

Spiritual Experiences and Trauma Recovery: A Qualitative Study on How Spiritual Experiences  
Inform Recovery from Trauma

by

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B.A., University of Regina, 2007

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This study examines how people who have survived trauma have encountered healing following spiritual experiences. The significance of this research lies in its unique findings, contributing to the body of literature on trauma recovery. Qualitative methodology and thematic analysis were used to explore the research question that guided this study.

Six individuals who had survived traumatic events participated in narrative interviews and were asked to tell the story of how their spiritual experiences impacted their healing from trauma. Findings show that these participants' spiritual experiences helped them to cultivate a foundation to return to in future moments of challenge, impacted the body's healing, and served as a guide.

Further research in the field is suggested, including investigating how experiences with Kundalini energy impact trauma recovery, the relationship between spiritual experiences and physical healing, and how people from diverse cultural backgrounds experience trauma recovery in the wake of a spiritual experience.

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## Acknowledgements

Over the course of the past two years I have learned more than I ever had anticipated before entering this Master's in Counselling Psychology program at the University of Victoria. I have witnessed the emergence of new skills, ideas, and perspectives within myself, and watched them flourish and develop into strengths, knowledge, and deeper understandings. For these gifts I have many to thank.

I would first like to express my deepest gratitude to my family for their role in helping me to get to this place in my journey. Words cannot adequately express my thanks for a lifetime of love and support. Next, I acknowledge the strength and courage of the six participants who made this study possible. Their openness and insight is very much appreciated. I also recognize the thoughtful support of my committee members, Drs. Anne Bruce and Natalee Popadiuk. Their patience, consideration, and feedback has facilitated more learning than I thought possible through this process. In addition, my supervising faculty member, Dr. Tim Black has been a wonderful guide along this learning path, both within the context of this thesis and in the classroom.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction to the Topic

The notion of spirituality has been documented and discussed extensively across many contexts throughout recorded history. While the concept of *spirit* has been described from numerous perspectives in relation to many aspects of life (e.g., Cohen, 2010; Ferrell, 2010; Geweke, 2010; Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2010), there is presently no universal definition for that which is commonly referred to as *spirituality* (Bruce, Shields, & Molzahn, 2011). As academic interest in the study of spirituality has grown, researchers from a variety of backgrounds have attempted to study spirituality and its place in the rubric of human experience. More recently, the study of spirituality in relation to psychological health has seen a significant increase, with considerable focus paid to the effects of spirituality and phenomena related to human wellness (e.g., Breibart, 2001; Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Gilbert, 2007; Piedmont, 2001).

As an individual with an interest in both personal growth and human development, the topic of spirituality is of considerable importance within the scope of my own life. However, as a student with a great number of commitments and responsibilities, the pursuit of spiritual growth is often left unattended. As such, the topic of spirituality leaves much to be discovered as I struggle to find time to explore my own sense of spirituality and the practices related to its pursuit. As I strive to gather knowledge about spirituality and related phenomena, it remains clear that while some aspects have been well documented within the research literature (e.g., James, 1961; Piedmont, 2001; Underwood & Teresi, 2002; Wilber, 2006), other aspects, such as the impact of spiritual experiences on individuals, have received less attention.

## Statement of the Problem

The examination of phenomena related to spirituality is still relatively new within the scope of academia and certain facets have been thoroughly examined in the literature relevant to the helping professions (Gall, Charbonneau, Clarke, Grant, Joseph, & Shouldice, 2005; Matheis, Tulskey, & Matheis, 2006; Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007; Rippentrop, Altmeier, Chen, Found, & Keffala, 2005). For example, researchers have investigated how aspects of spirituality promote a holistic sense of wellbeing in individuals (Brady, Peterman, & Fitchett, 1999; Como, 2007; Daaleman, Cobb, & Frey, 2001; World Health Organization, 2005), how spirituality relates to positive personal growth and development (Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Schroeder & Frana, 2009) and the impact of spirituality on coping with the many difficulties inherent to human life (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Elsass, Carlsson, & Husum, 2010; Wachholtz, Pearce, & Koenig, 2007). Others (e.g. Wilber, 2006) have proposed models to explain different aspects of spirituality, including how and in what direction spiritual development occurs, and how spirituality is experienced at different stages of development. While the general concept of *spirituality* has received considerable attention in the literature, *spiritual experiences* have received very little consideration from researchers. This gap in the literature is likely due to the more recent emergence of frameworks that serve to assist in the understanding of spiritual experiences and related phenomena through the lenses of the helping professions (Macdonald & Friedman, 2002; Underwood & Teresi, 2002).

One area of inquiry that has gained increasing attention in the academic literature related to spirituality is how spirituality exists in the lives of trauma survivors. Trauma is a term used to denote an experience of acute fear or helplessness in which one's internal and external coping resources are overpowered or inaccessible (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997; Lewis, Kelly,

& Allen, 2004; McNally, 2004). Such experiences often result in a host of problems including posttraumatic stress, difficulties maintaining healthy relationships, sleep problems, anxiety, and depression (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997). Researchers suggest that spirituality is instrumental in coping with difficulties (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Ebadi, Amadhi, Ghanei, & Kazemnejad, 2009; Elsass & Phuntsok, 2008; Gall et al., 2005; Ghofranipour, Montazeri, Anoosheh, Bazargan, Mohammadi, Ahmadi, & Niknami, 2010; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009), and that many survivors of trauma who use spirituality as a means of coping find it to be a source of resilience and strength (Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Elsass, Carlsson, & Husum, 2010; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Peres et al., 2007). While the existing literature provides evidence in support of the usefulness of spirituality in coping with trauma, there remains a gap in the research related to spiritual experiences relative to trauma recovery.

American author and theorist Ken Wilber (2006) provides, in my opinion, a comprehensive and accessible model for understanding spiritual experiences in relation to individual and human development. For these reasons, I have chosen Wilber's (2006) model as the theoretical framework for understanding the spiritual experiences explored in the present study. Wilber (2006) states that spiritual experiences are temporary *state* experiences in which an individual transcends his or her *self* and connects with something greater than the *self*. Wilber (2000) likens this variety of experience to a movement from an *egocentric* state to a *worldcentric* state, the latter of which is often understood as a connection with the divine. Some researchers suggest that these experiences can yield significant enduring changes in aspects of an individual's life (Bray, 2010; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Park & Helgeson, 2006). These changes are often considered positive and associated with transcending or overcoming some previous restraint or obstacle. The shortage of research in the counselling literature in this area is the focus of the

current study. While it has been suggested that spiritual experiences commonly serve as means for personal growth, despite a thorough exploration of the available literature, I was unable to locate any qualitative studies that have investigated how spiritual experiences impact recovery from trauma in individuals.

### **Objectives of the Research**

The purpose of this research was to increase understanding of how spiritual experiences inform recovery from trauma. The objective of this investigation was to learn in what ways spiritual experiences impact survivors' recovery from trauma from the perspective of the survivors themselves. Within the context of this study, I was interested in understanding how each participant's trauma recovery was influenced by having had a spiritual experience. Through this research, I intended to increase understanding by contributing to the existing body of literature on spirituality and holistic wellbeing in general, as well as spirituality and trauma recovery specifically. The study was intended to address a gap within the literature on this topic. With an increased understanding of how spiritual experiences inform recovery from trauma, clinicians working in the field of trauma therapy may better support trauma survivors throughout their healing journey by addressing inner resources related to spirituality that are often overlooked (Hodge, 2005). Further, it is hoped that more research on this topic will be conducted, which may positively impact the lives of trauma survivors who share similar experiences. This may help increase a sense of normalcy among trauma survivors who have experienced spirituality as instrumental in their recovery. A more extensive summary of the relevant research on this area is found in Chapter 2.

## **Background of the Study**

The general target of the proposed study was how survivors of trauma understood their recovery to be influenced and affected by spiritual experiences, as subjectively experienced by participants. As such, the current study rests on the assumption that in the social realm, reality is co-constructed by the use of language through conversation (Chase, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In studies such as this, the notion of “justness” replaces that of “propositional truth” (Krefting, 1991). Justness is a form of truth that is temporal, subjective and contextual (Krefting, 1991). In order to investigate this way of knowing or subjective reality, researchers must engage in dialogue with individuals who know or experience the phenomena under investigation (Richardson, 1999). Thus, to learn more about how trauma survivors’ healing journeys are affected by spiritual experiences, it is necessary to ask survivors themselves to describe their experiences in their own words.

I wanted to explore the fine details and nuances associated with the participants’ experiences and, as such, I chose a qualitative methodology for this research. Qualitative methodologies facilitate engagement with participants in the social meaning-making process that brings subjective experiences into existence (Richardson, 1999). With this process in mind, a narrative method of interviewing facilitated the co-construction of the participants’ biographical details surrounding their encounters with spiritual experiences and the impact those experiences had on their healing from trauma (Chase, 2005). Following this process, a thematic coding procedure assisted in the presentation of categorical themes derived from the co-constructed narratives (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). A more thorough explanation of this methodology follows in Chapter 3.

## **Researcher's Experience**

The topic of spirituality has been of interest to me since the age of 17. Immediately following my high school graduation, I spent a summer with family members whose attention to spirituality was far more acute than what I had been accustomed to. Having been raised in a Christian household, with the acceptance of some fundamentalist ideologies as the norm, I had limited insight into other ways of understanding the divine. Over the course of that summer, I came into contact with many people who engaged in a wide variety of spiritual practices, and my understanding of spirituality was subsequently expanded and made more flexible. This initial exposure to spiritual subject matter initiated my desire to learn about spiritual teachings from the perspectives of a number of wisdom traditions. Of those traditions, many of the writings from Buddhist and Zen Buddhist schools of thought resonated with me most deeply. I identified closely with the notion that life, for all sentient beings, involves suffering, and that human beings perpetuate this cycle of suffering through our firm grasp on both material and immaterial things (Chah, 2001). I found this realization to be both humbling and beautiful, and cultivated a sense of connection to all other life forms through this awareness. I believe that these teachings have been fundamental to my desire to pursue counselling as a career, as well as a perpetual source of empathy and compassion in my life.

Two years after I began exploring my own spirituality, I encountered my first spiritual experience. While on my first ever Western Canadian tour with a hardcore punk band I played in at the time, I decided to head out on my own and get some fresh air one summer night in British Columbia's Okanagan valley. Around this time, I had been struggling with a number of difficulties relevant to my relationships with a number of significant people in my life. That evening, as I gazed up at the starry, clear night sky, I was filled with a sense of connection to all

that existed. I wept as waves of emotion passed through me, and then felt as though everything would be all right. I understand this experience as a brief moment of transcendence, which lasted only a few short minutes. Wilber (2006) would call this variety of experience a *state* experience. Despite its transitory nature, this experience had a profound impact on my life, as it led to an increase in awareness of the connectedness that I shared with all other beings, which served as an internal resource in difficult times that followed.

Since that moment, I have met others who shared similar experiences with similar outcomes. Through my practicum work as a student counsellor for male survivors of trauma, I have been privy to stories that remind me of the importance of spirituality when coping with challenging life events. The story of one client in particular stands out in my mind as relevant to the focus of the present study. A young man who had struggled for years with the difficulties of having been raised in an abusive family shared with me his thirst for knowledge in the areas of Eastern and Western philosophy. This young man had discovered the teachings of Taoism, and found them to be helpful in his everyday coping. However, at the time that I was seeing him, he had been feeling severely stuck in a rut, and had been using marijuana as a means of temporarily escaping the confines of the problem. After several weeks of repeating this pattern, the young man came to our next session appearing to be in better spirits, and carrying with him an air of optimism and creativity. When I asked him what had changed, he shared with me an experience he had while reading some Taoist literature. After encountering a verse that resonated deeply with the situation he was in, he was filled with a newfound awareness that would turn out to be instrumental to his recovery. Having gone from feeling helpless and hopeless, this young man's transcendent experience moved him to a place of self-acceptance and understanding. This anecdote reaffirmed for me the growth-promoting possibilities inherent to spiritual experiences.

It also increased my curiosity regarding the potential for spiritual experiences to inform trauma recovery.

In the realm of the academy, I have pursued an interest in spiritual and religious phenomena from the onset of my undergraduate degree. After fulfilling the requirements for a minor in religious studies, I conducted a phenomenological research study in the field of psychology, looking at how spirituality contributes to wellbeing in individuals. That research, which contributed to the partial completion of my BA Honours in psychology, facilitated my exploration of the topic as an observer, rather than the one having the direct experience. Because I already had a sense of how spirituality contributed to wellbeing in my own life, that study helped me gain insight into the experiences of others. As valuable an experience as it was in terms of cultivating new research skills and increasing my own knowledge of the subject matter, it shed light on gaps in the literature, which I saw value in addressing. Few existing studies that I have reviewed touch on the topic of spiritual experiences, so in an effort to address this gap, I chose to further pursue this topic of study.

### **Overview of Methods**

For the purpose of increasing understanding of the ways in which spiritual experiences impact survivors' healing from trauma, I formulated the following research question: *How do spiritual experiences impact recovery from trauma?* I addressed this question by conducting narrative interviews with six trauma survivors who self-identified as having experienced trauma two or more years prior to the interview. I used Herman's Tri-Phasic model (Herman, 1997) as the theoretical framework through which to frame my understanding of trauma and trauma recovery. These trauma survivors were invited to engage with me in a narrative interview in which they were asked to share how they believe their recovery process was affected by their

own spiritual experiences. Specifically, the participants were asked to tell their stories of how their healing from trauma was impacted by having had a spiritual experience.

I conducted thematic analysis on the co-constructed interview data in accordance with the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved the generation of initial codes, the grouping of these initial codes, the development of specific themes, and the definition and naming of those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At that point, the participants were asked to review the results, and validate (i.e., verify) that the themes presented in Chapter 4 represented their experiences adequately. A detailed outline of the methods is found in Chapter 3. To conclude, the results of the thematic analysis are described in Chapter 4. Following that, Chapter 5 consists of a discussion of the results in relation to other research and literature on the topic of spirituality and trauma recovery.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an outline of the research and theoretical literature surrounding the core constructs related to the present study: spirituality, spiritual experiences, trauma and trauma recovery, and the impact of spirituality on trauma.

### **Importance of Studying Spiritual and Religious Phenomena**

Spiritual and religious phenomena, as significant aspects of human experience, are of importance to counsellors who are interested in gaining a better understanding of those who seek their services. Surveys by Statistics Canada (2003; Clark & Schellenberg, 2006) suggest that the majority of Canadians (53%) continue to maintain active spiritual or religious practices on a monthly basis. These include prayer, meditation, worship, or reading sacred texts (Clark & Schellenberg, 2006). Additionally, several prominent theorists in the field of psychology (e.g., James, Allport, Jung, Fromm, Maslow, etc.) have argued that religion or spirituality ought to be considered when attempting to attain a complete understanding of the individual.

In their argument in favor of the study of spiritual phenomena, Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, and Zinnbauer (2000) assert a noteworthy list of the characteristics of spirituality that they believe should be of vital importance to those interested in the psychological functioning and wellbeing of individuals. With regard to religion and spirituality in relation to basic psychological research, the authors assert that the two develop across the lifespan and that few other phenomena “may be as integral across lifespan development as spiritual and religious concerns” (Hill et al., 2000, p. 53). Further, they assert the importance of spirituality and religion as key aspects of social behaviour, stating that they are typically either expressed within the context of groups, or at least influenced by reference groups

(Hill et al., 2000). Spiritual phenomena are also closely tied to cognitive development, which is apparent in the way that spiritual or religious beliefs often reflect the level of complexity at which one thinks (Hill et al., 2000). Examples of this may be gleaned from comparing fundamentalist views of spirituality to more flexible pluralistic perspectives. While the former involves a more simple black and white understanding of spirituality, the latter requires more complexity of thought. From these points, they conclude that both religion and spirituality are “relevant to the study of personality and in the genetic determinants of personality” (p. 54). Many authors and researchers across multiple disciplines echo the importance of considering spirituality with respect to a holistic approach to health and wellbeing (e.g., Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Keegan, 1991; Narayanasamy & Owens, 2001). As a counsellor in training and a qualitative researcher, I have heard many subjective accounts of the prominence of spirituality in the lives of individuals as it relates to their sense of wellbeing, and I recognize that there remain many gaps in our understanding of how spiritual phenomena promote health.

### **Spirituality**

There are numerous definitions of spirituality within the current body of literature, with no single universally accepted definition (Bruce et al., 2011). Similar to the idea of personality, spirituality is understood as a complex, multifaceted concept that manifests in the process of the behaviour, experiences, and beliefs of the individual (Gall et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2000). The many definitions of spirituality include the notions of cherished beliefs, transcendence and dimensions beyond the self, connecting with others and/or a higher power, and personal growth and becoming (Speck, Higginson, & Addington-Hall, 2006). The variability between these definitions supports the idea that spirituality can imply different meanings, depending upon the personal interpretation or worldview of the individual.

The review of the literature on spirituality has revealed that, as a construct, *spirituality* is difficult to define because it is essentially intangible and subjective (Bruce et al., 2011; Wilding, May, & Muir-Cochrane, 2005). This may have been a factor that impacted the responses from participants in the present study, as much of what participants were asked to describe likely fell outside the realm of their normal lexicon. It is for this reason that there is such diversity in the literature with regard to any operational definition of spirituality. Previous attempts at operationally defining spirituality have been considered by some to be too broad (e.g., Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003), yielding operational definitions that limit the empirical research that they drive by including certain key criteria in their definitions (such as meaning making), while omitting other fundamental components (such as striving for transcendence). Other authors have used the word “spirituality” in empirical studies without providing any operational definition of the term (e.g., Askay & Magyar-Russell, 2009; Bray, 2010; Grossman, Sorsoli, & Kia-Keating, 2006). These conceptualizations are problematic because they fail to clearly assert what is being studied (Franch, 2008). According to Franch (2008), overly broad or non-existent conceptualizations of spirituality limit the reliability and validity of the subject of a study, decreasing the prospects for meaningful research. Although the concepts of reliability and validity are incongruent with the philosophy that underlies studies such as this one, Franch’s (2008) cautionary statement is relevant to the credibility of this study. To avoid the definitional struggles that previous researchers have encountered when trying to operationalize this challenging construct, an etymological review of the notion of *spirituality* will serve as an important point of departure for this study.

**Defining spirituality.** From an etymological perspective, the term “spirituality” is derived from the Latin root *spiritus*, which implies *breath* or *life* (Wulff, 1997). The word “spirit” has

traditionally been used in the context of religion (e.g., James, 1902), and continues to be both experienced and understood through conventional religious discourse (Hill et al., 2000). In other words, spirituality has historically been explored both experientially and academically through the study of religious practices and structures. However, with the more recent tendency to prefer a concept of spirituality that favors the secular over institutional religion, the meaning of the word has become befuddled (Franch, 2008). Thus, to begin dissecting the word *spirituality*, an investigation into the root word *spirit* is necessary.

An inquiry into the definitional status by way of the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) yielded a variety of meanings of the terms *spirit*, *spiritual*, and *spirituality*. As outlined in the table below, these definitions included the following:

**Table 1**

<b>Spirit</b> (pp. 251–255)	<b>Spiritual</b> (pp. 257–258)	<b>Spirituality</b> (p. 259)
The animating or vital principle in man (and animals).	Of or pertaining to, affecting or concerning, the spirit or higher moral qualities.	The body of spiritual or ecclesiastical persons.
That which gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements.	Applied to material things, substances, etc., in a figurative or symbolical sense.	That which has a spiritual character.
Incorporeal or immaterial being, as opposed to <i>body</i> or <i>matter</i> .	Of transcendent beauty or charm.	Spiritual or ecclesiastical things.
Being or intelligence conceived as distinct from, or independent of, anything physical or material.	<i>Spiritual home</i> (with no religious connotation), a place or milieu, other than one's home, which seems especially congenial or in harmony with one's nature, or to which one feels a sense of belonging or indebtedness.	The quality or condition of being spiritual.
The immaterial intelligent or sentient element or part of a person, freq. in	Of, belonging or relating to, concerned with, sacred or ecclesiastical things or	Attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or

implied or expressed contrast to the body.	matters, as distinguished from secular affairs; pertaining to the church or the clergy; ecclesiastical.	worldly interests.
Mettle; vigour of mind; ardour; courage; disposition or readiness to assert oneself or to hold one's own.	Devout, holy, pious; morally good; having spiritual tendencies or instincts.	An immaterial or incorporeal thing or substance; a spirit.
Liveliness, vivacity, or animation in persons, their actions, discourse, etc.	Of or pertaining to, consisting of, spirit, regarded in either a religious or intellectual aspect; of the nature of a spirit or incorporeal supernatural essence; immaterial.	The fact or condition of being spirit or of consisting of an incorporeal essence.

