

No Turning Back: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Women's Experiences of  
Voice

by

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## ABSTRACT

A feminist-inspired, hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was undertaken to explore the phenomenon of moving from silence into voice through the lived experiences of five women who used their voices to bring about significant change for themselves, their families or their communities. The women who were selected to participate had experienced the transition from silence to voice at least two years before the interviews and had achieved a level of awareness about the experience that enabled them to both recollect and reflect on its significance and meaning in their lives. There was diversity in ages, personal histories, cultural connections, and voice stories.

Through individual conversational interviews, each woman's unique description of their experience with moving from silence into voice was elicited. From these conversations themes emerged about the experiences of silence, awareness, voice, consciousness and the contextualized nature of voice. All of the women then came together and participated in a collective inquiry in which they reflected upon experiences and explored connecting threads and themes. The women engaged in the process as co-inquirers, often asking each other questions and building on each other's ideas. They also acknowledged and validated each other's ongoing process and the challenge of sustaining their voices and their sense of self in different contexts and times. Of particular interest was the phenomenon of the "no turning back" point in time when they knew, with great clarity, that they must use their voices to bring about changes in their life situations.

Through a thematic analysis of the texts of the conversational interviews, a framework of themes was developed and phenomenological descriptions of experiences

connected to each theme were prepared. The thematic analysis contributed to the development of key insights into the essence of the voicing phenomenon.

The goal of this inquiry was to more fully understand women's experience of the transition from silence to voice. My intention was to understand so that I could be more mindful in my own practice as a community facilitator and support other women in their processes of coming into and sustaining their voice and their sense of self. Underlying this desire to understand is a belief that women's voices are often neglected or diminished and thus lost or marginalized as a resource for individual, familial and community well-being. With this in mind, future opportunities for effective practice and research are explored in this dissertation. The research will be of interest to and a resource for both those who work with girls and women and others who simply want to understand more about their experiences.

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Dedicated to

Katherine and Tessa Charlesworth

For being in this world

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research inquires into women's experience with silence and voice and the transition from silence to voice. It has evolved from my recollections of and reflections on a moment in time when I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that I must use my voice to change my family's situation and protect my children. It has evolved too from my community work with girls and women and my observations of their silences and voices and the relationship between their voice, sense of self, and capacity for change. I have used a feminist-inspired, hermeneutic phenomenological approach to inquire into the experiences of women and their process of coming into and using their voice to bring about a change in their life circumstances.

The inquiry involved individual conversational interviews with five women who had one or more experiences of what we collectively termed a "no-turning-back point" when they moved from silence into voice. The women who were selected to participate had experienced the transition from silence to voice at least two years before the interviews and had achieved a level of awareness about the experience that enabled them to both recollect and reflect on its significance and meaning in their lives. There was diversity in ages, personal histories, cultural connections, and voice stories. All shared curiosity about voice and a desire to better understand not only their own experience, but also other women's experiences and how this knowledge might be of value to others. The conversations began with this request:

Please describe for me a moment or point in time when you felt that you could no longer be silent and that you *must* use your voice to bring about a significant change in your life for yourself, your family, or your community.

We then proceeded to carry on a conversation that shed light on their experiences before, during, and after the “voicing” moment or point in time.

The individual interviews were followed up with a group conversational interview in which we collectively reflected upon experiences and explored connecting threads and themes. The women engaged in the process as co-inquirers, often asking each other questions and building on each other’s ideas. They also acknowledged and validated each other’s ongoing process and the challenge of “hanging on” to their voices and their sense of self in different contexts and times, and celebrated their growth and consciousness.

Through a thematic analysis of the texts of the conversational interviews, I developed a framework of themes and phenomenological descriptions of experiences connected to each theme. I have presented these descriptions and interpretations in the text of this dissertation.

The goal of this inquiry was to more fully understand women’s experience of the transition from silence to voice. My intention was to understand so that I could be more mindful in my own practice as a community facilitator and support other women in their processes of coming into and hanging onto their voice and their sense of self. It is my hope that the dissertation will be of interest to and a resource for both those who work with girls and women and others who simply want to understand more about their experiences.

There are five chapters in the dissertation. Chapter 1 provides an overview and includes a story about my “voicing moment.” The story is included because it is from my recollection and reflection about this point in time that my curiosity about and passion for the topic of women and voice evolved. This is the origin of my interest. It has been suggested that in order to do phenomenological research well we must:

... find ourselves deeply interested (inter-esse, to be or stand in the midst of something) in that which makes the question possible in the first place. To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being...we ‘live’ this question, that we ‘become’ this question. (van Manen, 1997, p. 43; see also Gadamer, 1982)

In sharing the story I am sharing with the reader how I came upon the question about which I am “deeply interested.”

Chapter 2 describes how I prepared myself to engage in the inquiry. It identifies the initial questions that I had about girls’ and women’s silences and voices and then moves into a review of the literature to see what questions are being asked by others about the silences and voices of girls and women, what has been learned, and what’s missing. The psychological and sociological literature on girls’ and women’s voice or silence, ways of knowing, psychological development, sense of self, relational worlds, language, power and oppression, and community organization is considered. This chapter identifies the need to better understand the process of coming to voice.

Chapter 3 situates my study in a research paradigm and methodology and describes the methods that I employed to undertake the inquiry. It describes my choice of and rationale for the qualitative research paradigm and how I have integrated a feminist

approach into the inquiry. It presents the rationale for my selection of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach as my methodology, and provides an orientation to phenomenological inquiry. Having established the methodological foundation for the study, I then move into a detailed description of methods, beginning with the recruitment and selection of participants and extending to the methods of hermeneutic phenomenological writing.

