a woman?*
5. *What does it mean to you to be a woman?*
6. *Does being childfree bring new or other meaning and to being a woman?*
7. *Has your choice to be childfree influenced who you are and who you can become?*
8. *When you think of milestones, markers or rites of passage that you feel defined you as a woman, what comes to mind?*
9. *What was your experience in becoming a woman? In transitioning to adulthood?*
10. *Do you have a sense of the womanhood – the collective of all women?*
11. *What do you know the womanhood to be?*
12. *What is your sense of belonging?*
13. *Is it significant that have chosen to be childfree?*
14. *What has your experience of choosing not to have children been like?  
This choice brought you to know and question self?*
15. *When you think about you identity as a woman, how would you describe it? What is your sense of your feminine identity? Are they the same?*
16. *Are there any images or metaphors that speak to you in reference to who you are as a woman, who women are, being a woman etc?*
17. *Is there anything else that you feel is important that you want to share with me?*

# *Childfree Women*

UVic, **woman centred, researcher** is looking for heterosexual *women*, between the *ages of 30-35*, who are *not mothers* and committed to remaining childless, to *participate in a research study* for her thesis work in the counselling psychology and leadership studies department.

The research topic is childfree women's experiences of becoming and being a woman and belonging to the womanhood.

There will be an *individual interview* (1-1.5 hrs) as well as a *group interview* (approx.2hrs).

While there is no monetary remuneration, it is the hope that each participant will discover new insights and create new meanings and connections in the process.

If you are *interested in participating* or would like more information please contact:

Lisa Mortimore at 250-721-4413 or via email at

[lisamort@uvic.ca](mailto:lisamort@uvic.ca)