These many dictionary definitions are consistent with the premise that spirituality is a multifaceted concept, and that there are a multitude of perspectives from which to regard spiritual phenomena. The existing literature paints a multidimensional picture of spirituality, in the sense that it supports the notion that spirituality may consist of several characteristics that expand on those listed above. Speck, Higginson, and Addington-Hall (2006) outlined a set of key themes regarding the conceptualization of spirituality. In a review of the literature, they found that the following common themes emerged: finding meaning and making sense of life situations; searching for personal meaning within the context of one's life; cherished beliefs and personal standards; transcendence and an appreciation of dimensions beyond the self; connecting with others and/or a higher power; personal growth and becoming; and developing strategies to cope with life (Speck et al., 2006). Taking these notions into consideration, other research concurs with this multifaceted conceptualization of spirituality (Black, 2005; Wilding, May, & Muir-Cochrane, 2005). Thus, for the purpose of this study, any reference to the term *spirituality* will relate to this multidimensional understanding of the word as outlined by Speck

and colleagues.

**Distinguishing between spirituality and religion.** Within mainstream discourse, it is common for the terms *spirituality* and *religion* to be used interchangeably. However, in order to clarify the meaning of *spirituality*, a distinction between the two words is warranted. Some authors (e.g., Hill et al., 2000; LaPierre, 1994, Walsh, 1999; Wulff, 1997) agree that religion is characterized as an organized institution with particular rituals, values, practices, worldviews, and beliefs about divinity. Religions also feature definable boundaries and may provide a wide range of guidelines to which individuals adhere (Walsh, 1999). Although some may express their spirituality through religious values, practices, and beliefs, it is contended that belonging to a religion does not necessarily mean one is spiritually engaged (Gibson, 2001; Hill et al., 2000; Tanyi, 2002).

Conversely, while spirituality may be related to religion for certain individuals, for others such is not the case (Hill et al., 2000). For example, the spirituality of an atheist (one who does not believe in the existence of a God) or an agnostic (one who is undecided about the existence of a God) may stem from a strong belief in significant relationships, or self-chosen values and goals, rather than a belief in a divine force. Such beliefs may become the driving force in the lives of those who identify in that way. For other individuals, for example, Christians and Muslims, spirituality is often directly related to religion (Rassool, 2002). This direct relationship is made visible in the theological foundations of the respective religions, and may be understood as *God-based* (Hill et al., 2000). Because spirituality is an inherent component of human life, nonreligious individuals also have spiritual needs pertaining to the search for meaning and purpose in life (Tanyi, 2002).

Hill et al. (2000) outline three contemporary conceptions of spirituality. These include “a *God-oriented* spirituality where thought and practice are premised in theologies, either broadly or narrowly conceived”; “a *world-oriented* spirituality stressing one’s relationship with ecology or nature; and “a *humanistic* (or *people-oriented*) spirituality stressing human achievement or potential” (p. 57). The diversity of these three conceptions makes clear the numerous avenues for understanding spirituality in the lives of individuals. Religion is similarly multidimensional, in the sense that it addresses the ultimate concerns of individuals, and provides both personal and social identity within the context of a cosmic or metaphysical framework (Hill et al., 2000). These are descriptions shared by many definitions of spirituality, although religion goes so far as to prescribe behavioural patterns and adherence to practice not necessarily supported by spirituality. From the above distinction between the concepts of spirituality and religion, I believe that spirituality is a much broader concept than religion.

From these descriptions, one may conclude that although the concepts of spirituality and religion remain distinct in some regards, there are also many shared characteristics. It is therefore important to recognize and acknowledge the dynamic interaction between religion and spirituality. While it may be possible for one to exist in the absence of the other, they are commonly intertwined. Spirituality may exist within the context of religion, but this is not necessarily always the case.

### **Spiritual Experiences**

The idea of the *spiritual experience* has been addressed and discussed by many authors of a variety of religious and secular traditions (e.g., Borg, Andrée, Soderstrom, & Farde, 2003; James, 1902; Newberg & d’Aquili, 2000; Wilber, 2006). From the characteristics of spirituality derived from the literature and outlined in the definitional discussion above, the concept of the

*spiritual experience* will be understood as an *acute encounter with a sense of transcendence* within the context of the present study. The following discussion will clarify the meaning of this construct by outlining the definitions of the terms that comprise the *spiritual experience*.

The use of the word *acute* implies an experience that is transitory or temporary in nature. In other words, spiritual experiences are what Wilber (2006) deems *state experiences*, in which the individual's account is fleeting or momentary. This notion is contrasted with Wilber's idea of *stage experiences*, which are fixed and represent levels of development. These ideas will be explained further in the section that covers Wilber's AQAL model.

Next, an understanding of the term *transcendence* first requires an explanation of the term *self*. For the purpose of the current research, the "self" is that which is transcended within the context of the spiritual experience. In order to clarify this unwieldy construct, I refer to Ingersoll and Cook-Greuter's (2007) outline of Wilber's concept of the "self". In their article, the authors draw on Wilber's (1980; 1986; 2003; 2006) metaphor, which describes the self as being analogous to a climber on a ladder (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). In this analogy, the climber is regarded as the self, while the rungs on the ladder are representative of patterns that indicate one's degree of development (see Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007, p. 194). It should be noted that Wilber uses the terms "self" and "Self" to differentiate between two distinctive ideas. First, "self" (or small "s" self) refers to one's sense of individual personhood, whereas "Self" (or big "S" self) describes consciousness as such, or that which people commonly conceive as the divine (Wilber, 2006).

Ingersoll and Cook-Greuter (2007) assert that a person's sense of self (small "s" self) is that which he or she identifies with in contrast to the rest of the world, and which serves as an organizing process that takes its content from all aspects of life: "As the self develops (climbs up

the ladder and increases its altitude), each rung reveals a broader, deeper view or perspective that replaces previous views or perspectives” (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007, p. 194). In other words, with self-growth comes increased awareness and understanding. Additionally, this model holds that as the self develops or gains altitude, it has access to whatever skills and perspectives it has employed at previous levels, although it does not maintain the view from those earlier rungs (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). Rather, each rung holds its own view, and at each level the individual is capable of awareness only of those views previously experienced. For example, as one passes from rung to rung, he may believe that his view is the only view, or the only “right” view, but as ascension continues, he is able to recognize that there are multiple ways of experiencing the world (including those of stages past), and that views change as growth ensues.

In addition to the ladder-climber-view metaphor, Wilber (1986) proposed three aspects of the self that Ingersoll and Cook-Greuter (2007) note as being important to the understanding of transcendence. First, the *proximate self* refers to that part of one’s self that he or she is most intimately identified with, and is represented as the *climber* in the metaphor outlined above. Ingersoll and Cook-Greuter (2007) assert that the proximate self is the lens through which individuals experience life, and is reflected in the language of “I” and “I/me” (p. 196). The authors go on to explain, “when something the self identifies with consistently becomes an object of awareness, it is no longer labeled *proximate* but labeled *distal self*” (p. 196). The distal self is understood as being composed of aspects of self that were once the subject of one’s proximate self, but from which one has gained some distance by accepting or owning those parts of him or herself, and thus not wholly identifying with them (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). According to this model, those things that were previously experienced as subject (as the proximate self) can then be experienced as objects of awareness. Examples of this may be

observed throughout the course of lifespan development: In infancy, a person may identify wholly as her body. Therefore, the body, in case of the infant, is understood as the proximate self. By the time the person reaches the age of two or three years, she recognizes that she *has* a body (rendering the body a *part* of the distal self), but identifies as *being* emotion, which comprises the proximate self (“I *am* happiness” or “I *am* anger”, for example). As the person experiences further growth, she comes to understand that she *has* emotions (rendering emotions part of the distal self), but that she identifies intimately with her thoughts (which comprise the proximate self). For some people, development comes to a halt at this rung, while for others, growth continues, and they are able to hold increasingly more parts of their (small “s”) selves in the distal realm (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007).

In addition to the notions of the proximate and distal selves, there is also the idea of the *antecedent self*. Ingersoll and Cook-Greuter (2007) describe the antecedent self as “the pure witness that is present at all levels of development” (p. 197). More simply put, the antecedent self is that which is capable of witnessing the “ego” or *self*. It is the antecedent self that Wilber (2006) conceptualizes as big “S” Self. In other words, the antecedent self is consciousness as such – that which simply “is”, and that which all individuals have the capacity to connect with at any level of development (Wilber, 2006). It is this concept this is commonly understood as the divine by persons of a variety of religious and spiritual traditions (Wilber, 2006). In fact, according to Wilber, and as outlined by Ingersoll and Cook-Greuter (2007), the antecedent self has implications as both a *state* and a *level* of development, which are two concepts that will be described in the section on Wilber’s AQAL framework. Because the antecedent self is present at all levels of development, individuals are able to engage in meditative or other “observational practices” (i.e., spiritual practices) to reflect on their (small “s”) self (or “ego”) as an object of

awareness (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). It is this act of reflection on the self or ego as a distal piece of the (big “S”) Self that Wilber regards as *transcendence* (or going beyond the *self*). It is in this way that, for the purpose of the study at hand, this understanding of the self and Self will apply to the notion of *transcendence*. Hence, largely speaking, it is the small “s” self that is being “transcended”.

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) maintains that the word *transcendence* stems from the root word *transcend*, meaning to go beyond, surpass, or to extend above or beyond a limit. In the literature regarding spirituality, this term commonly refers to a quality of exceeding or rising above the *self* and experiencing a sense of connection with something greater than the *self* (Bray, 2009; Hill et al., 2000; Lancaster & Palframan, 2008; Moreira-Almeida & Koenig, 2006; Speck et al., 2004; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). From Wilber’s (2000) perspective, transcendence is an essential component of evolution. Wilber (2000) asserts:

Evolution has a broad telos, a broad direction...the self-transcending drive of the Kosmos—to go beyond what went before...The universe has direction, we ourselves have direction. There is meaning in the movement we live in the lap of immense intelligence, which by any other name is Spirit. (p. 36).

Thus, from Wilber’s (2000) perspective, transcendence, or the experience of connecting with that, which is beyond individual personhood, is an inherent part of the further evolution and development of the human species. Wilber (2000) recognizes the necessity of the evolution of the self from "egocentric" (or individualistic) to "worldcentric" (or collectivistic), asserting that by way of transcendence,

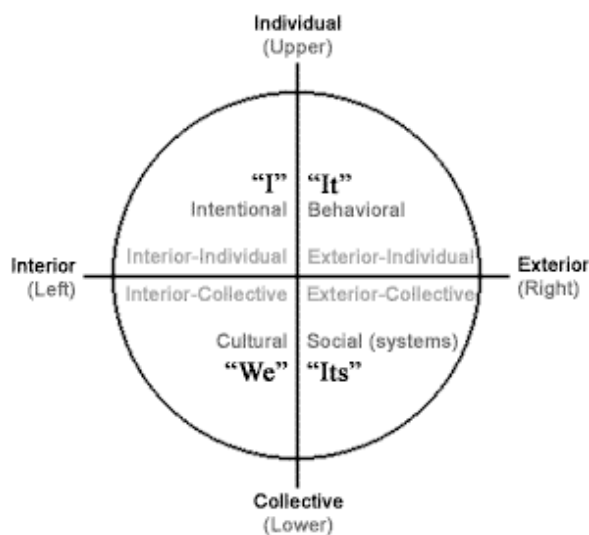
self-identity, needs, and moral response go from physiocentric to biocentric to egocentric to ethnocentric to worldcentric, the platform for all higher and truly spiritual development...If we look at the evolution of the average mode, then we find something like...a planetary federation with global or worldcentric morality—which is still an unrealized ideal for most. (p. 223).

Wilber also notes that the movement from *egocentric* to *worldcentric* is often regarded as a

movement toward the divine (2000). Other authors also assert that spiritual experiences are often accompanied by a sense of connection to a higher power (Decker, 2007; Rassool, 2002; Tanyi, 2002). The idea of a *higher power* is suggested by a number of spiritual and religious traditions throughout the world, and regarded as important to understanding spiritual phenomena by several authors and theorists (Decker, 2007; Hill et al., 2001; Lancaster & Palframan, 2008; Macdonald & Friedman, 2002; Tanyi, 2002). For many individuals, the notion of a higher power is often conceived as an entity or entities prescribed by a number of the world's major religions (Decker, 2007; Rassool, 2002; Tanyi, 2002). For others, a *higher power* is understood as the Earth or universe (Hill et al., 2000; Wilding, May, & Muir-Cochrane, 2005). In the interest of openness to the many conceptions of a higher power, I accept any transcendent force that individuals experience as being of greater than oneself as legitimate within the scope of this study.

**Wilber's AQAL model.** As a prolific writer in the areas of psychological and spiritual literature, Ken Wilber set forth a model for understanding human growth and development that can be applied to any number of systems and ideas. In *Integral Spirituality*, Wilber (2006) applies his model to spiritual growth. The core of Wilber's framework consists of a comprehensive map, the most important features of which can be distilled into five factors. The initial four factors include states of consciousness (e.g., awake, sleeping, dreaming); lines of development (e.g., cognitive line of development; interpersonal line of development); stages of development (e.g., pre-operational level/stage – Piaget; conventional stage of moral development - Kolberg); and, types of personality (e.g., extravert; masculine; intuiting – Myers-Briggs) (Wilber, 2006). The fifth factor, Wilber's *quadrants*, corresponds with four perspectives represented in all natural human languages. Within the scope of the English language, Wilber

(2006) suggests that these four quadrants can be summarized as the *I*, *We*, *It* and *Its* perspectives. The first person *I* perspective includes the interior experience of thoughts and sensations (Wilber, 2006). The second person *We* perspective includes understanding and valuing shared subjectively with others in relationship (Wilber, 2006). The third person singular *It* perspective includes apprehending one's brain and body objectively (Wilber, 2006). Finally, the third person plural *its* perspective includes objective awareness of the systems in one's immediate environment (Wilber, 2006). It should also be noted that each quadrant is specified by combinations of the discrete values on each of two axes, namely the Interior-Exterior (horizontal axis) and Individual-Collective (vertical axis), respectively. The diagram below is a graphical representation of Wilber's (2006) quadrants (image retrieved from [http://natureofmind.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/four\\_quadrants-150x150.gif](http://natureofmind.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/four_quadrants-150x150.gif)):



**Figure 1: Wilber's Quadrants**

To better understand Wilber's (2006) model, the following definitions will clarify the central components described above. First, the term *quadrant* refers to one of four fundamental perspectives (e.g., *I*, *We*, *It*, *Its*) (Wilber, 2006). Secondly, the term *stage* refers either to the altitude (higher or lower) of general development across several developmental lines, or to the

altitude of a specific line of development (Wilber, 2006). Third, a *line* consists of a discernible strand of development (e.g., cognitive, moral, emotional, interpersonal) (Wilber, 2006). Fourth, a *state* (e.g., awake, asleep, intoxicated) refers to a temporary aspect of consciousness, contrasted particularly with the idea of a more enduring *stage* (Wilber, 2006). Finally, a *type* is a relatively stable style in individuals, which is available at any developmental level (e.g., personality type, trait, cognitive style). Wilber's model builds on the five factors outlined above, and is referred to as the *AQAL* framework in the literature (Wilber, 2006). *AQAL* is an abbreviation meaning All Quadrants, All Levels. Although the abbreviation itself has remained this way, with the further development of Wilber's framework, it presently stands for All Quadrants, All Levels, All Lines, All States, and All Types (Wilber, 2006).

While these pieces of Wilber's theory are helpful for understanding various aspects of human development, the notions of *stages*, and *states* are most relevant to the study at hand. These ideas will be helpful in terms of providing a theoretical lens through which to view and understand spiritual experiences. As will be described in the section below, when applied to spirituality, Wilber's model serves as a tool for examining the temporary *state* experiences encountered at various *stages* of spiritual development.

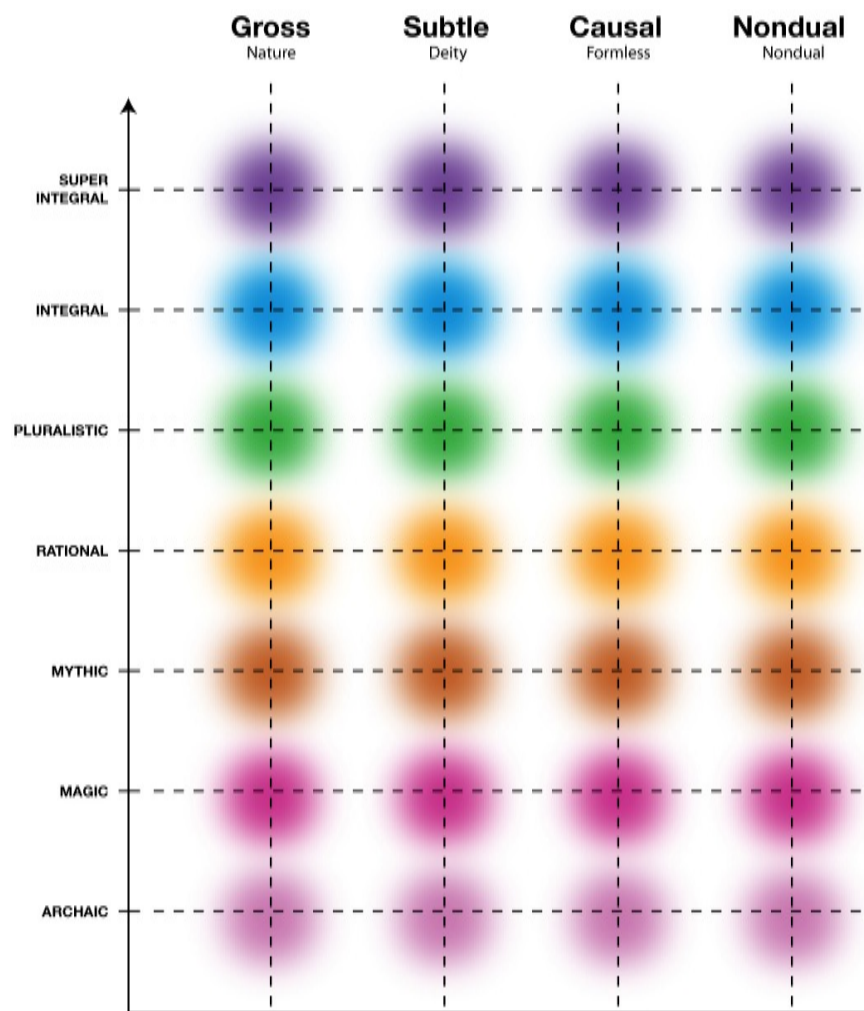
***AQAL and spirituality.*** One significant way that Wilber has applied the *AQAL* framework has been to further our understanding of spirituality. He does this by specifying particular values for the five factors outlined above, as well as combinations of those factors embedded in *AQAL*, with the aim of making sense of the complex notion of spirituality. When applied to spirituality, Wilber's concept of *states* assumes that spirituality involves altered states of awareness (Wilber, 2006). These consist of transitory experiences of the sacred, transcendent, or numinous (e.g., peak experiences, flow experiences, meditative states). With regard to

Wilber's notion of *lines*, spirituality involves a specific line of development (such as *care*, *compassion*, *love*, and *ultimate concern*). Additionally, with regard to *stages*, Wilber's perspective maintains that spirituality involves a high cumulative developmental level in several lines (e.g., high moral, meditative, and cognitive levels). Lastly, with regard to quadrants, spirituality involves an experience or quality of the self that arises in several possible contexts, such as: witness and transcendent I-am (I quadrant); deep connection with another person/ other people (We-Thou in We quadrant); or, from engaging transcendently with Nature/the physical world/systems (in the It/Its quadrants) (Wilber 2006).