Chapter 4 conveys the nature of five women's experiences with silence and voice, and particularly their process of moving from silence to voice. It includes descriptive interpretations of their experiences with silence, of coming into voice, of the "voicing moment," and of their evolving voice.

Chapter 5 describes the essence of the transitional voicing moment or experience and the significance and meaning of this transition in the lives of the five women participants. My aim was to look beyond the observable and find the "essence" of voice that made a difference for the women engaged in this inquiry. I write myself into the inquiry process within this chapter, drawing on my own experience, reflecting upon what I have learned and have come to understand about the phenomenon, and describing future opportunities in practice and research.

### Shared Experiences?

My experience as a woman who is a forty-something, white, educated, employed, divorced single parent will be different from my friend's experience as a twenty-something, Aboriginal college student living marginally on bursaries, which will in turn be different from every other woman we might meet. My voice and silence, emanating

from my experience and place, is unique, as is that of the other five women who shared their experiences with me in this journey of inquiry. And yet it has been my experience that there are threads that connect our unique experiences. It is a delicate balance that I am trying to achieve in this dissertation, that is, to uncover and speak about the connecting threads of women's experience with voice and silence while not appropriating the unique voices of others and becoming oppressive through the expression of my views and understanding. However, if I can achieve this balance, then these threads are aspects of the "lifeworld" (Husserl, 1970) that are helpful for us to understand. Through such understanding we may deepen our thought, radicalize our thinking, and effect change in our behaviour. It certainly has mine.

#### A Lived Experience of "No Turning Back"

"A person who turns to phenomenological reflection does so out of personal engagement." (van Manen, 1997, p. 154)

I remember the moment when I knew, without question, that I was going to use my voice to change the way things were. I remember the time of day. I can see the blackness of the night and the way that the room was arranged. I can feel the panic that gripped my heart as I heard my husband's footsteps come up the stairs. I can hear the sounds of my daughter screaming. I can hear him yelling. I can feel my arms extending, unable to reach my daughter as she hid deep under a table. I can recall every moment with absolute clarity, including the moment when I knew that this was the last time that I would allow something like this to happen in my family. The next day, I buckled my 1-1/2-year-old and 3-year-old in the car, threw two loads of laundry in the back and called

out to my husband that I was taking my daughter to a friend's birthday party and going to the laundromat. We didn't come back.

This moment was just over nine years ago, and yet with little effort I can recollect the finest details of that experience. As time has passed I have reflected on what happened that night and how it was that I came to a place of such clarity and confidence in knowing that things had to change, that I had to change, and that I would change the course of events. In the four years of marriage leading up to that moment, I had been verbally denigrated, isolated from family and friends, and physically and sexually assaulted. I was told that if I ever tried to leave I would never see my children again. I lived in fear. I told no one. I was ashamed, embarrassed, confused, and silent. Simultaneously I was experiencing significant success in my professional life and was a highly regarded and articulate, consultant and trainer. Despite this success and many years of positive messages from family, friends, and colleagues, I defined myself as my partner defined me: an incapable, ignorant impostor. I knew at some level that I was dying and there were times that I wished I could slip away. Within my relationship I was living in a semi-conscious state. Even with my children I was not fully present.

However, that changed on the night that I reached my "no-turning-back point." I experienced the world and my place in it very differently. I saw things that I had not noticed before. I became aware of what was at stake and what the risks were for my children if I allowed things to continue. I became conscious again. With consciousness came "voice." My voice was not a spoken voice. It was a strong, clear internal voice that only I heard. It was a voice that compelled me to act. There was simply no way, once I heard my voice, that I would ever turn back into that place of silence again.

## CHAPTER TWO: PREPARATION FOR THE INQUIRY

I began my inquiry by identifying the questions that I had about girls' and women's silences and voices and their use of voice to bring about significant change in their circumstances. I then moved into the literature to see what questions were being asked by others about the silences and voices of girls and women, what has been learned and what is awaiting further exploration and discovery. This chapter speaks to these preparations in three parts. In "Inquiry Questions," I share the questions that I had about girls' and women's silences and voices when I began the literature review. In "Review of the Literature," I identify and describe the key assumptions, findings, and interpretations of the literature, first in a general sense and then with respect to each of my questions. In "Critique of the Literature," I reflect upon what is said and not said in the literature on voice and where this took me in the conceptualization of my own research on women and voice.

### Inquiry Questions

Five questions guided my review of the literature: How are "voice" and "silence" defined and described? What is known about girls' and women's relationships to their own voices and silences? What is known about how girls and women use or do not use their voices in different contexts and situations? What is known about what influences girls and women in their expression of voice or silence? What is known about girls' and women's voices as resources for individual, familial and community health? My rationale for selecting these questions and what I hoped to learn in my review of the literature are described in the following paragraphs.

*How are “voice” and “silence” defined and described?* The terms “voice” and “silence” are used in many different contexts and often presented as if we know what the terms mean. However, I was curious to learn how they are defined and described and whether there is a shared understanding about the terminology and its significance. I also wondered whether there are different definitions or descriptions of voice, for example, is a distinction made between voice and speech or noise, or between inner or authentic voice and internalized or authoritative voice?

*What is known about girls’ and women’s relationships to their own voices and silences?* As I am curious about how girls and women use or do not use their voices and silences, it is important to me to learn about how girls and women relate to their own voices and silences. Are they aware of their voices and silences, and how do they describe their own voices and silences? Does their relationship to voice shift and change over time, in different contexts and in different situations, and if so, how? Do different groups of women have different experiences of and relationships with their voices and silences that are consistent within their group?