As stated in the outline of Wilber's (2006) theory above, the *lines* and *quadrants* aspects of the model are helpful in terms of understanding the many intricacies and nuances of spirituality. However, because spiritual experiences were the focus of the present study, the notions of *states* and *stages* were of particular use for the research at hand. The concept of *states* served as a foundation for determining whether the phenomena reported by participants are indeed spiritual experiences, based on their acute or temporary nature. Secondly, the idea of *stages* facilitated the contextualizing of the *state* experiences. According to Wilber (2006), the *stages* of spiritual development that an individual passes through serve as frames in which people anchor their experiences. In other words, people understand their spiritual experiences based upon the spiritual or religious tradition they adhere to, and, most importantly, where they reside in terms of their level of spiritual development. To better understand this concept, Wilber co-created a graphical framework called the Wilber-Coombs lattice, which is explained below.

***The Wilber-Coombs Lattice.*** The *Wilber-Coombs Lattice* (see Wilber, 2006, p. 88) consists of a grid structure based on the two AQAL factors that are most relevant to the present study. It locates four *states* of consciousness on the horizontal axis: gross (nature), subtle (deity), causal

(formless), and nondual; as well as seven *stages/levels* of worldview on the vertical axis: archaic, magic, mythic, rational, pluralistic, integral, and superintegral (see Wilber, 2006, p. 90). The Wilber-Combs Lattice serves as an interpretive tool with 28 points of intersection, each representing the results of a particular transitory state of consciousness being interpreted from within one of the more enduring stages of consciousness. A graphic representation of the Lattice may be referred to below (image retrieved from <http://interactioninstitute.org/blog/wp-content/import/2011/02/States-and-Stages.jpg>):



**Figure 2: Wilber-Combs Lattice**

This model was of particular use in the present study because it provided a map for understanding the subject at hand: spiritual experiences. According to Wilber (2006), a spiritual/state experience is understood by the individual having the experience in context with his or her stage of spiritual development. In fact, most people encounter the first three varieties of state experiences on a daily basis. Wilber (2006) explains that a gross state experience involves the experience of one's physical body, which is likened to the waking state that most people spend a good portion of their day in. While asleep, most people encounter subtle state experiences, which occur when one enters a state of dreaming. The formless consciousness that characterizes the causal state is most commonly encountered when one enters a state of deep dreamless sleep. According to Wilber (2006), these three varieties of state experiences require little to no training in order for a person to have them. On the other hand, a nondual state experience requires a degree of training or work beyond that required for the three described previously, usually through spiritual practice (e.g., meditation) (Wilber, 2006). Nondual experiences are often characterized by a sense of oneness with something outside oneself. By connecting with something outside oneself, the individual having a nondual experience does not encounter the sense of separation that one typically has in a gross or subtle state.

Someone whose stage of spiritual development resides at the mythic/orange stage will interpret a spiritual experience differently than someone at the rational/yellow stage. Because the former individual's spiritual development resides at the mythic stage, he is likely to interpret his spiritual experiences in context with the myths or stories favored by his religious tradition (e.g., Moses parting the Red Sea, being visited by the angel Maroni, or being addressed by the God Krishna). On the other hand, the latter individual, whose spiritual line of development resides at the rational stage, is more likely to understand her experience in a rational,

scientifically quantifiable manner (e.g., feeling a sense of connection with the universe – planets, stars, and other life forms on Earth and beyond). In this way, Wilber's (2006) framework provides a means for understanding the spiritual experiences of participants within the present study. I chose Wilber's model because it is helpful in terms of containing and contextualizing complex concepts in a clear and succinct way. It was useful in the study at hand because it is both straightforward and complex enough to organize thoughts and ideas around the intricate notion of spiritual experiences and trauma in the lives of individuals.

### **Spirituality and Wellness**

During the course of the past decade, there has been a proliferation of research regarding the implications of spirituality on human wellness. Within the current body of literature, there is an understanding that spirituality is a key component of the health and wellbeing of individuals (Callahan, 2010; Gall et al., 2005; Hiberns, Haynes, & Kivikko, 2010; Krupski, Kwan, Fink, Sonn, Malinski, & Litwin, 2006; Rippentrop et al., 2005). Understanding how spirituality informs health and wellness is a matter of importance in a world in which spirituality is becoming an increasingly central aspect of the lives of many (McIntyre, Thomlinson, & MacDonald, 2006). Academic disciplines including psychology (e.g., Gall et al., 2005), medicine (e.g., Daaleman et al., 2001; Matheis, Tulsy, & Matheis, 2006), and nursing (e.g., Ebadi, Amadhi, Ghanei, & Kazemnejad, 2009; McLeod & Wright, 2001; Narayanasamy & Owens, 2001; Shinbara & Olson, 2010), have all served as leaders in the exploration of the impact of spirituality on wellbeing. Researchers suggest that one's spiritual beliefs wield significant influence over the beliefs one holds with regard to health, and that they may have a direct effect on clinical outcomes for the ill (Como, 2007; Daaleman et al., 2001; Rippentrop et al., 2005).

One of the most identifiable characteristics of spirituality with regard to health is its relatedness to coping with life's challenges (Gall et al., 2005; Warner, Mahoney, & Kumrei, 2009; Schroeder & Frana, 2009; Simon, Crowther, & Higgerson, 2007). Several authors note that spirituality serves as a means of facilitating a personal understanding of existential uncertainties (Black, 2006; Breitbart, 2005; Daaleman, Cobb, & Frey, 2001; Seidlitz, Abernethy, Duberstein, Evinger, Chang, & Lewis, 2002; Wilding, May, & Muir-Cochrane, 2005; World Health Organization, 2006). In this way, spirituality is a valuable mode of working through the myriad of challenges and struggles inherent to life (Arévalo, Prado, & Amaro, 2007; Gall et al., 2005; Hodge & Roby, 2010; Jackson, White, O'Brien, DiLorenzo, Cathcart, Wolf, Bruska, Pecora, Nix-Early, & Cabrera, 2010; Rippentrop, Altmaier, Chen, Found, & Keffala, 2005; Schroeder & Frana, 2009). An account of the usefulness of spirituality when coping with difficult life events is described in a review of the literature by Gall et al. (2005). In their review, the authors outlined the multidimensional ways in which spirituality can operate at several levels of the stress and coping process at any single point in time. They describe that spirituality can operate at the level of person factors (e.g. beliefs), primary and secondary appraisals (e.g. God attributions), coping behaviour (e.g. prayer), coping resources (e.g. connection to nature), and meaning making (e.g. spiritual reappraisal) (Gall et al., 2005). These descriptions clarify some of the ways in which spirituality can serve as an asset for those struggling with difficult life events. The authors also outlined the three forms of spiritual connection (nature, others, and transcendent other), which are often associated with spiritual approaches to coping (Gall et al., 2005). Examples of these connections include "being in nature" and "connecting with all living things" (Gall et al., 2005, p. 97); connections with family members and spiritual or religious communities; and relational connections with deities. This information supports the idea that

spirituality is beneficial for some individuals coping with difficult life challenges. Of all the ideas outlined by Gall et al. (2005), the notion that a spiritual connection with a *transcendent other* is most relevant to the study at hand, as that idea relates to the definition of spiritual experiences used in the present study, suggesting that transcendent experiences (or relationships with transcendent beings) are helpful in terms of coping.

Another central component of spirituality and wellbeing is the relationship between spirituality and the creation of meaning by the individual. A number of studies show that spiritual beliefs influence coping with illness, control of pain and other symptoms, and the development of clinical depression (Breitbart, Gibson, Poppito, & Berg, 2004; Bussing, Michalsen, Balzat, Grunther, Ostermann, Neugebauer, & Matthiessen, 2009; Moreira-Almeida & Koenig, 2008; Nelson, Rosenfeld, Breitbart, & Galietta, 2002; Wachholtz, Pearce, & Koenig, 2007). Researchers examining the relationship between symptom control and spiritual wellbeing suggest that individuals who have a high degree of faith and sense of meaning are able to better tolerate pain, fatigue and other physical symptoms, and maintain a better quality of life (Brady, Peterman, & Fitchett, 1999). Further, a person's ability to sustain a sense of meaning in the face of illness has been identified as a protective factor against the development of clinical depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and a desire for hastened death (Breitbart et al., 2000; Breitbart et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2002). These authors support the notion that the ability to sustain a continuing sense of meaning contributes to improved quality of life and reduced psychological distress. While there is an abundance of evidence in the literature that spirituality assists with coping with problems of living, traumatic experiences pose specific challenges to individuals' lives in ways not addressed by the notions of coping and meaning making alone. While coping with and making sense of trauma may be helpful to survivors of traumatic

experiences, the literature outlined above does not explore ways in which spiritual phenomena contribute to actually *healing* in the wake of trauma. A review of the literature related to this aspect of the present study follows.

## **Trauma**

Related to psychological distress, traumatic events have the potential to yield significantly troubling symptoms in the lives of those who experience them (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997; Lewis, Kelly, & Allen, 2004). Briere and Scott (2006) identify that the term “trauma” has a history of misuse, because it is often applied to both negative events that produce distress, as well as to the distress itself. They argue that this tendency is inaccurate, as the technical definition of trauma refers only to the event itself, and should be reserved for major events that are psychologically overwhelming for an individual (Briere & Scott, 2006).

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Text Revision (*DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000) defines trauma as

Direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person’s response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behaviour) (criterion A2). (p. 463)

Several authors in the field of trauma research criticize the *DSM-IV-TR* definition of trauma, asserting the belief that it is too narrow (Brett, 2007; Briere & Scott, 2006; McNally, 2004; Weathers & Keane, 2007). Specifically, by limiting trauma to those events in which the individual experiences “threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity,” events that may be traumatic in the absence of this criterion are excluded (Briere & Scott, 2006). For this reason, a broader definition of trauma is encouraged (Briere, 2004; Briere

& Scott, 2006; McNally, 2004; Weathers & Keane, 2007).

In the current study, an event was considered traumatic if it was extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelmed the individual's internal resources, making normal functioning extremely difficult (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997). Some common traumatic events include but are not limited to natural disasters, mass interpersonal violence (e.g. terrorist attack), motor vehicle accidents, large-scale transportation accidents (e.g. water vessel or air plane accidents), building fires, rape and sexual assault, physical assault, partner battery, torture, war, child abuse, and emergency worker exposure to trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006; Drescher & Foy, 2010; Taylor & Weems, 2009).

Following a traumatic event, it is common for a person to experience posttraumatic symptoms, which are often dependent upon three domains: (1) variables specific to the victim, (2) characteristics of the stressor, and (3) how those around the victim respond to the victim (Briere & Scott, 2006). Victim variables refer to those aspects of the victim that were in place before the trauma and that are associated with a likelihood of sustained posttraumatic stress (Briere & Scott, 2006). Some examples of victim-specific risk factors include female gender, minority status, lower socioeconomic status, family history of psychopathology, the victim's ability to prepare for the event, a lack of post-trauma social supports, high levels of emotion during or in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event, dissociative experiences during or in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event, less functional coping styles, prior psychological adjustment, and previous history of trauma exposure (Breslau & Peterson, 2010; Briere & Scott, 2006; Cogle, Kilpatrick, & Kilpatrick, 2009; Herman, 1997; Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2008; Shalev, 2007). Some characteristics of stressors that are more likely to yield a posttraumatic outcome include those that are extremely intense, intentionality (such as

intentional acts of violence), the presence of life threat, sexual victimization, and unpredictability and uncontrollability (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997; Laylor & McElvaney, 2010; Ozer et al., 2008; Shalev, 2007). Lastly, with regard to how those around the victim respond to the victim following exposure to a traumatic event, the literature asserts that psychological support by family members, friends, and others is known to reduce the intensity of posttraumatic stress (Briere & Scott, 2006; Ozer et al., 2008).

There are a number of posttraumatic responses that are common in individuals following exposure to a traumatic event. Among these responses are various manifestations of depression, anxiety, stress disorders (e.g. posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD] and acute stress disorder [ASD]), dissociation, intrusive thoughts, somatoform responses, and drug and alcohol abuse (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997; Shalev, 2007). Many, if not all of these responses serve as adaptive coping strategies and survival mechanisms in individuals (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006). However, these posttraumatic responses become troublesome and maladaptive as they persist in individuals' everyday lives long after the original threatening events have passed (Ogden et al., 2006). Apart from these easily observable symptoms are feelings and experiences that alter the very meaning that trauma survivors ascribe to their lives (Briere & Scott, 2006). Herman (1997) stated, "the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others" (p. 133). Some of these existential impacts include feelings of profound emptiness, a diminished ability to hope, a loss of trust, a reduction in self-care and care for others, and, most relevant to this study, a loss of connection with one's spirituality (Briere & Scott, 2006).

Posttraumatic stress responses pose great challenges to those who experience them, and many trauma survivors are plagued by feelings of deep hopelessness and profound loss after

years of living with maladaptive coping reactions (Herman, 1997; Ogden et al., 2006; Shalev, 2007). The negative existential impacts of trauma on survivors yield debilitating outlooks for those struggling to reclaim their sense of agency following a traumatic event. A lack of public knowledge and social tendencies toward blaming the victim make this struggle even more difficult, as some survivors also face scrutiny and stigma for the traumatic events they experienced or the responses they engage in following those events (deVries, 2007; Rice & Moller, 2006). All challenges aside, the potential to recover from trauma is ever-present (Herman, 1997; Odgen et al., 2006; van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 2007). With a number of therapeutic approaches developed to help trauma survivors overcome the challenges they face, there remains hope that survivors can live more satisfying and fulfilling lives (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 2007; Ogden, 2006; van der Kolk et al., 2007).

**Recovery from trauma.** There are a number of theories of trauma recovery in the literature today. Many of these theories take into account the factors outlined above, in addition to brain chemistry, cognitions, behaviours, and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Davidson & van der Kolk, 2007; Herman, 1997; Lindy, 2007; Ogden et al., 2006; Rothbaum & Foa, 2007; Turnbull & McFarlane, 2007; van der Kolk, McFarlane, & van der Hart, 2007). While these models are all worthy of merit, I have chosen psychiatrist and trauma specialist Judith Herman's (1997) Tri-Phasic Model as the theoretical foundation for understanding trauma recovery in the present study because it is both straight-forward and widely-accepted. According to Herman (1997), recovery from psychological trauma is based upon the empowerment and creation of new connections for the individual following the sense of disempowerment and disconnection associated with trauma. Herman (1997) asserts that recovery is possible only within the context of relationships, and that survivors must renew connections with others in order to recreate the

capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy, which are often damaged by the trauma (Herman, 1997). Herman's influence on the field of trauma and recovery can be noted when reading other authors who echo the importance of interpersonal relationships in the trauma recovery process (e.g., Briere & Scott, 2006; Lindy, 2007).

***Herman's Tri-Phasic Model.*** According to Herman (1997), trauma recovery consists of three stages: Safety and Stabilization, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection. The first stage, Safety and Stabilization, is characterized by recognizing and naming the symptoms suffered by the trauma survivor, restoring a sense of control over his or her life, and establishing a safe environment (Herman, 1997). The Remembrance and Mourning stage is defined by the sharing of the trauma with a therapist, followed by the transformation of the traumatic memory (Herman, 1997). This serves the purpose of integrating the trauma story into the story of the survivor's own life (Herman, 1997). The third stage involves Reconnection with the survivor's sense of self (Herman, 1997). This stage is characterized by learning to deal with and face future dangers, reconciling with oneself, reconnecting with others, creating meaningful work within the community, and resolving the trauma by returning one's focus to ordinary life (Herman, 1997). According to Herman, the process of trauma recovery is ongoing and lifelong, although there comes a point at which a sense of normalcy is reclaimed and the survivor is less inhibited by trauma symptomatology. This perspective is shared by other trauma recovery theorists (e.g., Ogden, 2006; Turner, McFarlane, & van der Kolk, 2007).

In the present study, I was interested in the narratives of trauma survivors whose spiritual experiences impacted their recovery. As per Herman's (1997) model outlined above, I recognized the ongoing nature of trauma recovery, but understood that for those individuals who self-identified as having recovered from trauma, their focus in life was likely to shift from an

acute attention to trauma, toward other more expansive areas in life. From my perspective, as informed by Herman's (1997) model, trauma recovery involves a shift from the posttraumatic elements outlined above toward engaging in life gradually less encumbered by the effects of trauma. For example, under the impact of trauma, a person who survived a motor vehicle accident may avoid the scene of the crash at all costs, even if it means driving well out of her way on a daily basis. However, after progressing through Herman's (1997) phases of trauma recovery, she may begin to feel increasingly comfortable revisiting the site of the accident. In this way, the posttraumatic effects impact her life less as she gradually recovers, and she is able to live her life with greater flexibility and agency.

### **Relevant Studies**

A number of studies and theoretical publications in recent years have focused on the relationship between spirituality and trauma. Some recent studies suggest that just as spirituality is beneficial to aspects of health and wellbeing in individuals, it is also helpful with respect to posttraumatic stress (Elsass, Carlsson, & Husum, 2010; Elsass & Phuntsok, 2008). Specifically, as suggested above, spirituality plays a role in the cultivation of meaning, which influences one's ability to cope with difficult life events. It therefore follows that spirituality may serve to provide trauma survivors with internal coping resources that are valuable in their recovery. This idea is exemplified in Larry Decker's (2007) article, in which he set forth his ideas related to an individual treatment program for the reduction of psychological difficulties stemming from combat trauma. Decker (2007) addressed the importance of the meaning-making process inherent to spirituality with regard to trauma recovery. Specifically, he asserts it is common for the trauma of war to break down the survivor's ordinary perspectives, yielding a sense of disarray and creating incongruence between one's sense of meaning gained through battle, and

the meaning or meaninglessness of civilian life (Decker, 2007). By both validating and exploring the meaning cultivated from the trauma of war, and by exploring spiritual pathways, Decker (2007) argued that veterans may discover a new sense of meaning in civilian life that eases the psychological difficulties of post-trauma life. The ideas expressed by Decker in this article place emphasis on the importance of shifting meaning in recovery from trauma, which spirituality can be instrumental in creating. By helping trauma survivors cultivate new meaning in life, spirituality can serve as a resource that promotes reconnection, which relates to Herman's (1997) third phase of trauma recovery outlined previously.

Further examples of the process of meaning making related to spirituality are addressed in both qualitative and quantitative studies. For example, in Bryant-Davis' (2005) retrospective qualitative study, the researcher explored the use of coping strategies among 70 African American survivors of childhood violence. The researcher found spirituality to be a primary resource that promoted coping in 55% of the participants. This portion of the sample used spirituality to make sense of their trauma or to increase feelings of efficacy in handling the effects of the trauma (Bryant-Davis, 2005). This example underscores the prevalence of the use of spirituality as a valuable coping resource for many trauma survivors. Similar conclusions were also drawn by Arévalo, Prado, and Amaro (2007), whose correlational study suggested a negative relationship between perceived stress and spirituality. The findings of that study highlight the assumption that spirituality plays a key role in coping with difficult life events, resulting in a positive impact on health and wellbeing.