*What is known about how girls and women use or do not use their voices in different contexts and situations?* Within my own life I have noticed that I have many different voices and silences and that context (and my assessment of the risks and opportunities associated with the context) is a very significant influencer of the way in which I use or do not use my voice. I was curious to learn what the research tells us about the role of context in voice and voicing and how girls and women evaluate the context and risks and opportunities. This connects with my curiosity about the choices that girls and women make to use or not use their voices.

*What is known about what influences girls and women in their awareness or expression of voice or silence?* I am first and foremost a community-based practitioner and I bring into my daily practice a commitment to listening well and supporting people in finding and expressing their voices safely. It has been my experience that there is great richness and opportunity when people find and express their self, mind and voice on matters of great importance to them. Therefore, I am curious about what influences girls and women in their awareness about or expression of voice in order that I may integrate into my practice a wider range of ways to support voice. For example, do friendship, education, life experience, socio-economic status, or development influence awareness and expression? How important is it that girls or women know they are being listened to?

*What is known about girls' and women's voices as resources for individual, familial and community health?* This question brings me to the area that I am most interested in as a community-based practitioner. We are at a time in history where we face many challenges and barriers to health and well-being. It is my belief that every human being has the capacity to be a resource for individual, familial and community health. However, I am particularly curious about girls' and women's contributions as it has been my experience that their voices carry less overt authority than the voices of men. Are we missing something and what might we learn if we paid particular attention to the voices of girls and women as resources for health? Given this interest, I wanted to look into the literature to learn what connections are made between the topics of voice and health and well-being, and what is known about girls' and women's voices as resources.

## Review of the Literature

### *Approach to the Literature Search*

I reviewed psychological and sociological literature that addressed the topics of girls' and women's voice or silence, ways of knowing, psychological development, sense of self, relational worlds, language, power and oppression, and community organization. I paid particular attention to the feminist writings in each of these areas. In addition, I familiarized myself with feminist theory, analysis, and research, including the historical roots, by reviewing publications that were frequently cited in the articles and books that I read on girls' and women's voice and silence.

I also reviewed the available published works by key writers, researchers and practitioners that have explored the topic of women's voices and silences, including Jean Baker Miller<sup>1</sup>, Mary Belenky, Carol Gilligan, Nancy Goldberger, Lyn Mikel Brown, and the work emanating from the Stone Center at Wellesley College. My purpose in doing this was to track the progression of these authors' and researchers' thinking and reflections over time. My own experience of and relationship to the topic of voice has shifted over time, and I was curious to find out if this phenomenon was reflected in any way in the writings of these key contributors.

In this section, I begin by providing an overall summary of themes or threads emanating from the reviewed literature. I then reiterate my primary questions and describe and critique what is presented in the literature that relates to each question.

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<sup>1</sup> At many points in this inquiry I have struggled with language and how best to honour the voices and perspectives of people who have contributed to the body of knowledge about girls and women's voices, including the researchers and authors whose work I have reviewed and the women who participated in my research. One choice that I have made is to use both the first and the last names of authors when I refer to them and their work in the body of the text. I believe that this is more respectful than the typical convention of last names only as it symbolically brings more of the person into the text.

### *Overarching Themes*

I identified six themes or threads that are both explicitly and implicitly woven through the literature on girls' and women's voices and silences. Each of these themes is briefly described below. It is valuable to discuss these overarching themes at the outset as they set the stage for more in-depth review of the literature that is relevant to each of my inquiry questions.

#### *Girls' and Women's Voices are Different than Boys' and Men's Voices*

Most of the literature on girls' and women's voices reflects the assumption that girls and women have "voice" in a qualitatively different way than boys and men have voice, although each are equally valid (Belenky, Clinchy, Tarule & Goldberger, 1986, 1997; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Goldberger, 2001; Miller, 1976; Smith, 1978, 1987). It is this latter point that differentiates the contemporary literature from the historical assumptions that have been made about the differences between women's and men's voices, that is, the female voice is emotional, irrational and in many other ways less sophisticated than the male voice, which is the voice of reason and authority. This history has presented a significant challenge to those who believe that the female voice should be heard and valued in society.

Building on the belief and some evidence of the distinctive nature of girls' and women's voices, a number of authors have researched the phenomenon of girls' and women's voices (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995). However, while this literature is informative, it is not intended to examine the question of difference so much

as it accepts the premise of difference and describes the nature of voice from that perspective.

Many authors who embrace the perspective that girls and women have a different voice are nonetheless troubled by the risks associated with describing difference. There is a fine balance that feminist theorists of difference attempt to achieve. On the one hand, they aim to reject the dominant dualisms of masculine/feminine and rational/irrational that relegate the feminine to an inferior and less valued position. On the other hand, they also embrace the notion of difference. The fine balance is to give voice to women's unique and diverse experience, while not at the same time "essentializing" women's experience (i.e., making it women's nature) and thus perpetuating the hierarchical and oppressive dichotomies. Their aim is to expose the limits of current rational thought and encourage the valuing of alternative contributions. Carol Gilligan (1993) labeled this risk in saying, "one problem in talking about difference and the consequent theorizing of 'difference' lies in the readiness with which difference becomes deviance and deviance becomes a sin in a society preoccupied with normality" (p. xviii).

Other authors are more critical of the research and perspectives on difference. Some suggest that differences are more attributable to context and culture than to gender (Hekman, 1990, 1995; Ozick, 1983). These authors suggest that the idea of a separate female sensibility is contrary to basic feminist principles and could be used to maintain women in a subordinate place. Instead, they propose that we embrace the plurality of voices outside of gender:

[A] humanist society - you and I do not live in one - is one in which a voice is heard; 'Come,' it says, 'here is the world requiring architects, painters,

playwrights, sailors, bridge-builders, jurists, captains, composers, discoverers, and a thousand things besides, all real and all obvious. Partake,' it says: 'live.'

Is it a man's voice or a woman's voice? Students, colleagues, listen again; it is two voices. (Ozick, 1965 cited in Schneir, 1994, p. 200)

These criticisms appear to have influenced a number of authors who have operated from an assumption of difference, as they more recently describe attempts to shift the discussion away from relativism to relationship, and to position their work as being about plurality and diversity as well as gender (Gilligan, 1993, 2002; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy & Belenky, 1996). These critiques and shifts aside, there is still a consistent position reflected in the literature that there is something that is distinctive about the voices of girls and women.

### *Different Types of Voices*

The literature suggests that there are different "types" of voice, such as silenced voice, expressed or outer voice, inner voice and related voice. Individuals experience different types of voices depending upon, for example, situational contexts, sense of self, developmental status, and perceived importance of, or value/risk in, speaking or being silent. I identified three shared threads in the discussions about the different types of girls' and women's voices.

The first thread is that across and between girls and women, different types of voice are expressed, and also each girl or woman may experience different types of voice in different contexts and at different times in their life history (Belenky et al., 1986; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Gilligan, 1993; Goldberger, 1996; Lewis, 1993).

Another thread is that voice, and thus the different types of voices, are culturally and contextually-related. In many cases, they are adaptive, as girls and women assess at some level what type of voice will be acceptable within a particular context (Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Daly, 1976; Goldberger, 1996; Smith, 1978; Taylor et al., 1995).

A third thread is that the different types of voice are intricately connected to sense of self and mind; the greater a sense of self and mind, the broader the repertoire of voice and voicing (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Goldberger et al., 1996).

### *Developmental Quality of Voice*

Most of the literature on girls' and women's voice has a developmental foundation or premise. I identified two clusters of developmentally-oriented information within the literature.

The first cluster includes literature that challenges and critiques the dominant psychological theories of development, with the intention of illustrating the inability of these theories to represent or speak to the lives and experiences of girls and women (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Lyons, 1988, 1990; Miller, 1976). The feminist literature in particular has highlighted the inadequacy and bias of the view of human development that places autonomy, independence, individuation, and self-governance as a higher task of development than that of connection and relational awareness. Within this framework, women's different developmental patterns have been viewed as problematic and less

mature than their male counterparts (see Erikson, 1963, 1968; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Kohlberg, 1984; Kohlberg & Gilligan, 1971; Piaget, 1976, 1981). For example, Carol Gilligan (1993) noted that Lawrence Kohlberg interpreted girls' reliance on relationships as revealing "a continuing dependence and vulnerability, [where] her belief in communication [voice] as the mode through which to resolve moral dilemmas appears naïve and cognitively immature" (p. 30). It is suggested that the failure of women to fit existing theories of human development points to a problem with theory that has a limited conception of the human condition and that omits girls' and women's experience. What has essentially been a problem in theory has historically been recast as a problem with women and their development, with the locus of women's "problem" being our<sup>2</sup> desire for and orientation to connectedness (Miller, 1976).

The second cluster includes literature that refines or re-casts the existing theories of development in order to bring the experiences and voices of girls and women into the dominant theories (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Brown & Rogers, 1989; Jordan et al., 1991; Kaplan, 1991) or proposes alternative models, frameworks and theories of development that aim to more adequately represent women's lives and voices (Belenky et al., 1986, 1997; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Goldberger et al., 1996; Hekman, 1995; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976, 1991; Surrey, 1991; Taylor et al., 1995).

Researchers have inquired into the lived experiences of girls and women to uncover and describe developmental patterns, experiences and challenges in voice (Brown, 1998;

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<sup>2</sup> I have made a choice to use the terms "our," "us," and "we." I made this shift from the more traditional use of "they" and "them" not because I believe that there is a commonality in or essential nature to all women's experience but to bring myself into the text as a woman who is endeavouring to understand and share in the experiences and perspectives of other women.

Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Debold, Tolman & Brown, 1996; Gilligan, 1988; Stern, 1990; Taylor et al., 1995).

Within this body of literature, the developmental aspects of voice and the similarities and differences between the voices of girls, young women and adult women have been explored (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Gilligan, Lyons & Hanmer, 1990; Jordan et al., 1991; Taylor et al., 1995). These authors seek to describe the nature of girls' and women's voices, sense of self and mind, and the thoughts and ideas that they express and do not express, as a way of describing change, growth and shifting priorities. This research has led to formulations of frameworks and theories such as "women's ways of knowing" (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Goldberger et al., 1996), and "self-in-relation theory," the "Stone Center model of development," or the "relational approach to psychological understanding" (Jordan et al., 1991; Surrey, 1991).

### *Relational Quality of Voice*

There are three key relational aspects of voice described in the literature on the nature of women's voice. The first is that voice (and silence) is a resource for building, maintaining and sustaining relationships (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Gilligan et al., 1990; Jordan, 1991; Jordan, Surrey & Kaplan, 1991; Lyons, 1988, 1990). Since 1976 when Jean Baker Miller suggested that there was no language in the psychology of the day to describe women's sense of self as being "organized around being able to make and maintain affiliations and relationships" (p. 83), women's orientation towards more affiliative ways of living has been explored and debated. With

respect to voice, it has been suggested that girls and women use their voices (and silences) to support relationships.

A second relational aspect of voice that is described in the literature is that girls and women are challenged to bring their authentic or inner voices into relationships (Debold et al., 1996; Gilligan, 1982, 1988, 1993). As is described elsewhere in this paper, the intertwining of voice and relationships is very complex and appears to shift and change over time and in different contexts. It has been observed that in the course of girls' and women's development, we attempt to make and maintain relationships, but paradoxically keep large parts of ourselves out of relationship (Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1978; Taylor et al., 1995).