Further evidence that spirituality is an asset for those coping with trauma is suggested in literature reviews by Ai and Park (2005) and Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, and Koenig (2007). Ai and Park (2005) reviewed the literature on spiritual coping with regard to

interpersonal trauma, and suggested that spiritual coping may increase with distress “as a sign of crisis related resource mobilization” (p. 245). The authors concluded that trauma survivors’ expectancies played a role in posttraumatic recovery, and that those expectancies were closely related to spiritual beliefs. For example, women in abusive relationships who engaged in religious or spiritual practices were less likely to develop symptoms of PTSD than were battered women who did not identify as spiritually or religiously engaged. The authors asserted that examples such as this highlight a trend that is closely related to resiliency fostered by hope. The notion that hope promotes resiliency is echoed by Peres et al. (2007), who noted the importance of hope in the maintenance of health in individuals, stating that an increase in hope and a decrease in despair and hopelessness may be critical to wellness and longevity. The authors highlight that trauma survivors often search for a new sense of meaning and purpose in life, and that spiritual beliefs and practices are often strongly based on a personal quest to understand ultimate questions about life and meaning (Peres et al., 2007). The researchers in both studies maintain that an individual’s spiritual framework may have an important influence on how he or she interprets and copes with traumatic events (Ai & Park, 2005; Peres et al., 2007). The results of these literature reviews are in harmony with the idea that spirituality may be more fundamental to the treatment of trauma than previously recognized.

While there has been an increase of research in the realm of spirituality and trauma in recent years, there still remain several gaps in the literature. Though it is clear that spirituality is a vital internal resource that helps foster coping and the creation of meaning, no empirical studies with an explicit focus on spiritual experiences have been conducted. Moreover, I was unable to find any studies that have explored how individuals’ spiritual experiences have impacted or informed their recovery from trauma, and while coping is often a key part of dealing with

trauma, the move to healing often signals a decreased need for coping. Hence, this study focuses on the notion of healing as distinct from coping with traumatic experiences.

More recently, Lancaster and Palframan (2009) have offered empirical support for the role that spirituality plays in personal transformation following difficult life events. Lancaster and Palframan (2009) interviewed six individuals who identified as having undergone a major life transformation in terms of ideals, behaviour, concerns, or spirituality, as a result of one or more difficult life events. For the six participants in their study, these life events included major disagreements with in-laws, alcoholism, major injury to close family members, illness to self, life threatening illness to self, and domestic abuse. The authors asserted that the study set out to explore “the role, if any, played by spirituality within the coping and transformation process” (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009, p. 261). Following focus questions designed to cultivate understanding of the nature of transformation and spirituality, the researchers engaged in a thematic coding process, the results of which served as evidence that spirituality impacted the process of transformation following the difficult life events in two distinct ways. First, spirituality was found to lie dormant for participants until triggered by their difficult life events. Secondly, spirituality was supportive for participants, in that through spirituality, participants found a deeper meaning both within themselves and through a connection with others or a higher power (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009).

Although Lancaster and Palframan (2009) investigated spirituality’s role in self-transformation following difficult major life events, as opposed to specifically focusing on trauma recovery in the wake of spiritual experiences, their study is relevant to the present research because it considers the role spirituality plays in creating change following hardships. Their definition of self-transformation is outlined as “radical reorganization of one’s identity,

meaning and purpose in life” (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009, p. 260). Although their notion of transformation was more general than the specific focus on trauma recovery in this study, their definition of self-transformation fits with qualities inherent to Herman’s (1997) third phase, Reconnection, which involves learning to manage future dangers, reconciling with oneself, reconnecting with others, creating meaningful work within the community, and returning one’s focus to ordinary life. From my perspective, it appears that the process of healing from trauma set forth by Herman (1997) bears similarity to the process of self-transformation, and it may be that from the perspective of Lancaster and Palframan’s (2009) study, trauma recovery fits as a variety of self-transformation.

Although Lancaster and Palframan’s (2009) study offers support for the usefulness of spirituality in terms of cultivating transformation in the wake of difficult life events, there are some limitations to the research. First, since the participants were self-selected volunteers, a self-serving bias may have operated through a wide array of motivational factors. The findings should therefore be treated with caution. While the findings of this study support the idea that spirituality is helpful in terms of coping with difficult life events and cultivating growth and change, the challenging life events set forth by the participants were not necessarily of a traumatic nature. For example, participants described their difficult life events as consisting of major disagreements with in-laws, alcoholism, major injury to close family members, and illness to self. Although beyond the scope of their study, only two life events were likely traumatic for participants: Life threatening illness to self, and domestic abuse. Further, the researchers were more interested in the general impact of spirituality, rather than the acute experience of the transcendent and its impact on change. As such, despite the nature of the study’s findings, the question as to how spiritual experiences impact recovery from trauma remains unaddressed.

In spite of the growing body of literature in the area of spirituality and trauma recovery, an in-depth qualitative exploration of the ways in which spiritual experiences inform recovery from trauma has yet to be conducted. After searching extensively through online databases including PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Social Sciences Index, and JSTOR, using the keywords “spirituality and trauma”, “spiritual experiences and trauma”, “spirituality and healing”, “spirituality and trauma recovery”, and “spiritual experiences and trauma recovery”, few relevant studies were revealed, with the vast majority falling well outside the scope of the present research. Previous studies have focused more on coping and meaning making relative to spirituality, and have not addressed the active process of trauma recovery specifically. While meaning making involves creating new ways of understanding an event (Gall et al., 2005), which may be related to trauma recovery in part, the term trauma recovery refers to the process of establishing a sense of safety and stabilization, followed by recalling the details of the trauma, and subsequently reconnecting with life (Herman, 1997). Albright, Epstein, and Duggan (2008) assert that close attention to trauma narratives can aid in studying the impact of trauma on survivors. They highlight the need to further develop qualitative knowledge and competence in order to deepen our understanding of the lives of trauma survivors. In-depth research on the topic of spiritual experiences and trauma recovery will increase the effectiveness of trauma research and helping practice within the professional specialties devoted to rehabilitation (Albright, Epstein, & Duggan, 2008).

## **Chapter 3: Methods & Methodology**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will describe the methods and methodology used in the present study. Within the context of this study, the term “methodology” refers to the rationale and theoretical foundation on which the research was based, while the term “methods” refers to the specific techniques used to answer the research question (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I will begin by explaining my own position with regard to the investigated phenomenon, as well as my stance relative to the research question. Secondly, I will describe the research position, and why qualitative methodology was the best fit with my research question. I will also explain the narrative method of interviewing to illustrate why I engaged in that specific process with my participants. Next, I will describe my rationale and procedures for thematic analysis of the narrative interviews, as well as the procedures for these interviews. I will then outline the process of validating the thematic codes I assigned. Following that, I will describe my participants and recruitment procedures, and then outline the processes for maintaining credibility when using qualitative methods. I will then discuss the ethical implications of the present study and how I conducted the research in an ethical manner. Finally, I will provide a summary of the points discussed in this chapter.

### **Position of the Researcher**

As an individual who has considered and reflected upon the impact that spirituality has had in the shaping of my own life, I am familiar with much of what has been discussed in the literature on spirituality from an experiential perspective. Spiritual experiences have had profound impacts on my life, affecting how I regard myself in relation to others, the environment, the universe, and the mysteries inherent to human life. These experiences have

yielded growth by expanding my awareness and shaping how I choose to carry myself in the world. The experiences of connectedness, transcendence, and meaning are familiar to me on an intimate level. For example, after a transcendent experience in which I felt a deep sense of connection with nature and all creation, I experienced a new understanding of my place in the universe. Following that experience, I understood my own life as somewhat insignificant on its own, and recognized how my actions impact other beings in the world. This experience inspired me to strive to inflict as little harm on others and the planet as possible, and to try to do as much good as I was able to in my lifetime. Experiences like this have increased my understanding of myself, my ability to empathize and connect with others, and my propensity to recognize a fundamental sense of unity among other individuals and the environment.

As a graduate student, I acknowledge that much of my daily life is lived “in my own head”. I also acknowledge my own bias in my understanding of spirituality and spiritual experiences, as my own understanding of my experiences does not necessarily translate into having an understanding of the experiences of others. As discussed in the review of the literature, there are a multitude of definitions and conceptions of spirituality, and I am aware that those experiences that I consider to be spiritual may not be considered as such by others, and vice versa. As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge that I am not a neutral, unbiased being, and that my culturally-informed worldview has an influence on my understanding of things.

As a student in a Counselling Psychology Master’s program, I have had some valuable opportunities to work with survivors of trauma through my work in practicum placements. During those experiences, I noted how all of those clients demonstrated resiliency and unique abilities to cope with the myriad of difficulties that they met on a daily basis. Among those coping resources used by these clients, I was most struck by the use of spirituality as a means of

making sense of traumatic experiences and the painful memories that followed. One client in particular would use ideas taught by Eastern traditions, including Taoism and Buddhism, to cultivate a sense of openness to “letting things go”, which that client reported to be fundamental to his recovery and growth following a series of traumatic events. I found those techniques to be both interesting and profound.

My experience of working with trauma survivors has facilitated a practical foundation by which to understand the literature that suggests spirituality serves as a means of coping with and making sense of difficult life events. However, one topic that was never addressed in my sessions with those clients who used spirituality to cope with their traumatic events was the impact of spiritual experiences on their recovery. Based on my own experiences with transcendence, I believe that spiritual experiences have the potential to change one’s life in positive ways. However, I had never encountered trauma in relation to a spiritual experience myself. Thus, the question regarding how spiritual experiences inform recovery from trauma was born from this gap in my understanding, in addition to the gap in the literature.

In an attempt to address this unexplored area of study, the following research question has been proposed: *How do spiritual experiences impact recovery from trauma?* This chapter describes the methodology and methods used for answering this research question.

### **Qualitative Research Positioning**

Black (2008) applied Wilber’s (1999) AQAL framework in the formulation of a critique of the long-standing debate concerning the credibility of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Black (2008) maintains the position that the debate surrounding the superiority of either quantitative or qualitative methods is based on a limited or incomplete definition of the term “empiricism,” a misinterpretation of the word “paradigm,” and the inappropriate restriction

of the term “validation” in the social sciences (Wilber, 1999, as cited in Black, 2008). Black (2008) sets forth the idea that the most widely accepted view of “empiricism” is, in fact, “narrow empiricism”, which uses only one of the three ways of knowing: the five senses (“eye of the flesh”). The means of investigation employed by narrow empiricism disregards the other two ways of knowing: logic, reason, and mathematics (“eye of the mind”), and spiritual experiences and oneness of the Spirit (“eye of the spirit”) (Wilber, 1999, as cited by Black, 2008). While researchers in the physical sciences study phenomena using physical measures, such approaches are incompatible when it comes to studying that which cannot be observed using the “eye of the flesh”. In fact, taking a narrowly empirical approach to exploring subjective human experience is simply not possible. Black (2008) illustrates this point by asserting:

Individual subjective interiors are invisible to the physical sense, and as such, are invisible to the hard sciences. To illustrate this invisibility we can take the experience of sadness as an example. The experience of sadness does not have simple location in the world. One may observe tears, a downward turned mouth, and sobbing. One may measure the chemicals released in a tear, the angle at which the mouth turns down, and the increase in blood pressure with each heave and sob, but none of these can tell the observer about the individual’s interior experience of sadness. Interior subjective experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values) are not visible to the physical sciences, but that does not mean they are not real. (p. 3).

While the eye of the flesh may be inadequate when attempting to observe or measure the subjective experiences of individuals (such as in the example outlined above), the eye of the mind facilitates the necessary tools for representing people’s internal experiences (Black, 2008). Black (2008) asserts that in order to understand a person’s subjective experience, a researcher must invite that person to explain it through conversational dialogue. Although physical scientists may argue that those phenomena that are impervious to narrow empiricism cannot be said to exist for certain, ironically, several of the tools used in the physical sciences to aid in scientific explorations (including mathematics and statistical theory) also exist outside the

physical realm, and are only accessible through the eye of the mind (Black, 2008). Black (2008) goes on to illustrate that even when subjective experiences are represented numerically (such as in a rating scale for anxiety or depression), the subjects of inquiry (e.g., anxiety or depression) do not exist within the physical realm, and are therefore merely internal experiences represented numerically, which still requires the observer to look through the eye of the mind. In studies such as this, regardless of whether numbers or words are used to represent participants' subjective experiences, neither method actually refers to measurable data in the physical realm (Black, 2008). One representation merely uses numerical language to describe participants' internal experiences, while the other uses written words to meet the same end (Black, 2008).

Simply put, qualitative research serves to explore the questions quantitative research is inherently unable to (Creswell, 2009). In the same article outlined above, Black (2008) summarizes Wilber's (1999) notion of the three strands of valid knowing, which must be taken into account when planning to engage in any type of research. These strands include "instrumental injunction", "direct apprehension", and "communal confirmation/rejection" (Black, 2008, p. 4). Specifically, the term *instrumental injunction* denotes the use of the appropriate method for addressing the specific type of research question in a study (i.e., "If you want to know this, do this" Black, 2008, p. 4); *direct apprehension* refers to the immediate experience of the subject area in relation to the appropriate research method; and *communal confirmation/rejection* refers to the validation of the results with others who have adequately completed the first two strands of the process.

In order to maintain these fundamental characteristics of valid scientific inquiry, the research question, *how do spiritual experiences impact recovery from trauma?* must determine the instrumental injunction. I investigated the subjective (internal) accounts of the impacts that

spiritual experiences had on the lives of those who had survived trauma. Fundamental to this inquiry is the postmodernist concept of *analytic realism* (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Garratt & Hodkinson, 1998; Watson & Girard, 2004), which is based on the idea that the social world is dependent upon the individual's interpretation. This concept holds that the interpreted meanings and definitions that individuals bring to real-life contexts and situations are actually socially constructed through language, or more specifically, a communication process (Watson & Girard, 2004). Social experiences between individuals are mediated by each individual's interpretation, as no aspects of the social world, including objects, people, situations, and events, possess their own inherent meaning separate from interpersonal dialogue (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Watson & Girard, 2004). The meaning that people project on to their experiences is not haphazard, but fundamental and constructive (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). From this flows the concept of *justness*, which refers to the postmodernist idea that the subjective truth that comprises the social realm is bound by time, context, and is socially constructed through language. Therefore, the internal experience of an event is entirely dependent upon language, in that it only exists when it is represented using symbols, which are intrinsically created through social processes (Watson & Girard, 2004).

Internal experiences cannot be directly observed or measured by way of physical means (Black, 2008; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Instead, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the inner experience of trauma survivors, it was necessary to engage them in conversational dialogue to facilitate their subjective description of the experience, and to cultivate meaning of the experience through language. Thus, it follows that a qualitative injunction was most appropriate for investigating the research question of this study.

As outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), there are five essential features of qualitative research. These features include *naturalistic context*, *descriptive data*, *concern with process*, *inductive data analysis*, and *participant perspectives or meaning*. The theoretical foundation of the present study is closely aligned with the concept of analytic realism, outlined above. Some qualitative research, including this study, is often driven by the assumption that human experience is mediated by interpretation. Therefore, qualitative researchers whose studies resemble the research at hand are concerned with adequately co-creating the perspectives of individuals, in addition to the five primary characteristics mentioned (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Qualitative research facilitates an in-depth inquiry into the conditions by which people attribute meanings to objects and events (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As a result, the descriptions of those meanings gathered using methods that are in line with qualitative ways of representing data are likely to be more deeply understood in comparison to those acquired through quantitative approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research, which typically involves participant interviews, facilitates a dialogue between the researcher and participant that allows for direct engagement in the meaning-making process of the participant. This process satisfies the requirement for direct apprehension of data in valid scientific investigations, as outlined by Wilber (1999), and cited by Black (2008).

Qualitative research is conducted with the intent to maintain sensitivity toward the nature of human and cultural social contexts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As such, it is often guided by the ethic to remain congruent with the phenomena under investigation, as opposed to any particular set of methodological techniques or principles (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). Therefore, qualitative researchers are interested in the subjective states of their participants for the purpose of increasing understanding of the given phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Lastly, qualitative researchers are concerned with the credibility of the results of their method of analysis (Gall et al., 2009). To address this concern, the results of a qualitative study are often validated by the participants themselves. This procedure involves the confirmation or rejection of the researcher's results by those who provided the data (Black, 2008; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Initially, the researcher engages in the involving processes of collecting, reviewing, and coding data. After the results have been organized, validation can occur. Because the participants of the study co-constructed the data with the researcher through a process of dialogue, they are the only ones who can adequately validate the results as being representative of their experience (Black, 2007; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This process is consistent with the foundational concept of analytic realism that underlies all qualitative research, and is called validation by a community of the adequate (Black, 2008).

Thus, since the phenomenon in question - the survivors' accounts of how spiritual experiences have impacted their recovery from trauma - are a significant part of the subjective aspect of reality, a research approach that facilitates the direct investigation of these experiences is essential. These experiences can only be described through language because dialogue distinguishes the interpretation given to these experiences by each participant. By engaging in qualitative research, I increased my understanding of how spiritual experiences impact trauma recovery by co-constructing narratives about each participant's experience through conversation. Specifically, the instrumental injunction, interviewing the participants and asking them to tell their stories of how their spiritual experiences impacted their recovery from trauma, disclosed the data, which I apprehended during the interview, during the process of transcription, and during the analysis of each transcript. I then engaged in the process of validation by checking the results with the only other people who had adequately completed the injunctive and apprehensive

strands: the participants themselves. For the purpose of ensuring that I engaged in the collection and analysis of data in a sufficient manner, I also maintained close contact with another community of the adequate: my thesis supervisor and committee. As experienced researchers and university faculty members, my committee served to provide constructive criticism of my work to help ensure that it was adequately conducted. This process is in line with the requirements of the research question and the three components of valid scientific inquiry outlined above. Specific to the current research, the inquiry included narrative interviews and the thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

### **Narrative Positioning**

Unlike the positivistic worldview assumed by many quantitative researchers, narrative researchers are interested in co-constructing narratives with participants (Chase, 2003, 2005). Susan Chase (2003), a prominent author in the field of narrative research asserts, “narration is a major way in which people make sense of experience, construct the self, and create and communicate meaning” (p. 79). She adds, “personal narratives, no matter how unique and individual, are inevitably social in character” (Chase, 2003, p. 79), and, “Narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (Chase, 2005, p. 656). These statements by Chase (2003, 2005) highlight the dialogical role of the research in conducting narrative interviews within the context of qualitative research.

The narrative approach to research falls under the rubric of qualitative inquiry, with some distinct additions. Specifically, the core of narrative research is ultimately concerned with biographical details, as set forth by the individuals who directly experience them (Chase, 2005). The heart of a narrative approach to qualitative research is focused around those biographical

details, thereby facilitating the use of a narrative interview approach without necessarily employing narrative data analysis. To distinguish between the concept of a narrative interview versus that of narrative analysis, Chase (2003) describes the narrative interview as the venue that facilitates the telling of the story, while narrative analysis involves the creation of first-person narratives by the researcher, which much subsequently be accepted or rejected by the original participant as fully telling his or her story. According to Chase (2003), within the context of narrative research, narrative analysis is merely one form of data analysis among other equally valuable methods. Thus, for the purpose of the research at hand, it is acceptable to employ a narrative interview method in the absence of a narrative analysis.

In their description of the narrative method of interviewing, Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) state that it is “not a neutral tool, for at least two people create the reality of the interview situation . . . . Thus, the interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes” (p. 643). This quotation underscores the notion that narrative researchers are concerned with co-constructing the stories imparted by their participants for the purpose of their research. Because individuals understand themselves and their environments by making meaning through narrative stories (Chase, 2003, 2005), narrative-style interview questions are appropriate for the present research. Comparatively, semi-structured interview questions are more likely to elicit cognitively focused responses, as they tend to ask participants for their thoughts or beliefs on a particular subject (Mishler, 1986, as cited in Chase, 1995). Because I was interested in a more robust story of how participants found their spiritual experiences to impact their recovery from trauma, questions that elicited answers that drew from participants’ experiences, memories, emotions, spirituality, sensory aspects, and other personal or private states (Atkinson & Delamont, 2008) were central to this study’s purview.