A third area of inquiry explores the interrelationship between voice and listening (Belenky, 1996; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Bernstein & Gilligan, 1990). A number of authors ask the question, "does one have voice if no one is listening?" and conclude that listening is essential to voice (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Gilligan, 1993, 2002; Goldberger et al., 1996; Jordan et al., 1991; Lewis, 1993). No amount of noise will be heard if there is no one who cares to listen.

### *Influence of Social and Cultural Contexts*

Much of the literature on the developmental and relational characteristics of girls' and women's voices and silences is descriptive and does not theorize about reasons or test theory. However, where explanations are proposed for the shifting developmental and relational nature of voice, and particularly for the fractures experienced by young

women moving into adulthood, they relate to social and cultural context. Voice cannot be separated from context. The intersections between feminist theory, research and practice and the topics of voice and silence are most evident when we consider social and cultural contexts for voice and silence.

A number of authors have suggested that our genderized context places us in a position of having voice devalued (Daly, 1973; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Smith, 1978, 1987, 1999). Others explore the nature of voice within different ethnic and cultural contexts (Taylor et al., 1995), socio-economic contexts (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Taylor et al., 1995), and educational contexts (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Lewis, 1993).

In the following sections I shift from speaking about overarching themes to what I learned from the literature that addresses my primary questions on the topic of voice and silence.

### *Voice and Silence - Defined and Described*

#### *What is Voice?*

A notable finding in my search of the literature about voice and silence is that none of the authors or researchers that I reviewed have defined either concept or term. There appears to be an underlying assumption through all of the writings that we as readers (and as women) will know what voice and silence is and what is meant when the terms are used. Furthermore, authors are silent on the reasons for not defining the topics and the concepts. While I can appreciate the difficulty in and the hazards of defining a phenomenon that is so personal and experiential, it is this silence about the difficulty and the hazards that I find most intriguing and frustrating. This presents a challenge to finding

a “shared voice” about voice, as it is not clear whether those working on the topic are speaking about the same, or even similar, phenomena.

As an illustration of the ambiguity with which the term “voice” is described, I refer to the description offered by Carol Gilligan in the new preface to her 1993 edition of *In a Different Voice*:

By voice I mean voice. Listen, I will say, thinking that in one sense the answer is simple. And then I will remember how it felt to speak when there was no resonance, how it was when I began writing, how it still is for many people, how it still is for me sometimes. To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act.

When people ask me what I mean by voice and I think of the question more reflectively, I say that by voice I mean something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self. Voice is natural and also cultural. It is composed of breath and sound, words, rhythm, and language. And voice is a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds. (Gilligan, 1993, p. xvi)

As Carol Gilligan’s (1993) comments suggest, “voice” is not a simple or straightforward concept to define. It is a noun and a verb, a name for something and an act. It is not a simple matter of it existing or not, of one having it or not, of one using it or not. The topic of voice cannot be separated from the cultural and social context, from experiences of voice and voicing, silence and silencing, or from the relational act of speaking and listening. Voice is a complex and fundamental concept within human, social and cultural

development. Descriptors of voice are more plentiful than definitions, and I found the research pertaining to different types of voice to be particularly relevant to my inquiry into voice and silence.

### *Different Types of Voice*

A distinction is made in the literature, although not explicitly so, between inner voice and internalized voice. The former is a more authentic manifestation of thoughts and ideas while the latter reflects the voice that we are taught or conditioned to carry with us (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997). The latter is more a reflection of societal values and ideas and more judgmental and limiting. This is the voice of authority that speaks *through* individuals who may not have a sense of their own views and values in relation to a particular topic, but who have learned well what is acceptable and not acceptable to say and believe. This internalized voice may also be labeled the outer or expressed voice.

The connections between inner and outer worlds/inner and outer voice are discussed by a number of authors (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Gilligan, 1993; Taylor et al., 1995). Jill Taylor and her colleagues (1995) are clear that “having voice” does not mean that one speaks out indiscriminately, but rather that one is able to speak about one’s experience, to connect inner and outer worlds or speak one’s psychological truth and have this received in safe company. I refer to this notion of speaking one’s psychological truth as “authentic” or “genuine” voice. Carol Gilligan (1993, preface) also speaks to the interconnection between inner and outer worlds and voices, and the notion of authentic voice, when she describes voice as a psychological instrument and channel connecting inner and outer worlds, and where the voice that represents the inner world is

a “resonant” voice. This line of thought implies that one does not truly “have voice” unless this voice reflects and represents the inner self.

### *What is Silence?*

Voice is contrasted with silence in the works of many feminist authors. As with the topic of voice, “silence” and “silencing” are frequently discussed, although not defined. Instead, the contributors to, characteristics and implications of silence and silencing are described. I have clustered these ideas into the following themes: silence is golden, public silencing, and necessary and strategic silencing.

#### *“Silence is Golden”*

The literature speaks to the implicit and explicit expectations in some contexts that “good” girls and women swallow their words and maintain a silence. The premise that our voices as girls and women have been actively silenced by (white) male-dominated institutions underlies much of the feminist literature pertaining to voice. Related to this is the premise that the voices of girls and women are not valued within society and thus not encouraged in their expression. This devaluing of voice results in women having less freedom and power (Friedan, 1967; Taylor et al., 1995).

Jill Taylor, Carol Gilligan and Amy Sullivan (1995) note that many girls and women describe how their voice “gets them in trouble,” that they have to learn “how to keep their mouth shut,” and that they are told by others that “they talk too much.” Voice is characterized as a “bad thing” by others, particularly within school, work and family contexts, although also amongst friends. In contrast “being nice” is valued within these

contexts, where “being nice” looks like being very careful and cautious with words and speaking, putting the preservation of relationships first and accepting what others say, particularly the words of those in power.

A number of feminist authors have suggested that women have had to deny their own voices (and thus selves) in order to maintain the “pretty picture” of femininity provided to them by male dominated society (Friedan, 1967; Schneir, 1994; Schweickart, 1996; Smith, 1979; Steinem, 1993).

The literature suggests that as women we are left with the following options in respect of our relationship to our own voices - to be a good woman is to be a quiet woman and women are to blame for whatever lot they find themselves in.

### *Public Silencing*

A number of authors speak to the extinguishing of women’s voices within the public sphere (Chodorow, 1978; Daly, 1973; Smith, 1978, 1987). Dorothy Smith (1987) suggests that, “there is a dialectical interchange between the narrowing local sphere assigned to women and the enlarging terrain appropriated by men and dominated by them” (p. 4). The implication of this is that the knowledge and skill embedded in relationships between people are disenfranchised as formal organizations and structures (e.g., enterprises, bureaucracies) become the authority on knowledge. This is of particular significance to the voices of women as the thoughts, feelings, ideas and perspectives that women have, particularly in the context of or arising from their relationships, are not valued or significant in society.

### *Strategic Silences*

There are different ways of being silent and in some situations silence is a survival strategy. In other situations silence is an intentional, strategic choice. Jill Taylor and her colleagues (1995) describe how girls learn to:

... use both voice and silence as strategies in navigating the multiple and sometimes contradictory conventions they learn at home and at school. Each strategy has its advantages and when the pendulum of voice or silence swings too far in either direction, each poses a risk. (p. 67)

Voice and silence are two sides of the same coin. Once again, context influences the decisions that girls and women make about their voice and silence, with silence being a necessary tool to avoid negative repercussions of using voice in home, school, work and within their cultural community context (Belenky et al., 1997; Brown, 1998; Schweikart, 1996; Stack, 1975; Taylor et al., 1995).

### *Girls' and Women's Relationships to their Voices and Silences*

I identified two bodies of research and knowledge that are particularly relevant to my question about the relationships and awareness that girls and women have with their own voices: girls and women and their developmental pathways, and girls' and women's sense of self. In addition, several discussions relating to the intersections between voice and silence added to my understanding about the challenge girls and women face with engaging voice.

## *Voice and Development*

The relationship girls and women have with their voices and silences shifts over time, through different developmental phases and in different contexts. The research on voice and development has primarily used a case study method in which cohorts of girls and young women have been interviewed and tracked over a number of years. It is not extensive, either in terms of the size of cohorts or in the volume of studies, and there are limitations in the diversity of the cohorts, however there are many consistencies in the findings across studies. The most notable and consistent findings are described below and track the developmental progression from girlhood to womanhood.

Younger girls (preadolescent) relate more comfortably to their voices at this age as compared to their adolescent years. Preadolescent girls have a stronger sense of self and their mind. They share a determination to be candid and truthful and say what they need to say. They are able and willing to be observant and to speak about what they are noticing and thinking. Girls at this age are focused on friendships and being related and connected to other girls, but do not yet perceive the need to be cautious about what they say and how they say it in order to preserve these relationships; relationships are not as complicated or conditional as they appear to be for older girls. The adult researchers also noticed that the girls were aware that they were expressing their voice (Brown, 1998; Gilligan et al., 1990).

As girls move into adolescence however, they become more cautious, less trusting of others within their social milieus, and more strategic about when they use “that voice.” A cautiousness and heightened sensitivity about themselves, their relationships, truthfulness (and the risks associated with truth-telling) and their voices enters the

picture. A distinct shift in girls' voices is observed with this change of voice coinciding with changes in girls' relationships and sense of self (Lyons, 1990). Whereas, the younger girls were described as being frank and fearless, with a determination to "speak truthfully" and "remain in relationship" (Gilligan et al., 1990, p. xxi), as they edged into adolescence, the researchers noted that they began to relinquish:

...what they know and what they have held fast to, as they come face to face with a social construction of reality that is at odds with their experience, so that some kind of dissociation becomes inevitable. Girls' initiation or passage into adulthood in a world psychologically rooted and historically anchored in the experiences of powerful men marks the beginning of self-doubt and the dawning of realization, no matter how fleeting, that womanhood will require a dissociative split between experience and what is generally taken to be reality. (Gilligan et al., 1990, p. xxi)

As girls mature they begin to learn that there are challenges and risks associated with voice and silence (Stern, 1990). They become less familiar and comfortable with their own voices and question the integrity of the voices of their peers and others. As they wade into adolescence many try to hang onto their voices and sense of self but are overcome by societal and peer expectations for behaviour. At this developmental juncture between having a freer voice and not having one, many young women report being angry at the expectation that they quell and modify their own voices (Brown, 1998; Debold et al., 1996; Gilligan, 1988; Taylor et al., 1995).