### **Thematic Analysis Positioning**

Norman Denzin (2005a) asserts, “In the social sciences there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself” (p. 313). This notion is echoed by Boyatzis (1998) in his description of thematic analysis in qualitative research. Boyatzis (1998) describes thematic analysis as a process for displaying qualitative information that can range from a list of themes to a complex model involving related variables (p.vi). He asserts that fundamental to this analytical process is observation, which is a highly individualized, subjective action. Specifically, observation involves regarding a phenomenon with the unique lens of experience irrevocably dawned by all individuals. Boyatzis (1998) emphasizes the importance of observation in the analytical process, stating, “Observation precedes understanding” (p. 1). He qualifies this statement by adding, “Recognizing an important moment (seeing) precedes encoding it (seeing it as something), which in turn precedes interpretation” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). These are the three phases of inquiry inherent to the qualitative analysis of information (Boyatzis, 1998). These directions structure the method of analysis used in the present study in that I first engaged in observation through the process of narrative interviews, which was instrumental in gaining understanding of how spiritual experiences impact recovery from trauma, which then facilitated the recognition of the value in sections of the interviews in order to code them. Finally, with that coding, I was able to arrive at an interpretation.

Thematic analysis has an extensive history within the social sciences, and commonly involves the analyses of existing documents, or the recording, transcription, and coding of audio or video samples (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). For the research at hand, I coded verbatim transcripts from audio recordings of the narrative interviews. With regard to the process of transcription, Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) describe it as serving to create “interpretive

constructions arrived at through choices made by the researcher” (p. 74). As a researcher, I acknowledge that my own experiences, beliefs, and biases played a role in both the transcription and interpretation processes of my research, as I engaged in co-construction throughout all aspects of my research while engaging with my participants. Specifically, my own beliefs regarding spirituality, trauma, and my understanding of spiritual experiences needed to be accounted for while conducting this research. While my beliefs about trauma and trauma recovery have been informed primarily by much of the literature reviewed on those topics in Chapter 2, my beliefs about spirituality and spiritual experiences have both theoretical roots (represented in the related literature reviewed in the previous chapter) and personal experiential roots. I believe that spirituality is an innate process by which human beings strive to connect with that which is beyond individual personhood. Similar to Wilber’s (2000) ideas outlined in Chapter 2, I believe that spirituality is the process by which people move from an egocentric worldview toward a more collective-focused (or “worldcentric”) perspective. I understand spiritual experiences as being instrumental to that movement, which is an understanding partially informed by my own personal experience. These beliefs came into play across the decision-making points throughout the course of this study, and informed the interview questions I asked to participants (thereby making the transcribed interview data inherently co-constructed), and the data analysis process I engaged in (e.g., the extent to which I believed statements made by participants in the narrative interviews addressed my interview question, according to my understanding of spiritual experiences and trauma recovery).

### **Interview Procedure: The Narrative Interview**

In the present study, the narrative interview process revolved around the most central request that I presented each participant with: Tell me your story about how your healing from

trauma was impacted by your spiritual experience. I anticipated that the participants' stories would be told in non-linear ways, depending upon each participant's memory and story telling style. I was also mindful of the story telling process, which consists of a beginning, middle, and end. If participants struggled with answering the initial question, I provided prompts to help expand sections of their stories for the purposes of clarification and reconnecting the narrative with the research question. In order to determine when each participant had shared his or her full story with me, I posed the question, "Now that we have had some time to talk, have you told me your story?" The answer to this question dictated the remaining time and focus of the interview.

Three of the interviews took place at the University of Victoria, while the other three took place at the private homes of the participants between the months of February and April 2011. The interviews ranged in length between 1 hour and 1 hour and a half. All interviews were digitally recorded, and all digital files (including transcripts) were stored in password-protected folders on my own personal computer.

I was personally engaged throughout the narrative interviewing process. For example, I experienced a range of emotional responses to participants' stories of trauma and healing, including sadness, anger, joy, intrigue, awe, and amazement. Because of the social nature of personal narratives, it was my intention to be an active agent throughout the interview process by requesting that participants elaborate on or clarify points that were unclear to me, and by steering the direction of the narratives back toward the research question if the conversation went off course. Along with my participants, I experienced each interview in the first person, and maintained the agenda to have the participants answer the research question.

### **Analysis Procedure: Thematic Analysis**

For the purpose of the present research, I followed the six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) because this approach provided a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. Prior to deciding on using narrative interviews with thematic analysis, I discussed other methodological options with my supervising faculty member. Another method that I had considered using within this study was phenomenology, which would have involved pursuing the “essence” of how my participants described their spiritual experiences as impacting their recovery from trauma. However, because of the essentialist assumption within phenomenology that there is a unitary truth that can be ascertained through the interview and data analysis processes, I chose to use narrative interviews with thematic analysis because this approach facilitated the revelation of the multiple truths (i.e., answers to my research question) that I co-constructed with my participants.

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis consisted of the following:

1. Familiarization with the data.
2. Generation of initial codes.
3. Grouping of codes.
4. Developing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

To address the first phase, the position I assumed relative to the co-constructed narratives afforded me intimate familiarity with the interview data from each participant. Not only did I co-create the narratives through the interview process, I also engaged in the painstaking practice of transcription, which helped me to become even more intimately familiar with the contents of

each interview. After the transcription of each interview, I then read and re-read the entire transcript to submerge myself deeper into the narrative data. Following this, I then coded the text of each transcript as to whether or not the particular section of speech was a possible answer to the research question. I then took these results and began grouping those quotes that addressed the research question into similar categories, making notes as to what I believed linked these quotes together. Next, through the processes of reflecting on groupings of common quotes and meeting with my supervisor I developed and refined the themes to the point where I constructed a name and descriptive paragraph for each theme. Lastly, I engaged in the process of member checking for the sake of validating my results. After checking in with each participant, I indicated beside each theme how many participants endorsed the theme both in the narrative interview and in the validation stage.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of qualitative data analysis facilitated a systematic movement from familiarization with the interview transcripts toward the refining of themes. With regard to the development of themes, Braun and Clarke (2006) caution researchers engaging in thematic analysis that "there is no hard-and fast answer to the question of what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme." (p. 82). However, they assert that a theme embodies something important within the data relative to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set as a whole (Braun & Clark, 2006). For this reason, researcher judgment is necessary in terms of determining what constitutes a theme (Braun & Clark, 2006).

To meet the end of co-constructing themes, Braun and Clark (2006) recommend that researchers take on a stance of flexibility relative to the formation of themes, and attend to whether a pattern of response between participants captures something of importance in relation

to the guiding research question. Although there are many different conventions for determining what constitutes a theme (including each individual time a pattern appears across the data set, or the number of speakers who contribute to a pattern in the data set) (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I chose to construct themes based on the majority of participants reporting a given pattern. In the case of the present study, a pattern was considered a theme if four participants (one-half of the participants, plus one) endorsed it in the narrative interview. This decision was based on a logical inference that when the majority of participants in a study share a common pattern of experience, it is evidence that the pattern is related to the experience that I was investigating. When only half of the participants endorse a theme, there is a question regarding whether or not it is part of the experience or not. Ultimately, the decision is an arbitrary one, given the nature of qualitative inquiry and the fact that inferences are not made from such small sample sizes.

In addition to the co-constructed themes, which consisted of four or more endorsements between the narrative interviews, notable categories of responses consisted of those patterns for which only two or three endorsements were given between participants. As per Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion, when left to my own discretion, I chose to include those patterns for which a minority of participants shared a common experience between interviews if those patterns directly related to the research question guiding the study.

### **Validation Process**

To ensure that the data were organized with particular regard to the themes that the participants actually generated, my supervising faculty member reviewed the data analysis. This step helped to ensure that there was external consistency between the content provided by the participants and the themes generated through data analysis. After this revision process, I engaged in the process of member checking with each participant by asking them to review the

categorizations and offer any insights towards revision. To meet this end, I took each theme and included only those quotes that each individual participant him/herself provided for the validation of each theme. In a face-to-face meeting, I asked each participant to tell me whether or not each theme/quote fit with his or her experience. In all cases in which a participant had an endorsing quote, the participants asserted that the themes represented their experience. In most cases, participants also endorsed those themes for which they did not have a corresponding quote, with the exception of one participant relative to one theme. In order to best represent their experiences, the participants were invited to make changes, additions, or deletions to their contributions to the pool of data if necessary. After these two phases of validation and revision were complete, the thematic results (see Chapter 4) were formulated into a discussion of the experiences of the participants and were considered in relation to other literature on this topic (see Chapter 5).

### **Participants**

Ethical approval to complete this study was received from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain the necessary participants for this study. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants who are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory or understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). With respect to this study, the phenomenon of interest was the impact of spiritual experiences on the process of recovery from trauma. Therefore, the participants needed to be individuals who had experienced trauma and who had a spiritual experience that impacted their recovery from that traumatic event. To be considered for this study, participants needed to identify as having experienced or witnessed an event that was extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelmed that person's internal resources, making normal functioning extremely difficult

(Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997). To address the component of the spiritual experience, the participants were required to have had an acute experience characterized by a sense of transcendence (Wilber, 2007), which may have involved a deep sense of connection with other individuals, the universe, or a higher power, and which resulted in a moment of personal transformation (Bray, 2009; Hill et al., 2000; Lancaster & Palframan, 2008; Moreira-Almeida & Koenig, 2006; Speck et al., 2004; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Whether or not each participant met these criteria for inclusion was determined by way of an initial telephone interview (see appendix A), which took place when each participant first made contact with me regarding their interest in this study.

Out of concern for the wellbeing of the participants, I also established criteria for exclusion in addition to the criteria for inclusion stated above. First, because of the established purpose of this study and its focus on the experience of adults, all individuals under the age of 19 were excluded. Because children lack the cognitive capacity that facilitates self-reflection to the extent that adults are capable (Pletsch, Johnson, Tosi, Thurston, & Riesch, 1991), it was in the best interest of the study that only adults be included. Secondly, individuals whom, at the time of the study, were presently suffering from symptoms related to PTSD or ASD were not included, out of respect for their own psychological wellbeing. Because of the potential for retraumatization or triggering traumatic memories, the ethical risk factor for including these individuals was too high for the purpose of this study (Lewis, Kelly, & Allen, 2004). The individuals' age was determined by asking prospective participants for their year of birth during initial contact. Secondly, the likelihood of recruiting individuals currently presenting with symptoms of PTSD and ASD was diminished by selecting participants whose traumatic experiences occurred more than two years prior to the interview. Only one potential participant

was turned away because I had already met my target in terms of the number of participants I was aiming to recruit.

My primary means of recruitment involved informational posters placed in a variety of places of worship throughout Victoria, B.C. These included Christian churches of various denominations, as well as Buddhist meditation centers, and one Synagogue. The posters (see appendix B) described the study in general, the participant criteria, and directed interested volunteers to contact me by telephone if they wished to participate in the study. Recruiting participants who are active in their religious communities increased the likelihood of finding subjects who were spiritually engaged, as religion often serves as a vehicle for spiritual practice (Hill et al., 2001; Tanyi, 2002). A secondary means of recruitment involved snowball sampling. After each interview, I asked each participant if he or she knew anyone else who might meet the criteria for participation in this study (see script in appendix A). For those who did, I was willing to pass my contact information on through the initial participants and request that they contact me if they were interested. None of the participants in this study were recruited by way of the snowball sampling method, as they all contacted me by way of the informational posters.

Once deemed appropriate for the study, participants were interviewed in a private office on the University of Victoria campus. In total, six participants were desired for this study. Once I had successfully recruited six participants, I no longer accepted any further volunteers. This number of cases was sufficient for a study of this nature because it facilitated an in-depth investigation into the phenomenon, while being small enough to be manageable with respect to the time-consuming nature of qualitative research (Gall et al., 2010).

When contacting interested volunteers about participating in the present study, I outlined the purpose of the study and explained how their contributions fit with my research objectives

(see appendix A). Additionally, I described the nature of their participation and what would be involved. I explained that I was looking at the impact of spiritual experiences on the participants' recovery from trauma, and if individuals indicated continued interest and availability, interviews were scheduled.

Prior to beginning each interview, participants were given a copy of the informed consent form for their information and approval (see appendix D). The form outlined my assumptions, the purpose and scope of the study, the nature of the interview questions, the expected duration of the interview, my expectations of the participants, and what the participants may expect of me. Two copies of the form were present during the informed consent briefing, one of which the participants held, the other of which I read from. This facilitated a co-reading of the informed consent information, which was intended to promote dialog with the hope of addressing any and all of the participants' questions or concerns. The form was presented to each participant prior to the qualitative interview. If accepting of the conditions of the study, the participants signed and dated both copies, keeping one copy for him/herself. I placed the other copy in a secure filing cabinet for the purpose of record maintenance.

Following the qualitative interview, I invited each participant to engage in a debriefing process, in which I encouraged him or her to pose any questions he or she might have regarding the study. Out of concern for the participants' psychological and emotional wellbeing, I asked each participant if he or she needed to say or do anything to help him or her go on with their everyday tasks once the interview concluded. If participants felt the need to engage with a professional counsellor because of emotional distress, I offered to provide referrals to affordable mental health services within the community. None of the six participants requested this option.

## **Methodological Credibility**

Although a qualitative approach is most well suited to the research at hand, it is imperative to assess the methodological rigor of this qualitative inquiry. In spite of their basis in philosophical misunderstandings, some commonly perceived limitations of studies similar to this include that the descriptive data that is central to qualitative research frequently requires rigorous and time-consuming data collection and analysis procedures. Additionally, because there are numerous approaches to analyzing the vast amount of data in qualitative studies, the lack of a single standardized approach sometimes raises questions about the reliability of the results. It can also be challenging to complete the process of data reduction and coding, potentially resulting in excessively broad or narrow interpretations of the data, thereby raising concerns about internal validity and objectivity. Lastly, the findings obtained through qualitative methods may not appear to retain the same kind of statistical generalizability that findings obtained by way of quantitative methods are often considered to have. The inaccuracy of these statements, however, is that although the issues of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity are of valid concern with regard to quantitative research, they are based on a model that is incompatible with qualitative research. To address this, a shift in language is necessary in order to fit the philosophical assumptions that underlie this study.

More consistent with the qualitative perspective that underscores this study is the notion of *trustworthiness*. As asserted by Leininger and outlined by Krefting (1991), qualitative researchers are not concerned with “reliability” and “validity” in the way that quantitative researchers are. Rather, qualitative researchers are interested in gaining understanding of the nature of the phenomena under investigation. In order to achieve this end, several models for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research have been proposed. Krefting (1991)

describes the commonly used model set forth by Guba (1981), which is based on the identification of four aspects of trustworthiness: *truth value*, *applicability*, *consistency*, and *neutrality*.

With regard to *truth value*, Krefting (1991) states that it is usually obtained from the discovery of human experiences as they are lived and perceived by individual informants (e.g., research participants). Truth value establishes the researcher's confidence in the truth of his or her findings, based on the research design, participants, and results (Krefting, 1991). The idea of truth value is consistent with Lincoln and Guba's notion of *credibility*, which holds that it is subject-oriented, as opposed to something defined beforehand by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Krefting, 1991). Unlike quantitative research, which is often used for the purpose of ascertaining a single identifiable truth, qualitative research allows for the existence of multiple realities (Krefting, 1991). As such, it is the researcher's task to represent those multiple truths revealed by participants as adequately as possible (Krefting, 1991).

In her description of strategies for upholding credibility or truth value, Krefting (1991) recommends that qualitative researchers engage in "adequate submersion in the research setting to enable recurrent patterns to be identified and verified" (p. 217). This can be achieved by spending extended periods of time with participants, for the purposes of perspective checking, and facilitating a level of rapport between participants and the researcher (Krefting, 1991). This is important, because higher levels of rapport yield more intimate disclosures of information from participants (Krefting, 1991). Krefting (1991) goes on to iterate Kirk and Miller's (1986) point that a study's credibility is threatened by errors in which research subjects respond in ways that they believe to be socially desirable. The use of prolonged engagement and the resulting rapport is therefore fundamental to decreasing the likelihood of participants providing untrue,

socially desirable responses. I employed this strategy for upholding credibility in this study by taking the time necessary to build rapport with my participants, and using rapport-building skills that are inherent to my practice of counselling, such as providing non-judgmental responses to participants' statements. Evidence that rapport had been established included the mutual use of humour between myself and the participants, the participants' open posture when sitting with me in the interview, and the participants' willingness to speak openly with me regarding the personal subject matter that was being explored.

Paradoxical to the threats to truth value that result from insufficient rapport in the researcher-participant relationship is the notion that too much closeness can result in an enmeshed relationship between the research parties (Krefting, 1991). This type of relationship can impact the researcher's ability to interpret the co-constructed narratives by making it difficult to separate the researcher's own experience from that of the participants' (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, as cited in Krefting, 1991). Krefting (1991) recommends a strategy called *reflexivity* to help ensure that this extreme over involvement does not occur. One way to engage in reflexivity is to cultivate awareness around the multiple roles that the researcher engages in while also engaged in the research. In my case, I am a student of counselling, a novice counsellor, and a spiritual practitioner. I acknowledge that it is impossible for me to divorce myself from any of these roles, which bare influence on how I interact with my participants. To effectively address this threat to credibility, I engaged in the maintenance of a field journal, which included my thoughts, feelings, ideas, and reflections as I came into contact with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited by Krefting, 1991). I employed this strategy when writing in my own private journal, a practice that I often perform at the end of my day. This strategy helped me maintain awareness of my own biases and preconceived assumptions as separate from the

experiences described by my participants in the narrative interviews, which was important with respect to my task of providing an adequate representation of my participants' accounts of how their spiritual experiences impacted their recovery from trauma.

Another way to measure or assess the truth value in a qualitative study is to engage in member checking during the data analysis process (Krefting, 1991). Member checking involves investigating the extent to which those who share the experience under inquiry would immediately recognize the descriptions provided by the researcher (Krefting, 1991). I addressed this aspect of trustworthiness through the process of the validation of my thematic codes, outlined previously. In the validation stage of this study, if the participants recognized my descriptions of the thematic codes as being in line with their experiences, I understood that truth value was upheld, and that my analysis was credible. This was my strategy for representing my participants' experiences as adequately as I was able.

Krefting (1991) writes that *applicability* represents the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied to other contexts and settings, or to other groups. Also referred to as *transferability* (Guba, 1981), studies maintain this quality when the findings fit into contexts outside the study situation that are determined by the degree of similarity or goodness of fit between the multiple contexts (Krefting, 1991). The responsibility of transferability falls on the individual who desires to transfer the findings to another situation or population, rather than on the researcher of the initial study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited by Krefting, 1991). However, in order to account for the transferability of this study's findings in future research contexts, I provided as much background information on my participants as possible, while still respecting their anonymity, so readers and future researchers have a sense as to what other groups the findings I describe could be transferred. However, in order to maintain applicability,

as described by Krefling (1991), I will present sufficient descriptive data, in order to allow comparison to other contexts.

In qualitative research, *consistency* is determined in terms of dependability (Krefling, 1991). Unlike in quantitative research, in which reliability is the criterion that addresses the regularity, stability, and equivalence of a study, *consistency* is assessed by the extent to which the findings of a study would be dependable if the research were replicated with the same participants or in a similar context (Krefling, 1991). Since qualitative research is based on different philosophical assumptions than quantitative research (which assumes a single reality), the notion of reliability is not relevant to qualitative inquiry. Instead, variability is expected in qualitative research, and variability that is traceable is regarded as dependable (Krefling, 1991). Within the current research context, the uniqueness of human experience is emphasized so that variation in experience is sought over identical repetition (Krefling, 1991). In order to enhance the traceability of the present study, I made effective use of the research expertise of my supervising faculty member and supporting committee members. Krefling (1991) states, “the use of colleagues and methodological experts (peer examination) to check the research plan and implementation is another means of ensuring dependability” (p. 221). By successfully defending a thesis proposal in front of a panel of my committee members and supervising faculty member, as well as scheduling regular consultation with my thesis supervisor, I ensured that my research plan and implementation were sound.