Jill Taylor and her colleagues (1995) discuss the challenges and risks associated with voice and silence, particularly for girls and women who are marginalized in ways

beyond gender, such as through poverty, race, ethnicity, familial socio-economic status, etc. Girls who are outspoken are likely to find themselves in conflict with peers, parents and school authorities. Girls and women from poor and working class families face a significant risk in being outspoken. To do so in school settings increases the risk of dismissal and not completing their education, thus further reducing access to employment. To do so within workplace settings, especially as an entry-level worker, increases the risk of job loss and thus economic ruin. They go on to say that:

In addition to the educational and economic costs, we also see in this study what is at stake for them psychologically. Efforts to be strong, self reliant and outspoken can be reasonable and effective survival strategies in a difficult, and sometimes hostile, environment. These efforts cease to be adaptive however, when they move to a position that precipitates disconnections from others, covering over vulnerabilities and the desire for relatedness.... [S]ilence presents its own dangers. Girls who learn to silence their voices or desires so that they can stay in school or to stay connected with their families and their cultures may also find themselves out of connection with important psychological and relational needs. (Taylor et al., 1995, p. 68)

In other words, there are costs to speaking and costs to not speaking.

Many adolescent girls and young women continue to experience the gradual disconnection of self and voice along the path to womanhood and as they internalize or assimilate cultural norms and expectations (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Debold et al., 1996; Gilligan et al., 1990; Kaplan, 1991; Taylor et al., 1995). Young women speak of needing to quiet their voices in order that they may have relationships:

[T]he coming not to know what one knows, the difficulty in hearing or listening to one's voice, the disconnection between mind and body, thoughts and feelings, and the use of one's voice to cover rather than to convey one's inner world, so that relationships no longer provide channels for exploring the connections between one's inner life and the world of others. (Gilligan et al., 1990, p. xxi)

### *Voice and the Self*

The literature suggests that girls and women are at great risk for problems of identity and being divided against their self, with a desire to speak and be authentic but with multiple barriers to doing so (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Daly, 1973; Freidan, 1963; Schneir, 1994, Taylor et al., 1995). As described above, the division of self begins during early adolescence when girls become more attuned to the ways in which other people, and society in general, define and make sense of the world. At this juncture, they begin to doubt their voices as well as their selves (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). They are less likely to speak out and more ambivalent in their verbal presentations of ideas. Young women demonstrate a struggle “to disentangle [their voices] from the voices of others and to find a language that represents [their] experience of relationships” and sense of self (Gilligan, 1993, p. 51).

Mary Daly (1973) and Paulo Freire (1982) both speak to the divided self or divided consciousness that is a common characteristic of any oppressed group – the oppressed take on or internalize the views of the oppressor and become caught in a web of self-defeating judgment. Although Paulo Freire was noticeably silent himself on the

experience of women, his comments about oppression have been characterized as relevant to women's experience:

The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot live authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. (Freire, 1982, p. 64)

Women's relationship to their own selves and voices is often characterized by ambivalence. In some cases, they cannot trust or value their own voices as they have come to believe that they have little of worth to say. At other times, there is a stirring of voice and they then cycle in and out of having a connection to their own voices and selves.

Another body of literature about women's voice and sense of self speaks to the ways in which these concepts are intertwined. As the sense of self and knowing evolves, so does the capacity for voice and voicing (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Goldberger et al., 1996). A strong and integrated sense of self is a necessary antecedent to "having voice" (Taylor et al., 1995).

In 1986, Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Jill Tarule and Nancy Goldberger challenged the dominant theories of the day pertaining to personal epistemology and development in adulthood. Through in-depth conversations with a diverse range of women over time, they discovered that women had varying ways of knowing and of relating to their own knowledge. They had intended to research women's development of self, not women's voices. However, they found that the two were inextricably linked.

Their research could not ignore the significance of voice in women's lives as a developmental marker for many women:

What we had not anticipated was that 'voice' was more than an academic shorthand for a person's point of view. Well after we were into our interviews with women, we became aware that it is a metaphor that can apply to many aspects of women's experience and development. In describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence: 'speaking up,' 'speaking out,' 'being silenced,' 'not being heard,' 'really listening,' 'really talking,' 'words as weapons,' 'feeling deaf and dumb,' 'having no words,' 'saying what you mean,' 'listening to be heard,' and so on in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with a sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others. We found that women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development; and that the development of a sense of voice, mind and self were intricately intertwined. (p. 18)

They identified seven different states of knowing, all of which are connected to women's experience of self, mind, voices and voicing. The first is "Silence" in which women believe that they have no mind and where words are "weapons" used to "separate and diminish people" (p. 24), and where punishment is meted out for using words. The second way of knowing is "Received Knowledge" in which the voices of others are the authoritative and knowing voices and their own voices are stilled as they express the voices only of the authoritative other. The third is "Subjective Knowledge" or the inner voice in which the woman moves away from silence and comes to identify that she has an

inner voice and a “becoming” self. The fourth is also connected to “Subjective Knowledge” but here there is a quest for self; the woman discovers her personal authority, subjectivity and a sense of self-in-relation to others. The fifth way is “Procedural Knowledge” or the voice of reason in which the woman develops capacity for reflection, objectivity *and* subjectivity, and a beginning confidence in her voice and knowledge. The next level of “Procedural Knowledge” allows for both separate and connected or objective and subjective knowing and the intersection of the two. This incorporates the public domain of reason and the private domain of feeling and insight. The seventh way of knowing is “Constructed Knowledge” in which the public and private domains (thinking and feeling) are integrated and self and voice are reclaimed. It is at this point that authentic voice or “real talk” emerges.

This research elicited both strong favour and criticism, however it did serve to bring to our awareness four key themes related to women’s voice, knowing and self. The first is that the three are intricately intertwined. The second is the prevalence of women’s experience of silencing, disempowerment, and lack of voice in multiple contexts, even when women operate at the most integrated state of knowing. Even women who “have voice” in some contexts experience challenges to their voices as they feel unheard in other home, work, and community contexts (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997).