Lastly, *neutrality* refers to the extent to which the researcher maintains a neutral stance in the data collection process and results (Krefling, 1991). Whereas quantitative researchers are concerned with maintaining objectivity by way of the rigor of their methodology through which reliability and validity are established, qualitative researchers are interested in increasing the

worth of their findings by decreasing the distance between themselves and their participants (Krefting, 1991). Krefting (1991) refers to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) ideas around neutrality, by which they place emphasis on the neutrality of the data, over the neutrality of the individual researcher. Krefting (1991) goes on to re-assert Lincoln and Guba's (1985) point that neutrality is accounted for by way of *confirmability*, which is achieved when truth value and applicability are maintained. Because I took the steps outlined previously to establish and maintain truth value and applicability in my research, neutrality and confirmability were also accounted for by virtue of these considerations.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were essential to this investigation due to the fact that I engaged human participants as co-creators of the data for this study. In order for this study to gain approval by the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board, the benefits of participation in the study had to outweigh any potential risks. With regard to participation in this study, the risks to participants were considered to be minimal, as the likelihood and degree of potential harm resulting from participant involvement was no greater than those risks they encountered in their everyday lives in relation to spiritual experiences and recovery from trauma.

I recognized one potential inconvenience and one possible risk involved in the participation of the present study. The former related to the notion that participation in this study required up to three hours of the participants' time. This estimated time took into account both the time between participating in the interview and the validation of the results by way of member checking, as part of data analysis process. For those participants with busy lives and a shortage of time, I conceived that this may have proven to be inconvenient. The perceived risk to participating in this study related to the difficult nature inherent to discussing events associated with traumatic experiences. Although I did not focus solely on the details of the participants' traumatic experiences, discussing aspects of

those incidents could have brought up uncomfortable feelings for participants. Conversely, the benefits associated with participation included facilitating an opportunity to discuss how the participants' spiritual experience informed their recovery from trauma, which could have yielded an increase in self-awareness. Additionally, participation in this study facilitated the contribution to the body of literature on recovery from trauma, and the resulting increase in understanding may eventually influence counselling approaches for survivors of trauma.

Another ethical consideration was that of anonymity and confidentiality. To address this, participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym for use during the interviews, in order to maintain their anonymity. Further, all identifying information was excluded from the transcripts, data analysis, and results in order to protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity. As the primary researcher, only I made note of which interview transcript corresponded with each participant, in order to maintain continuity between the participant and the appropriate results in the validation phase. Lastly, all research data was stored in locked cabinets and password protected computer files on an external hard drive in my private home. The only limit to confidentiality – which is a limit that applies to all adults residing in the province of British Columbia – was my legal requirement for the disclosure of a child or vulnerable adult in need of protection to be reported to the necessary authorities. These limitations were clearly marked on the consent form, and were collectively reviewed with each participant prior to commencing participation in the study. As a final ethical precaution, all data will be destroyed twelve months after the completion of the investigation; paper data will be shredded, electronic files will be deleted, and audiotapes will be erased.

Given the nature of this investigation and the precautions described above, the ethical considerations for this study do not pose any major concerns. I believe that the benefits of conducting this research outweigh the potential risks to participants.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have explained the qualitative research positioning, the details of narrative research, and the positioning for thematic analysis to be conducted in the present study. After detailing the congruence between these methodologies, I outlined the processes necessary for the narrative interviews and thematic analysis, and then discussed my participants and their recruitment. I then outlined the validation process with regard to the thematic codes that I arrived at during the process of thematic analysis. Next, I explained the qualitative forms of methodological credibility: *truth value*, *applicability*, *consistency*, and *neutrality*, as laid out by Krefting (1991), and how these were addressed in the research at hand. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of the ethical considerations of the study, and how I minimized risk to participants.

## Chapter 4: Results

Narrative interviews were conducted with six participants who had experienced a traumatic event in line with Briere and Scott's (2006) definition outlined in Chapter 2: *An event that was extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelmed the participants' internal resources, making normal functioning extremely difficult.* These participants also self-identified as having encountered spiritual experiences that corresponded with the operational definition used in the previous review of the literature: An acute encounter with a sense of transcendence. The six participants ranged in age from 30 to 75, with five women (one of whom self-identified as transgendered) and one man. Of the six participants, two were survivors of childhood sexual abuse, one was the recipient of intimate partner violence that involved a rape, one had experienced a still birth, one survived a motor vehicle accident, and one experienced interpersonal loss related to her own gender transition. Because spiritual experiences involve transcending one's self and connecting with something greater than the self, it is also important to note what these participants connected with. One participant described her spiritual connection with God, another with her Divine Light, the third with The Divine, the fourth with The Truth, the fifth with Universal Energy, and the last with a sacred place. With regard to their spiritual experiences, one participant related hers to prayer in the Christian tradition, two related their spiritual experiences to yoga and meditation, a fourth described hers as an "epiphany" related to self-exploration, a fifth understood hers as a "spontaneous Kundalini awakening" (see Gupta, 2010; Mookerjee, 1982; Sivananda Radha, 1981), and the final participant related hers to her practice of Celtic spirituality. All participants were able to clearly articulate how their spiritual experiences were instrumental in their recovery from these traumatic events.

As outlined in chapter 3, narrative interviews were conducted, in which participants were

asked, to “tell me your story about how your healing from trauma was impacted by your spiritual experience.” Before commencing each interview, I requested that each participant choose her/his own pseudonym so as to maintain her/his confidentiality and anonymity within the context of the study. Five participants offered their own pseudonyms, which included “Robin”, “Georgia”, “Toby”, “Healer”, and “Celt.” Although the sixth participant asserted no desire to remain anonymous, I informed her that I was ethically obligated to maintain her anonymity within the parameters of this study, as per the requirements of the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria. She consented for me to choose a working pseudonym on her behalf, which I set forth as “Judith”

After completing all six interviews, I transcribed each one verbatim, then engaged in the process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through the process of coding and thematicizing, I constructed three discrete themes and one notable category of response, outlined below. As described in Chapter 3, the inclusion criteria for a pattern of responses to be considered a theme required that pattern to be reported by the majority of participants. Therefore, a pattern was considered a theme if four participants endorsed it in the narrative interview. As stated in the previous chapter, this decision was based on a logical inference that when the majority of participants in a study share a common pattern of experience, it is evidence that that pattern is related to the research question. Additionally, I also chose to include those patterns for which a minority of participants shared a common experience between interviews if those patterns directly related to the question guiding the study. In the case of this study, one such category of response addressed the present research question, and is included in the results to follow.

Throughout the process of data analysis, my supervisor carefully reviewed all themes to

ensure that I clearly followed the appropriate procedures, as outlined in Chapter 3. This supervisory component served to bolster the dependability of the study (Krefting, 1991). After my supervising faculty member indicated that he agreed that my three themes and one notable category of response were supported by the data contained within the narrative interviews and were necessarily homogenous, I engaged in the process of member checking described in Chapter 3. Specifically, adhering to Krefting's (1991) recommendations with regard to assessing and maintaining credibility, all themes were endorsed by each participant during a follow-up encounter. Through the process of member checking, each participant was asked to review each theme and indicate whether or not that theme represented his or her experience. Participants were given the opportunity to review the descriptive paragraph for each theme and notable category of response, but were only asked to review the supporting quotations from their own narrative interviews. This is because the process of member checking only requires that participants validate their own quotations, as they do not have the authority to assert whether or not I adequately understood another participant's narrative (Krefting, 1991). If a participant reviewed a theme for which there was no supporting quote from his or her narrative interview, but believed that theme to fit with his or her experience relative to the present study, that participant was given the opportunity to endorse that theme at the validation stage. In other words, each participant reviewed the description of each theme, then indicated whether or not that description represented his or her experience. I then noted beside each theme how many participants endorsed it in both the narrative interview and the validation stage in the Results section displayed in Chapter 4.

The first three themes were initially endorsed by at least four of the six participants, none of which were endorsed by all six. These three themes were: 1. Creating a Foundation; 2.

Healing Through the Physical Body; and 3. Being Guided. After reviewing the themes with the participants through the process of member checking at the validation stage, the themes “Creating a Foundation” and “Healing Through the Physical Body” increased from five endorsements to six, while “Being Guided” increased from four endorsements to five. In addition to these first three themes, one other notable category of response emerged, which was initially endorsed by two of the six participants: “Freedom.” While engaging in the process of member checking at the validation stage, I asked whether or not each participant would also endorse this theme, based on its description. Unanimously, all participants agreed that this category of response fit with their experience relative to the research question, raising the endorsements from the initial two to six at the validation stage.

The following are the titles and descriptions of the four themes, as well as the verbatim endorsing quotes, all of which were reviewed by the participants during the data analysis procedure.

### **Primary Themes and Supporting Quotes**

**1. Creating a Foundation** (Endorsed initially by five participants. Endorsed by six at validation stage).

When asked how their spiritual experiences informed their recovery from trauma, participants asserted that they provided a foundation that they could choose to return to in challenging times. For four of the participants, their spiritual experiences helped them to cultivate a touchstone that served as a resource when dealing with subsequent challenges. For those participants, that resource ranged from a foundation of protection on which to reflect in fearful times, to a source of hope or strength, to a grounding point when circumstances became overwhelming. One participant explicitly stated that following her spiritual experience, she

recognized that any time she needed, she could heal herself. In these ways, the spiritual experiences described by the participants cultivated a basis on which to draw hope, safety, confidence, and perseverance. For these participants, the act of returning to their base or foundation was a purposeful, agentic decision, that they could set forth themselves when circumstances necessitated it. For all five participants who endorsed this theme in the interview, their spiritual experience helped them to cultivate resources that made healing from their trauma possible.

- Georgia: “On the days when I go into, you know, ‘Nobody loves me’, you know, I connect spiritually, and I go, ‘That’s not true’. And when I get afraid, I connect spiritually, and I feel like, ‘Yeah, I am protected by Divine Light’. And it’s all within me.”
- Toby: “I want to say it was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life, so I’ve always known that and I’ve taken that with me, and I’ve never shared that part of me with anyone else. And I never tell people that because I don’t want people to not believe me or like to think that it was fake, or to question it or whatever, because it’s like, it’s what’s given me hope and like I carry it with me and I know it exists, and I know in the truest part of myself that it exists.”
- Judith: “It’s what I anchor my whole life around, and everything I do always comes back to that divine truth of who I am, to the degree that it gives me confidence to face all this other stuff.”
- Healer: “You have to make a clear channel for the Kundalini energy, by clearing out all the emotional garbage related to each chakra...And once that was done, it was the

healing, as well as clueing into the fact that if I put myself in a meditative state, I can do my own healing.”

- Celt: “Every time I felt, ‘I can’t cope with this!’, I would get hold of one of the rocks that I have out on the balcony now, that come from more or less the same area, and just holding on to those, um, just kind of brought me back to that place...It just helped me to say ok, ‘I’ll get through this’.”

**2. Healing Through the Physical Body** (Endorsed initially by five participants. Endorsed by six at validation stage).

When asked how their spiritual experiences informed their recovery from trauma, participants stated that there was a physical component to the spiritual experience that helped heal the trauma. Four participants described a physical sensation that they experienced at the time of their spiritual experiences. Two of those participants equated the physical experience with a rush of “Kundalini energy”, which they felt move up and/or down their spines. Another recalled feeling physiological response to the prayer she received from her community in the wake of her trauma. The fourth described the physically calming effect of her spiritual experience in the wake of her trauma. For another participant, who had survived childhood sexual abuse and several subsequent traumas, his spiritual experience gave him the freedom to be both within his body and outside as an observer, while the trauma had restricted him from experiencing bodily sensations. This he described as a pivotal “shift”. For all five participants, the physical component of their spiritual experience was fundamental to their healing in a holistic way.

- Georgia: “Every time I repeated, in my mind, to myself, I felt a shot of energy go up my spine. Kundalini energy is, you know, you can’t always get it moving, but it was just like

‘Whhhhhoah!’ and every time it would go ‘Whhhhhoah!’ and it was just very powerful... The message that I got was that ‘Yes I am protected by Divine Light’. And I got it in a body sense; it wasn’t an intellectual sense. And it was just really powerful, and I kind of walked around in an altered state for a few days. And I was, I was just not on this, on this level.”

- Robin: “There’s a physical sensation to trauma that I could talk about or whatever, almost to the point that your body is having a physiological reaction, so the prayers almost, it’s like, I honestly felt like a physiological type of response to [the prayer] that I could not explain... It kind of relieved some of the physical trauma pain that someone might feel from going through a trauma.”
- Healer: “I had just gone to bed at night, when there was this tremendous swoosh of energy, and for me, what happened, most people say it comes from the genital area up through the head... for me it was the other way. It came through the crown chakra, down to the base chakra, and then back up and out again, and it was just amazing. Totally amazing.”
- Celt: “It does a couple physical things: Blood pressure down and pulse rate down. You cannot sit on a stone looking across the Shannon River, or probably any piece of water that you love, and have your pulse come (bubbling noise) and your blood pressure up. So physically, it brings you down.”
- Toby: “I shifted and felt ‘This is like the yin and the yang of me experiencing my pain’, because before, I never wanted to be in my body, so I would always be out, and I thought it was such a horrible... and it *was* such a horrible thing at the time. But now, here I am, I’m having a spiritual experience where I’m meant to go in my body, and I can like fly

out like there's no tomorrow, and I can witness myself, and I can like, you know, like I can be where the wall is or whatever, and I can just like witness what's going on within my life.”

**3. Being Guided** (Endorsed initially by four participants. Endorsed by five at validation stage).

When asked how their spiritual experiences informed their recovery from trauma, participants explained how they served as a guide toward healing. Three participants described being led by a voice that was both internal and a part of something greater (i.e., God/the divine). All three of these participants related their inner voice to intuition, which helped them to receive a sense of innate knowledge or inner truth that was instrumental to their healing. The other participant who shared this theme spoke of an inner guide (“guru”) that she knew she could trust. This inner guide helped her to feel secure in knowing what she needed to do with regard to her path in life. Two participants spoke explicitly about how their inner voices led them away from self-destructive trajectories, toward paths characterized by self-acceptance and self-nurturance. In all instances, the guides helped participants to live lives less encumbered by the negative impacts of trauma.

- Robin: “I almost think that like, there was something, like this total knowledge that like, almost like when it all happened, when he was born, I was like, almost like, ‘I knew it, I knew it’, and it was almost this like weight off my shoulders because I didn’t have to feel guilty anymore about that prayer. I didn’t have to feel guilty anymore that I had this intuition. I knew this was gonna happen and it was like confirmation for me that God is like in control and he was speaking to me and preparing me and helping me to be able to come to peace with this.”

- Georgia: “I have my own inner guru and I can trust myself...I know what I need to know to do what’s right. And that was there in ’97. Um, and, you know, that’s a very powerful thing to know about yourself. You know, it covers the waterfront in terms of healing from anything.”
- Toby: “Part of like this whole like 9 months was just me listening to my inner voice, or whatever...the voice of spirituality, because after that HIV thing...scare...I like felt like I went down to the ocean and I would just hear this voice screaming at me, being like ‘You could have ended up dead, and da-da-da-da-da-da!’ And so I slowly started just like listening to it until it toned down more, and it was just saying like nice, slow...it just wanted me to be ok and wanted me to care for myself, and wanted me to like do things that I loved, and whatever. So I know it may sound, whatever, the way that it sounds, but it’s like, so I was just like following the intuition of this voice, and I was asking it can maybe show up in a nicer tone, or like if it could show up maybe like in my grandma’s voice, or you know, whatever.”
- Judith: “When that inner voice interceded, it gave me permission to continue life as a female. And I was able to fully accept that, and let go of all of the fear and doubt about rejection, and just know that there’s more power in my truth than their perceptions. And um, I found that’s given me the strength today.”

### **Notable Category of Response**

As stated above, the following category of response initially received endorsements from only two participants between narrative interviews, however, as discussed in Chapter 3, I chose to include it in the results section because it related directly to the research question. When asked if it fit with the other four participants’ experiences, all six endorsed it.

**Freedom** (Endorsed initially by two participants. Endorsed by six at validation stage)

When asked how their spiritual experiences informed their recovery from trauma, two participants asserted that it afforded them a sense of freedom. One participant asserted that knowing that God was involved in her spiritual experience gave her the sense that she was no longer being held down by the impact of the trauma she experienced. The other stated that his spiritual experience has allowed him to break free from a path of harm, which involved a relationship with social services. In both cases, being freed from the impact of the trauma was particularly salient to their recovery.

- Robin: “I’m not being held down because of what happened. I know that God was so present and so part of that decision, and so part of the experience.”
- Toby: “I was a child of like, social services. I mean, I was a part of that since I was like 14. That’s like on and off 10 years, you know what I mean? And so, I’ve known that to be, like that’s my stability, and like breaking free of that, you know.”

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I described the themes that emerged during the thematic analysis process, and supported these themes using verbatim quotes set forth by the participants. An in-depth examination of these findings in comparison to existing literature will follow, as well as an explication of the results.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will describe the unique contributions of the present study to the current body of literature, as well as how the results of this study support previous findings and address gaps in the existing literature. Following this, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of the study, and then address the researcher context in relation to the current study's findings. Next, implications for future research and for the field of counselling will be explored, followed by a final summary and conclusion of the chapter.

### **Findings in Relation to Previous Literature**

#### **Spiritual Experience Framework**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Ken Wilber (2006) set forth a model for understanding spiritual experiences that involved differentiating between *states* and *stages* of consciousness. As iterated previously, *stages* refer to the developmental levels that people pass through throughout the process of spiritual growth, while *states* are temporary experiences of the transcendent (i.e., an acute sense of connection with something greater than oneself) that are anchored in their *stage* of development (Wilber, 2006). Although the focus of the present study was not to map the point at which each participant's spiritual experience fell on the Wilber-Combs Lattice (outlined in Chapter 2), it is clear that this framework for understanding spiritual experiences can be applied to the results of the narrative interviews. For example, "Robin" described experiencing an intimate connection with God, as understood by her grounding in the Christian religion, in which He guided her through intuition. In a further example, "Toby" described an experience in which his "third eye" opened while in a deep meditative state, during which he encountered a sense of connection with an "amazing energy" that was otherwise indescribable. "Celt", on the other

hand, described an experience of connecting with a deeply meaningful location in Ireland through the practice of physically holding rocks from around the same area. In all cases, the participants in this study described their time-limited transcendent experiences as a state of connection with that which they understood as divine, which fits well with the notion of the spiritual experience presented by Wilber (2006) and outlined in Chapter 2.

Additionally, given the transrational nature of state experiences, speaking about them is often very challenging, and therefore writing about them is even more challenging. While the Wilber-Combs Lattice (Wilber, 2006) served as a lens through which to identify the participants' spiritual experiences as state experiences, making definitive statements regarding the particular stages of development or states of consciousness each participant resides at or experienced respectively would be highly problematic. Such a task is outside the purview of this study, and beyond the information gleaned from participants in the narrative interviews. Hence, I will avoid making such bold statements, which I believe would be over-assertions that are not supported by the narrative interview data. Suffice to say that, according to Wilber (2006), each individual resides at a particular developmental stage, which helps to form the lens through which his or her state experiences of connection with spirit have been interpreted.

### **Coping and Meaning Making**

The two most common aspects of spirituality described in the literature as helpful regarding challenges of living included coping and meaning making. With respect to the present study, both of these aspects appeared in the participants' narrative interviews. As described in Chapter 2, Gall et al. (2005) outlined ways in which spirituality can serve as a coping resource for individuals. Of particular relevance to the findings in the present study, the authors outlined how a sense of connection with a transcendent force can be instrumental to coping. Although the

present study focused on trauma recovery, as opposed to simply coping with trauma, these findings support Gall et al.'s (2005) claim that a connection with nature or a transcendent other can be helpful in terms of managing stress related to the trauma. For example, in this study, the touchstone or foundation cultivated through "Celt's" spiritual experience (described in the previous chapter) helped her to face subsequent difficulties, which reflects a helpful spiritual connection with nature. This supports Gall et al.'s (2005) claim, as well as the findings of research studies (e.g., Suzuki, 2002) in which a felt sense of connection with nature engendered a sense of hope in day-to-day living and afforded participants a sense of emotional comfort in the midst of stress.

"Robin", on the other hand, felt a sense of intimacy with God through her spiritual experience, which was instrumental in her healing after losing an unborn child. With regard to a sense of connection with a transcendent other, Gall et al. (2005) asserted,

Relationship with God can fulfill various functions, including the provision of comfort, social support, and a sense of belonging, the encouragement of inner strength and acceptance, empowerment, and control, and the relief of emotional distress and specific fears. (p. 98).

Many of these functions are reflected in "Robin's" narrative, as evident in her statement,

He is so intimately concerned, and so...even when we may feel distant and, like, even when I feel distant, from Him or I'm not engaged in what I would consider a strong relationship with God, He is so intimately concerned with us that He would do, you know, He did what He needed to do through the intuition to prepare me and to speak to me and, um, that even when I'm not paying much attention to God, He's paying full on attention to me, like, um, so there's like some total peace in knowing that.

Although the scope of this study is more specific than much of the existing literature (exploring spiritual experiences and trauma recovery, as opposed to spirituality and coping in general), these findings are reflected in the body of literature that espouses the usefulness of a relationship with a transcendent force in terms of providing the functions outlined by Gall et al. (2005).

In their review of the literature on spirituality and coping, Gall et al. (2005) set forth that a relationship with the transcendent (i.e., God or the divine) can play a key role in the coping process related to stress. Past studies by Maton (1989), and Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) found that people who describe their relationship with the divine as secure scored higher on measures of self-satisfaction, and lower on measures of anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms. A sense of connection with a transcendent force therefore has implications for surviving stressful problems associated with living, which can include the stress that follows a traumatic event. This was evident in several of the narratives shared by participants in the present study. For example, in her account of the intuition she experienced before giving birth to a stillborn child, “Robin” asserted

When he was born, I was like, almost like, ‘I knew it, I knew it’, and it was almost this like weight off my shoulders because I didn’t have to feel guilty anymore about that prayer. I didn’t have to feel guilty anymore that I had this intuition. I knew this was gonna happen and it was like confirmation for me that God is like in control and he was speaking to me and preparing me and helping me to be able to come to peace with this.

This quotation exemplifies that her connection with a transcendent force (God) helped her to cope with the implications of directly experiencing the death of her child. Similarly, “Celt” described how her connection with nature through her practice of Celtic spirituality helped her to cope with the myriad of challenges that arose following her motor vehicle accident:

When I felt as close as I ever get to panic, I think about my stone, and I’m leaning back against the wall of Calumet Noise and it helps. And it’s not because it’s a stone, and it’s not because it’s the Shannon, it’s just a feeling of connection and one way or another, all is right with the world, even if I don’t like it.

In these ways, the present research supports these previous findings related to spirituality and coping, as the spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences of these participants helped them to weather the impact of their trauma.

With regard to meaning making, several of the participants’ narratives included undertones

that reflected their process of making sense of their trauma in the wake of their spiritual experiences. Although meaning making was not a stand-alone theme because of its subtle role in the participants' stories, there is evidence that each participant made sense of his or her trauma in different ways before and after their respective spiritual experiences. As addressed in Chapter 2, the cultivation of meaning through spirituality contributes to improved quality of life and reduced psychological distress (Breitbart et al., 2000; Breibart et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2002). As described by Gall et al. (2005), the creation of meaning through spirituality can involve making more benign attributions to an event, seeing opportunities for growth or benefits resulting from the event, or determining that an event is less central to one's life than originally perceived. The process of meaning making is evident in all the participants' narratives from the present study. For example, "Robin" stated, "I may have no clue why this happened, but I do know that there's a really good reason and God would turn this into good", which reflects that through her spiritual beliefs (separate from her specific spiritual experience), she makes sense of the loss of her child by attributing his death to God having a good reason for not allowing him to live. Similarly, "Healer" stated that after her spiritual experience, she felt as though the trauma she endured was trivial in the grand scheme of things, as she came to recognize the interrelatedness between herself and other beings in the world: "It made my own experience seem insignificant in the scheme of...in the larger scheme of things. If you're helping other people, you're helping yourself at the same time." In a further example, "Judith" described how the foundation she cultivated in the wake of her spiritual experience helped her to make meaning of the judgments and expectations cast onto her by other people:

Any time that I was challenged, I would ask the question, 'Is this about me, or is this about them?' And the thing is, because I had that Truth, I knew who I was. And if it didn't support who I was, I know that this was something that...this was some stuff that those other people need to deal with. And it wasn't my responsibility for me to deal with it.

These quotations exemplify the variety of ways these participants' spirituality and spiritual experiences helped them to make sense of difficult factors related to their traumatic experiences, which is further evidence for the usefulness of meaning making as it relates to spirituality.

### **Trauma**

In addition to the component of spiritual experiences explored in this study, the theoretical lens through which trauma was conceptualized also supports the results of the narrative interviews. All participants' narratives included a description of the common posttraumatic responses discussed in Chapter 2 that many individuals experience following exposure to a traumatic event. For the participants in this study, those responses included anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, hyper arousal, danger-seeking behavior, dissociative experiences, a diminished sense of hope, a loss of trust, and a reduction in self-care (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997; Ogden et al., 2006; Shalev, 2007). For example, in sharing her story about gender transition, "Judith" described how trauma had led her to the gate of suicide:

In that sense of isolation and desperation and aloneness and confusion, I was on the brink of suicide, because I knew my wife would leave me, because there was no way in the world that she would accept this, and that was traumatic in itself.

As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, "Georgia" shared how the underlying sense of fear that followed her while growing up contributed to pervasive anxiety and depression:

It wasn't until I sort of had that kind of a breakdown in graduate school...and take that as a warning young man...uh, that I began to realize how fearful I was, and that certainly the depression that I got was an anxiety depression, so I was very, very nervous of the world around me.

"Healer" shared a further example of a posttraumatic response. As a victim of family violence in her youth, and a rape by her husband in adulthood, "Healer" recalled how she spent much of her time before her spiritual experience in a dissociative state:

I think being in the state of delusion was the worst. I'd come into the office and I'd tell (name removed) something, and a long story, you know what happened. And one time I came in and I told him something and I came in the next week and I told him, I said, 'You know that story last week? It didn't happen, it wasn't true. I'd come out of it.'

These examples support the theoretical trauma literature that suggests that traumatic experiences can result in both psychological and social disturbances for survivors. For the participants in this study, spiritual experiences helped them to overcome these disturbances.

### **Trauma Recovery**

Herman's (1997) theoretical framework through which trauma recovery was understood also relates to the results of the current research. As outlined in Chapter 2, Herman's (1997) Tri-Phasic model of trauma recovery supports the belief that healing from trauma is only possible within the context of relationships. The cultivation of safe interpersonal connections with others is regarded by some authors in the field of trauma therapy as essential for recreating the capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy that are often damaged by the trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006; Herman, 1997; Lindy, 2007). In therapy, this is often achieved through the therapeutic alliance between the counsellor and trauma survivor (Briere & Scott, 2006). The findings of the present study demonstrate that the spiritual experiences of these participants helped them to establish that connection with something beyond themselves in order to make their healing journeys possible. Because spiritual experiences inherently involve a sense of connection with some transcendent force, the relational component of trauma recovery espoused by Herman (1997) was fulfilled for these participants. In her narrative interview, "Robin" described her own example of how a relationship with a transcendent force can renew a survivor's capacity to trust:

There was this total intimacy with God around it. And it was very short, in the sense that it wasn't something that I was doing 24-7, but it was like this very short, very intimate moment, and, um, there was almost like no one else in the world that I could even talk

about this with, and I could share it with Him, and just this like...total trust that He has His hand in this, and He knows what He's doing, and I may not find out what His reasons are.

“Toby” provided a further example of how his relationship with the transcendent helped to restore a sense of hope and self-efficacy through his spiritual experience:

For someone who was sexually abused, I felt sexy, like I never felt like that. Like I felt like always dirty, that I needed to shower. If you would have caught me like 7 years ago, I would have showered probably up to five times a day. My feet were so...like I would have welts on the bottom of my feet because I would shower so much. And I would scrub myself like so much. But then this time, in that moment of like meditation, I just like, I found, um, that I felt sexy, I felt pure, I felt beautiful, I felt cute, I felt all these amazing things that I had always like seen in other people.

These examples demonstrate how the participants in this study benefitted from the relational aspect of their spiritual experience, which is a fundamental factor with respect to trauma recovery.

With regard to the three stages of trauma recovery set forth by Herman (1997) and outlined in Chapter 2, the narrative data provided by the participants in this study is congruent with the stages of Safety and Stabilization, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection. While some of these stages were experienced by participants within the context of their spiritual experiences, others were described as occurring within other settings. Regardless of the context in which participants experienced these stages, the narrative data supports the claim that these individuals passed through these three stages of trauma recovery, and that their spiritual experiences were relevant at varying points along their journey. For example, with regard to the first stage, Safety and Stabilization, “Georgia” recalled,

It's not the feeling of being loved, it's the feeling of being protected. Well, it allows me to know that, should any crap come down the road again, I have this spiritual core, and that's what protects my essence. You know, the body comes and the body goes, but that stuff cannot be destroyed.

This quotation by “Georgia” highlights her recognition that although her physical body can be

harmful and damaged, she has a spiritual core that is impervious to malicious threats and abuse. “Georgia’s” insight is in line with Herman’s (1997) fundamental aspect of Safety and Stabilization, “restoring control” (p. 159), which, for survivors of sexual abuse like “Georgia” often involves establishing a sense of safety within one’s body, which is demonstrated in the quotation above.

Herman’s (1997) second stage of trauma recovery, Remembrance and Mourning, involves telling the story of the trauma “completely, in depth, and in detail” (p. 175). For five of the six participants in this study, sharing the details of their traumatic experiences was a fundamental part of what they expressed in their narrative interviews. Only one participant, “Healer” shared only briefly what her trauma consisted of, without covering the specific nuances. As outlined in Chapter 3, because the inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced a traumatic event 2 or more years prior to the narrative interview, and because this study focused on how spiritual experiences inform recovery from trauma, it is not surprising that the participants had passed through this stage and felt comfortable recalling the details of their traumas. An example of this is evident in “Toby’s” narrative interview, in which he shared,

I’ve talked about this so many times, in one way or another, but it’s interesting to like see how not emotionally charged I am with a lot of things and it’s really freeing and exciting to actually like...be like, ‘Ok, wow’...like, I dunno...and to look at it in a different way, and noticing even that I am looking at it in a different way.

Although I explicitly requested that participants share only what they feel comfortable sharing, as per my ethical obligation as a researcher, nearly all the participants shared the intimate details of their stories of trauma, which supports Herman’s (1997) claim that “The major work of the second stage is accomplished, however, when the patient reclaims her own history and feels renewed hope and energy for engagement with life” (p. 195). Toby’s quotation above demonstrates this reclamation through his expression of freedom and excitement around his

emotional neutrality relative to the telling of his story.

Herman's (1997) final stage, Reconnection, is evident in all six narrative interviews, as each participant described how he or she has taken steps toward living a life unencumbered by the immediate threat of trauma. For example, "Judith" described moving from the brink of suicide toward living an authentic life following her gender transition:

It became very important to me to remain authentic, because that's where my strength was. Every time I put together an illusion, which was somebody else's perception or expectation, I would undermine my own strengths. So I recognized that right away and I just sidestepped it, and I said, 'Ok, this is not about me. These people have to deal with their own perception and judgment.' I know who I am and what they think of me has absolutely no effect on who I think I am.

Similarly, "Robin" recalled how following the trauma of a stillbirth, she was able to go on to work as a helping professional in the medical field after her spiritual experience. For her this was significant because of the contextual similarities between her workplace and the place she experienced the trauma. While taking on such a position would likely have otherwise been profoundly triggering, Robin described how her spiritual experience helped her cultivate a sense of peace, while still grieving the loss of the child:

I can say that I fully, fully have accepted and am at peace with my experience. Like it hasn't...and that doesn't mean that every so often if I run into the midwife out in the community, of course I think about our time together and this experience, and I grieve and am sad, and of course when the anniversary date comes up, I think a lot about our baby.

These quotations highlight that these participants were able to survive the extraordinarily difficult circumstances yielded by their traumas and reclaim their power in real-life situations, similar to Herman's (1997) description of the stage of Reconnection.

### **Present Findings Relative to Trauma Studies**

In the research focused on trauma recovery, some authors have drawn parallels between spirituality and factors related to healing (Arévalo et al., 2007; Bryant-Daivs, 2005; Elsass et al.,

2010). Among the best researched of these factors is spiritual coping, as it relates to trauma recovery. In her interviews with 70 African American survivors of childhood violence, Byrant-Davis (2005) found that 55% of her participants used spirituality as a means of coping with the aftermath of trauma. In a more recent study, Elsass et al. (2010) interviewed a total of 102 Tibetan torture survivors about their coping mechanisms in relation to trauma. Although this study did not focus on trauma recovery specifically, the results indicated that although these torture survivors demonstrated symptoms of extreme traumatization, their level of traumatization was lower than other survivors from less spiritually focused cultural groups. The authors concluded that these torture survivors used Tibetan Buddhism as a means of coping with the trauma they endured. Additionally, a correlational study by Arévalo et al. (2007) found that posttraumatic stress was negatively correlated with spirituality, suggesting that spirituality is an effective resource when healing from trauma. Although the present study focused specifically on spiritual experiences as they inform trauma recovery, there are some supporting findings between this study and the research outlined by these authors. Specifically, as described in the theme “Creating a Foundation” in Chapter 4, the participants in this study all asserted that their spiritual experiences were valuable resources when it came to coping with subsequent problems related to their traumas. By using their spiritual experiences as foundations or touchstones that served as a basis on which to draw hope, safety, confidence, agency, and perseverance, the participants in this study were more equipped to manage future challenges. This is a finding consistent with the literature that focuses generally on spirituality and coping, although more detailed and descriptive than the broad concept of coping.

### **Uniqueness of the Present Findings**

While the present study supports the current body of literature that affirms the helpfulness of spirituality when coping with the aftermath of trauma, this is the first study to specifically explore how spiritual experiences impact healing from trauma. This study stands out from the previous research, not only as the first exploration of spiritual experiences with respect to trauma recovery, but also as one of the only studies that looks at healing, as opposed to merely coping or making meaning. Specifically, while coping involves resiliency and dealing with the day to day effects of trauma, and meaning making relates to how one makes sense of an event (Gall et al., 2005), trauma recovery is an active process of healing, that results in returning to a life unencumbered by the effects of trauma (Herman, 1997). As such, all themes and notable categories of response are unique in that they offer an account for how spiritual experiences play into recovery in the wake of trauma.

### **Creating a Foundation**

At present, no researchers focusing on spirituality and trauma recovery have described spiritual experiences as helping participants cultivate a foundation or touchstone to which they can return or carry with them. Additionally, no authors contributing to the trauma literature have related these experiential internal resources as being helpful to coping with future challenges in the wake of trauma or trauma recovery. In this way, the theme “Creating a Foundation” is unique to this study, as it describes participants’ spiritual experiences as instrumental in the formation of a touchstone or base that fosters strength and hope. For the participants in this study, the resources cultivated by their spiritual experiences helped them to achieve or return to states that were in stark contrast to their states in the immediate wake of their traumatic experiences.

## **Healing Through the Physical Body**

All six participants in this study described how there was a physical component to their spiritual experience that was instrumental to their healing from trauma. While there are several studies in the trauma literature focusing on the somatic aspects of trauma (e.g., Crofford, 2007; Henry, 2006; Perry, Oum, & Gray, 2007; Zatzick, Russo, & Katon, 2003), none of these studies address or explore how spiritual experiences play into the healing process from a somatic perspective. Additionally, none of the literature that focuses on spirituality mentions a physical component to spiritual experiences, but instead focuses on cognitive, emotional, or relational aspects (e.g., James, 1902; Piedmont, 2001; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). The participants in this study described the physical sensations that accompanied their spiritual experiences as a rush of energy, feeling physically uplifted, a noticeable shift, a calming sensation, and feeling as though having been struck by lightning. The physical component to the spiritual experiences of these participants is particularly salient to the trauma literature, as it provides evidence that the healing effects of the spiritual experiences of these individuals are not limited to the cognitive, emotional, or social realms. Rather, these experiences can also impact the body in ways that are innately healing by addressing the somatic impacts of trauma. At present, the body of literature on trauma has not offered an exploration into the potential role that spiritual experiences can have with regard to trauma recovery, let alone the implications that these experiences may have on the somatic symptoms related to trauma. The findings of this study are expository in the sense that they shed light on a gap in the literature related to the physical healing implications that can accompany spiritual experiences.

## **Being Guided**

Five participants described being guided as a central part of their spiritual experiences and a crucial factor in their healing from trauma. Although some authors relate spirituality in general to an “inner journey” (e.g., Keegan, 1991; Simon et al., 2007), there is a deficit of literature that refers to being guided by way of a spiritual experience (e.g., Underwood & Teresi, 2002). In addition, there are no studies in the field of counselling or psychology that account for the healing from trauma that can occur by way of being guided through a spiritual experience. For two of the four participants who endorsed this theme in the narrative interviews, the sense of being guided facilitated healing by helping them cultivate a sense of safety, security, and peace, which are qualities contrary to the common effects of trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006). The other two participants who initially endorsed this theme referred to being guided away from self-destructive paths, both having abused substances, with one engaging in dangerous sexual practices and the other on the brink of suicide. Because dangerous or risky behavior is commonly associated with PTSD (Briere & Scott, 2006; Laylor & McElvaney, 2010), it may be interpreted that the guiding voices that these two participants followed helped them escape those pitfalls and move in a direction that allowed for healing. Unlike the themes “Creating a Foundation” and “Healing Through the Physical Body”, “Being Guided” received endorsement from only five of the six participants in the validation stage. This speaks to the usefulness of member checking with regard to maintaining Truth Value and methodological credibility. Rather than conforming with the other five participants, the participant who chose not to endorse this theme added to the credibility of the results by providing what appeared to be an honest response to my request for validation.

## **Notable Category of Responses**

### **Freedom**

Although initially endorsed by only two participants, when asked if this notable category of response fit with the other four participants' experiences, all six endorsed it. The final phase outlined in Herman's (1997) Tri-Phasic model, "reconnection", involves learning to deal with and face future dangers, reconciling with oneself, reconnecting with others, creating meaningful work within the community, and resolving the trauma by returning one's focus to ordinary life. This phase is embodied in the notable category of "Freedom", as the participants' narratives all account for how their spiritual experiences were instrumental in being able to return to lives less encumbered by the effects of trauma.

### **Researcher Context**

After outlining the research on both spirituality and trauma in Chapter 2, I carried forward a number of my own assumptions about what I would find through the investigation of the research question. Because of the emphasis on meaning making relative to spirituality in the literature, I assumed that my participants would assert that their spiritual experiences helped them make sense of the trauma they endured. In fact, I had a hunch that making sense of the trauma would be the most frequent response from participants, and would stand out as a prominent theme between the narrative interviews. Although meaning making may have played a role in the participants' narratives, it was not a theme within this research. Instead, meaning making was a subtle undercurrent, interwoven throughout the fabric of the interviews. Meaning making appeared in a variety of ways, as exemplified in the quotations and discussion above. It was also a factor present across the themes, rather than serving as its own category of responses separate from the other notable groupings. Although I can fathom some people responding to the

research question in this way, such was not the case with this particular group of individuals. While the cultivation of meaning is a fairly general process that people engage in, the participants in this study provided far more in-depth and specified responses, which included elements of meaning making, but went into far greater detail and description, therefore yielding more specified themes. For example, in the theme “Creating a Foundation”, Judith mentioned the truth that she anchors her whole life around, which may be understood as relating to meaning making in that it helps her make sense of things, but that truth serves as a foundation, and is therefore more acutely specified than the process of meaning making in general: “It’s what I anchor my whole life around, and everything I do always comes back to that divine truth of who I am, to the degree that it gives me confidence to face all this other stuff.”

One finding that arose from the current study that I did not anticipate was the theme of “Healing Through the Physical Body”. Because no previous studies relative to spirituality and trauma had touched on the notion that spiritual experiences could have a physical component that heals the body, I did not anticipate this being a category of response with unanimous endorsement from participants. Instead, I anticipated more focus on cognitive and psychosocial processes, as outlined by Hill et al. (2000). Following the interviews, I understood “Healing Through the Physical Body” as relating to Herman’s (1997) first stage of trauma recovery (Safety and Stabilization) because it spoke to a sense of safety or security within each participant’s body that had been disrupted by their respective traumas. When regarded through the lens of Herman’s (1997) model, this finding makes sense from a theoretical perspective because trauma survivors must reach a sufficient level of safety in order to enter the two subsequent stages of healing. Although this finding fits well with Herman’s (1997) model, it remains unique to this study because no previous researchers have related spiritual experiences

to somatic healing or safety within the trauma literature.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study**

The primary strength of the present study is that the investigation of this specific area of research has been largely unattended to by previous researchers. As discussed throughout this chapter, the central findings of this study are not discussed in the existing body of literature. Additionally, the depth of the findings facilitated by the qualitative methodology chosen to explore the research question is also an asset, and leaves the door open to a number of future research possibilities to be discussed later in this chapter. A further strength of this study was the relative diversity between participants, which facilitated a range of unique perspectives relative to the research question. The six participants in this study ranged across the gender spectrum (e.g., female, transgendered, and male), and were diverse in terms of sexual orientation. Finally, the focus on how this study's participants healed from trauma by way of their own spiritual experiences, as opposed to an established mode of therapy, offers new insight into the internal/experiential resources of trauma survivors. This study's findings add to the emerging body of literature on how people heal from trauma largely on their own.

In addition to recognizing the strengths of this study, there are also some limitations that are worthy of consideration. First, the method used to recruit participants was limiting in several ways. Because all participants were recruited by way of informational posters, only those individuals with a sufficient level of literacy were likely to volunteer to participate. Additionally, recruitment posters were placed primarily on public bulletin boards within places of worship around Victoria, B.C. Because the majority of places of worship in Victoria, B.C. are associated with denominations of Christianity, the likelihood of recruiting an abundance of Christian participants (at the expense of other religious or spiritual traditions) was bolstered.

Furthermore, while this approach was chosen in order to target participants with active spiritual practices, it did not account for those individuals whose spiritual practice fell outside of a formal public place of worship. Another limitation related to the sample of participants was the homogeneity of ethnicity. Specifically, all participants were Caucasian, and all but one were born in Canada (with the other born in Ireland). Furthermore, while unusual within the scope of most mainstream discourses, no participants were heterosexual males. These limitations have implications for a lack of cultural diversity between participants.

A further limitation of this study, which is a limitation of all qualitative research, is that this study was time-bound, and therefore limited to the context in which it was conducted. Large scale contextual factors that may have had implications on the results of the narrative interviews include the historical time in which the study was conducted, the geographic location in which the study took place and its history, as well as the political climate in Canada, and specifically Victoria, B.C. Smaller scale contextual factors that may have had implication on this study's findings include the state and level of arousal myself and each participant was in at the time of each interview, the time of day each interview took place, the events that each participant experienced immediately before coming to the interview, the level of self-care each participant maintained before the interview, etcetera. Through this discussion I acknowledge that this research fits into a specific contextual location, and that a similar study may yield different findings if conducted within a different contextual frame.

A final limitation of this study relates to my position as a novice researcher. Being that this is my first time conducting a study involving narrative interviews and thematic analysis, as well as my first real exposure to the philosophy underlying qualitative research, I have traversed a steep learning curve while carrying out this study. In order to address this position, I

successfully completed graduate level courses in research methods, and pilot tested the interview process with practice participants. To ensure that I did not venture off course, my supervising faculty member closely oversaw the methods and procedures that I engaged in to meet the ends of this study. Lastly, the validation procedures I engaged in (i.e., member checking) add to the credibility of this study's findings.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Some recommendations for future research have been mentioned throughout this chapter in the discussion of the present findings relative to previous research. Throughout the process of conducting this study, I have become aware of a number of gaps related to spiritual experiences and trauma recovery that the focus of this study does not address.

First, two participants in this study described having experiences with Kundalini energy. "Georgia" was a follower of Swami Sivananda Radha (1981) and her book *Kundalini Yoga for the West*. She described her experience with Kundalini energy as relating to ritual practices that she engaged in to cause the Kundalini energy to move. The other, "Healer", described hers as a "spontaneous Kundalini awakening" which occurred in the absence of ritual while she was laying in bed. For both participants, these experiences had implications on their healing from trauma. At present, there are few studies that have explored the implications of Kundalini yoga on health (Shannahoff-Khalsa, 2003; 2007), and an absence of research exploring experiences with Kundalini energy relative to problems of living. Because it strikes me as interesting that two participants out of a small sample of six recalled having experiences with Kundalini energy, future studies might explore specifically what implications experiences with Kundalini energy have on trauma recovery. Secondly, the theme "Healing Through the Physical Body" provided unexpected insight into the physical factors related to spiritual experiences. Because all

participants unanimously endorsed this theme, more research into the relationship between spiritual experiences and physical healing will help to illuminate this finding further. A third avenue of exploration may involve inquiry into how the spiritual experiences of people of diverse cultural backgrounds inform recovery from trauma. As noted in the limitations outlined above, all six participants in this study were of European descent, and therefore an exploration of how people from other cultural and ethnic groups heal from trauma through spiritual experiences is warranted. Overall, this study goes beyond the scope of the majority of the present research that examines spirituality in general as it relates to coping and meaning making by addressing the active process of trauma recovery relative to spiritual state experiences. More studies of this nature are necessary to continue addressing the gaps in the current body of research.

### **Implications for the Field of Counselling Psychology**

This study arose out of my desire to contribute to the current body of literature on trauma recovery, thereby furthering the understanding of trauma within the field of counselling psychology. The findings of this study can inform the work that therapists working with trauma survivors do in a number of ways. First, as expressed by Hodge (2005), it serves therapists well to explore spiritual factors when engaging in the therapeutic process. The findings of this study serve to extend the scope of the current body of literature, which supports the notion of exploring spiritual variables with clients, particularly in assessment (Hodge, 2005). Specifically, therapists working with trauma survivors who assert, “Yes, spirituality is an important part of my life” can venture forward and inquire whether those clients have had spiritual experiences, and whether those experiences have any relevance with respect to the clients’ current state of trauma recovery. As a counsellor informed by the findings of this study, I might ask clients, “Have you ever had a spiritual experience that helped you to get to the place you’re at now with respect to

healing from your trauma?” Additionally, as discussed previously in this chapter, the self-transcending nature of spiritual experiences can help trauma survivors to achieve a sense of connection with a transcendent force, which may have implications in terms of facilitating the sense of safety that is conducive to healing from trauma. Counsellors working with trauma survivors can benefit from being mindful of this, as a connection with other individuals need not be the only means of clients establishing a restorative relationship (Herman, 1997). Counsellors with this in mind might ask their clients, “Has your relationship with the divine helped you to overcome any of the challenges that arose after the trauma?” Finally, the fact that six individuals spoke to me about how spiritual experiences informed their recovery from trauma is a cue to all professional helpers to remember the importance of exploring the strengths and insight that clients already possess, and who may just require gentle reminders of those factors.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The area of spirituality and trauma recovery has received little attention from researchers, with more focus given to how spirituality informs coping and meaning making. This has left considerable gaps in the literature, with no previous exploration of how spiritual experiences impact recovery from trauma. Therefore, this study helps to shed light on previously unexplored territory. The current study supports existing frameworks and theoretical knowledge that focus on spirituality, spiritual experiences, trauma, and trauma recovery, and offers unique contributions in terms of healing from trauma following a spiritual experience.

Through the process of thematic analysis, three themes were developed and endorsed by at least four of the six participants in this study. A fourth notable category of response was also developed, although it did not meet criteria for thematic inclusion. The outcomes of this study suggest that people recovering from trauma find that spiritual experiences inform their recovery

in a number of ways, which has implications that impact a number of areas of their lives.

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### Appendix A: Phone Conversation Script

The following is an example of the script\* to be used when participants (P) initiate contact with the primary researcher, Will Bratt (WB).

\*Exact wording and order may change slightly depending on participants' responses.

WB: "Thank you for taking the time to call. Can I tell you a bit more about this study before we talk about setting up an interview time?"

P: (possible response) "Sure"

WB: "First, just to help me get an idea of what you have experienced, do you mind telling me in very general terms what experience with trauma you had that you feel comfortable being interviewed about?"

P: (possible response) "I was involved in a hostage situation."

(possible response) "My partner of 15 years left me for someone else."

WB: (possible response) "Thanks for sharing with me. That is the kind of experience I am looking to talk to people about in my study. Can I tell you a bit more about the study?"

(possible response) "That sounds like it was a painful experience for you. Unfortunately, I'm looking to specifically talk with people who have experienced situations where they felt their lives or the lives of others were in danger. I really appreciate the time you took to contact me."

P: (possible response) "Sure."

(possible response) "Actually, no thanks."

WB: "I am trying to get a better understanding of how people who have experienced trauma have found spiritual experiences to impact their healing journey. The interviews will be audio taped, and there will be lots of room for you to tell me the story of your experience in the way that you wish to do so. I also want to let you know in case you were not aware, there will be two interviews. The first one is expected to take about an hour to two hours, and the second is expected to take up to another hour, so your total time will be up to approximately three hours. How does all this sound to you?"

P: (possible response) "That sounds okay to me."

(possible response) "I think that's going to be too much for me to be able to do right now."

WB: (possible response) "Would you like to go ahead and set up the first interview?"

(possible response) "Thanks for letting me know that. Would you rather not participate?"

P: (possible response) “Sure.”

(possible response) “Yes, I think I would rather not”

WB: (possible response) “Great. We can meet at UVic in a private room for recording the interview.”

(possible response) “That’s not a problem at all. I really appreciate you taking the time to phone me.”

P: “UVic would work for me.”

WB: “What day and time would work for you this or next week?”

P: “I’m free on Thursday at 5:30”

WB: “I’m free then too. We can meet Thursday at 5:30, at [specific room location]. Do you have any other questions for me at all?”

P: “No, I think I’m fine for now.”

WB: “Ok. Well, if anything comes up between now and when we meet, please feel free to give me a call. Thank you for taking the time to call and talk with me. I’m looking forward to meeting with you in person. I’ll see you next Thursday at 5:30”

## Appendix B: Recruitment Post

**Have you had a spiritual experience  
that impacted your healing from  
trauma?**

*I would really like to hear from you.*

My name is Will Bratt and I am doing my M.A.  
in Counselling Psychology at the University of  
Victoria.

I am interested in talking to people who have:

1. experienced a traumatic event, like a car accident, physical or sexual assault, or witnessing a severe injury or death where your life or someone else's was endangered (no less than 2 years ago).
2. had a spiritual experience that had an influence on your recovery from that trauma.

If this description sounds like you and you are willing to share your story with me, I would really appreciate hearing from you.

For more information or to schedule an interview, please contact

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

### Preamble:

Throughout this interview I'm going to be asking you to tell me your story about how you found your healing from trauma to be impacted by a spiritual experience. Feel free to start your story at whatever point in your life that you think your story of this experience begins. Throughout the interview, I may ask you clarification and prompting questions to make sure that I understand you, and that you have said all you want to about your story. We will know when we're done here today when you believe that you have told me as much of your story as you see necessary for my understanding. I will check in with you at the end to make sure you have shared all that you wanted to share.

### Questions:

1. Tell me your story about how your healing from trauma was impacted by your spiritual experience.
2. Why do you think your spiritual experience had this impact on your recovery?
3. Do you mind telling me a bit more about...
4. How was it for you when...
5. Is this what you meant by...
6. Do you mind repeating...
7. How important do you think your spiritual experience was in the scope of your trauma recovery?
8. How has your life been different since your spiritual experience?
9. What other thoughts/feelings/behaviours were present in the story?
10. Now that we have had some time to talk, have you told me your story?
11. Do I know everything you want me to know so that this story feels finished to you?

## Appendix D: Consent Form

### Education Psychology and Leadership Studies

University of Victoria

PO Box 3010

Victoria, BC, V8W 3N4

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### *Participant Consent Form*

#### Project Title: Spiritual Experiences and Trauma Recovery

**Researcher:** Will Bratt, Graduate Student  
Faculty of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies  
University of Victoria

**Supervisor:** Dr. Tim Black  
Faculty of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies  
University of Victoria  
(250) 721-7829; tblack@uvic.ca.

#### **Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

- Learn and understand more about how people who have experienced trauma found spiritual experiences to play a role in their healing journey.
- The researcher will be asking participants who experienced a traumatic event and found a spiritual experience to play a role in their self-healing to describe the story of how this happened and what they see as their spiritual experience's unique role in this.
- To fulfill part of the requirements for the primary researcher's graduate degree.

#### **This Research is Important because:**

- It may inform how helping professionals who specialize in trauma work support clients and expand possible resources for trauma survivors to explore on their own.

#### **Participation:**

- You are being asked to participate in this study because you experienced trauma no less than two years ago and have had a spiritual experience that has impacted your healing from this trauma.
- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on how you will be treated by the researcher.

#### **Procedures:**

- You will be asked to think back and describe your experiences surrounding the traumatic experience as well as how your spiritual experience related to your healing.
- The interview will consist of a few pre-scripted questions; however, the majority of the interview will be more open-ended to allow for freedom in responses.
- Interviews will be audio taped for transcription, and written notes may also be taken.

- After this first interview, you will be asked to meet with the researcher a second time when you will be given the opportunity to review how I interpreted what was said during the interview. You may add or change anything that does not fit with your experiences.
- **Duration: 1 ½ - 2 hours for initial interview; ½ - 1 hour for follow-up; 1 ½ - 3 hours total**
- **Location: University of Victoria**
- **Inconvenience: the time that you will be investing into coming and travelling to both interview sessions, and depending on your family situation, there may be a need to arrange child-care.**

**Compensation:**

- It is unethical for me to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants. If you would not participate if the compensation was not offered, then you may decline.

**Benefits:**

- Furthering understanding of how people heal from trauma on their own.
- Help better inform how current support services might work more effectively in supporting client who have experienced trauma.
- The opportunity to have your experiences heard and validated as important

**Risks:**

- It is anticipated that there will be minimal risks to you by participating in this research. However, due to the personal nature of the interviews, you may feel embarrassed in sharing the details or experience of the traumatic event(s). Additionally, you may become fatigued during the interview, which may last up to two hours. Finally, because I am interviewing people who have experienced trauma and am asking them to discuss this with me, the interview may induce memories of the trauma that you might find stressful or to which you may have an intense emotional response, known as post-traumatic stress reaction, which includes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- **Risk(s) will be addressed by:** The primary researcher is a counsellor-in-training at the University of Victoria and will be as sensitive as possible throughout the interview process. Either the participant or the researcher can stop the interview at any time if proceeding with the interview may be harmful. If your emotional responses indicate the need for further support, the researcher will help participants contact appropriate services. If you become fatigued during the interview, you will have the option of stopping and completing the interview at a later date at your convenience.

**Researcher's Relationship with Participants:**

- It is possible, though not anticipated that you may have a previous relationship with Will Bratt, the primary researcher. If you happen to know me, Will Bratt, please do not feel obliged to participate in this study out of any sense of obligation if you would not participate otherwise.
- If you are presently a client engaged in a therapeutic relationship with Will Bratt, you will not be included in the present study for ethical reason surrounding multiple relationships and power-over dynamics which may be counter-therapeutic.

**Withdrawal of Participation:**

- You may withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence.
- If you choose to withdraw, your data will not be used and any record of your participation (e.g., audio-tape, field notes, etc.) will be destroyed.

**Continued or On-going Consent:**

- Before beginning the previously described follow-up interview, you will be asked to initial and date your original consent form to show your on-going consent. Additionally, if you desire to complete the initial interview over the course of two sessions due to fatigue, you will be asked to initial and date your original consent form to indicate your on-going consent.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality:**

- Due to the nature of the interviews, the primary researcher will know your identity. To keep your anonymity beyond these interviews, you will be asked to take on a pseudonym of your choice during the interview, which will be used on all subsequent data and records
- Everything you say during the interview will remain confidential with the following exceptions: if you inform me that a child is in need of protection, or if you or another person intend to harm yourself or another person.
- I may also be asking, if you are comfortable doing so, to tell others who might want to participate about this study. If you choose to do this, the people you talk to will subsequently know of your own participation. Please know there is no compulsion for you to do this.
- All records (e.g., audio-tapes, transcripts) will be labeled with participants' pseudonyms and kept in secure locations, either in locked filing cabinets for hard-copies or password-protected personal computers for digital records, to which only the principal researcher will have access. Any personally identifying information will also be removed from the transcripts and formal documents.

**Research Results May be Used/Disseminated in the Following Ways:**

- Directly to participants for confirmation of interview analysis
- As a published article
- In a Masters-level thesis & class presentations
- In presentations at professional meetings.

**Questions or Concerns:**

- Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;
- Contact the Human Research Ethics Office, University of Victoria, (250) 472-4545  
[ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)

**Consent:**

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 researchers.

---

*Name of Participant*

---

*Signature*

---

*Date*

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

## **Appendix E: Counselling Resources**

### **Victoria Counselling Resources**

#### **Citizens' Counselling Centre 250-384-9934**

The Centre offers individual and couples counselling to adult residents of Greater Victoria. Counselling is available days, evenings and weekends. Our volunteer counsellors are trained to work with the following life issues: relationship/communication, changes in status or roles, (grieving/loss, divorce, marriage, career changes), situational depression, conflict resolution, stress and anxiety management, anger, self esteem and assertiveness. CCC operates on a sliding fee scale based on family income.

**[citizenscounselling.com](http://citizenscounselling.com)**

#### **Men's Trauma Centre 250-381-6367**

The Men's Trauma Centre is a non-profit society based in Victoria, B.C. Canada. The Men's Trauma Centre exists to provide treatment and support services to adult and late adolescent males who are survivors of physical, emotional or sexual trauma as well as support for our clients' significant others. We also consult with community and government groups in the areas of prevention, treatment, legal issues and other matters relating to the sexual violation of males. MTC operates on a sliding scale based on income. (ALANA SAMSON, M.A.)

**[menstrauma.com](http://menstrauma.com)**

#### **NEED Crisis and Information Line 250-386-6323**

NEED provides 24 hour emotional support, crisis intervention services and community resource information. They are a telephone-only support and information service, staffed by volunteers professionally trained to offer emotional support.

**[needcrisis.bc.ca](http://needcrisis.bc.ca)**

#### **Victoria Mental Health Intake (VIHA) 250-370-8175**

Provides specialized services for Schizophrenia, mood disorders and anxiety, among others. VIHA refers to external program for addiction services as well. Referrals to intake can only be made by physicians.

**[http://www.viha.ca/mhas/locations/victoria\\_gulf/cms.htm](http://www.viha.ca/mhas/locations/victoria_gulf/cms.htm)**

#### **Women's Sexual Assault Centre 250-383-5545**

Victoria Women's Sexual Assault Centre has highly qualified trauma specialists who provide services to individuals impacted by sexual assault and abuse. (JUDE MARLEAU, M.A., BARB PECK, M.A., LINDA JENNINGS, M.ED)

**[vwsac.com](http://vwsac.com)**

#### **University of Victoria Counselling Services 250-721-8341**

Based on a commitment to student learning, as well as social, personal, and ethical development, our mission evolves from that of the University. We foster student success, engagement, and well-being through programs focused on students' developmental needs, individual and group counselling, and crisis intervention and emergency response. We respect the dignity and worth of all individuals and embrace human diversity within a warm, accepting, and confidential

environment. Services are only available for UVic students. (SUSAN DEMPSEY, M.A., JANET SHEPPARD, M.A., RITA KNODEL, PH.D) **[coun.uvic.ca](http://coun.uvic.ca)**