The third theme that the research illuminated was the power of our western society to define, validate, invalidate, and essentially genderize, knowledge and the diverse range of ways that women come to understand, accommodate or resist the prevalent notions of “truth” and authority. The fourth theme is that women tend to resist

disimpassioned or disconnected knowing, value personal experience as a source for knowing, and prefer connected strategies of knowing.

### *Intersections Between Voice and Silence*

The interconnections and intersections between self, voicing and silencing are explored by a number of authors. Jill Taylor and her colleagues (1995) quote Audre Lorde who tells of being encouraged by her own daughter to speak about the risks of silencing and the importance of voicing:

Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there is always one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside. (p. 69)

Carol Gilligan (1993) spoke to the intersection between voice and silence when she noted that:

Women's choices not to speak or rather to dissociate themselves from what they themselves are saying can be deliberate or unwitting, consciously chosen or enacted through the body by narrowing the passages connecting the voice with breath and sound, by keeping the voice high in the head so that it does not carry the depths of feelings or a mix of feelings and thoughts, or by changing voice, shifting to a more guarded or impersonal register or key. (p. xi)

### *Contexts and Voice*

Context is a significant influencer of the types of voice that women hold or express, as well as whether voice is valued and thus “heard.” Context is a backdrop to some of the research that has been conducted on women’s voice. For example, Magda Lewis (1993) speaks to the academic context in her review of women’s experience of voice and silence within higher education. Jill Taylor and her colleagues (1995) have examined voice and silence amongst girls and women from different racial and cultural contexts. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) have considered the risks to voicing for girls in different social and economic contexts. However, while the significance of context is identified, the ways in which girls and women factor context into their assessments and decision-making about voice and silence requires further exploration.

The challenge to girls’ and women’s voices that is presented within the socio-cultural context of Western society is considered by several authors (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Debold et al., 1996; Gilligan, 2002; Smith, 1978):

Within a Western culture that authorizes as knowledge the products of a mind abstracted from material reality - of the body, of human relationship, of the particulars of people’s lives - we have found that girls’ coming of age and coming to know the dominant culture typically find themselves torn, and ultimately, split from their own power to authorize their experience as real and as knowledge.

(Debold et al., 1996, p. 86)

### *Influencers of Awareness and Expression of Voice*

In reviewing the literature pertaining to voice, I wished to learn more about what influenced or supported girls and women to become more aware of and able to express their voice. I explored beyond the discussions about context and looked for research that pointed to other variables. There is considerably more discussion in the literature about how girls and women deny, quell or extinguish their voices, than there is about how girls and women discover, develop and express their voices. However, two key influencers are described in the literature: listening and caring relationships.

#### *Power of Genuine Listening*

Mary Belenky, Lynne Bond and Jacqueline Weinstock (1997) speak to the power of listening in their description of the Listening Partners Project. Women who were severely marginalized and disadvantaged economically, socially, educationally and emotionally and who clearly had no voice or sense of self, were brought together over a period of months and supported in genuinely listening to each other. The women reported “finding their voices” by way of having someone listen to them genuinely and without judgment. These findings suggest the significance of relationships in voice and voicing.

In contrast, the absence or withdrawal of genuine listening may damage or sever relationships and threaten a girls’ or woman’s sense of safety, fairness and equality (Bernstein & Gilligan, 1990).

### *Emergence of Voice Through Trusting Relationships*

The literature on the emergence of voice through relationships speaks to two themes. The first theme relates to the power of groups of women coming together, raising consciousness and building self through dialogue (de Beauvoir, 1952; Daly, 1976; Smith, 1978, 1997). The second theme relates to the power of trusting interpersonal relationships within which voice is explored and developed (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Jordan, et al., 1991; Surrey, 1991).

In attempting to explain the phenomenon of women being maintained as “the other” through the millennia, Simone de Beauvoir contended back in 1949 that it was largely because women were not able to get together and create community amongst themselves. “They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women” (de Beauvoir, cited in Schneir, 1994, p. 11). Their allegiances, she suggested, are to the men that they stand behind, not to the women in similar circumstances. She called for women to create relationships with and for each other, through which to explore who they were as women, not as “the other.”

The feminist reawakening after the World War II set off in several different directions, however the emergence of women’s consciousness was a shared priority for all. It was felt that only in raising awareness could action be promoted. Consciousness has been promoted largely through dialogue – in itself a tactic unique to women. Consciousness-raising was aimed at creating supportive contexts in which women could assist one another to overcome the negative feelings about themselves and their place in the world. In short, the feminist circles aimed at supporting women in their self-creation.

Through the post-war evolution of the feminist movements, many previously unexplored or silenced topics emerged into the public domain. In particular, sexual subjects began to be explored with unprecedented openness and honesty. In this way, the group “voice” grew.

A number of authors, particularly those associated with the Stone Center at Wellesley College (Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976, 1991; Surrey, 1991) have explored the relational quality and development of voice. They have learned of the importance women attribute to relationships, particularly within family, and of how the self “gains vitality and enhancement in relationship and is not reduced or threatened by connections” (Surrey, 1991, p. 62).

As I have noted elsewhere, some researchers and authors have suggested that as girls move into adolescence and womanhood they more vigorously attempt to preserve relationships, often at a significant cost to their sense of self and authenticity. On the other hand, in other studies it is concluded that girls’ and women’s sense of self and identity, and thus voice, emerges only through trusting relationships with others within which there is “safe dialogue” characterized by genuine listening and understanding (Belenky, 1996; Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Taylor et al., 1995). It is not clear to me how the apparent disconnection from self and authenticity that occurs as the preservation of relationships becomes paramount can be reconciled with the evidence that the sense of self emerges through trusting and authentic relationships. This apparent contradiction or complexity is an intriguing area for further research.

*Girls' and Women's Voices as Resources for Personal, Familial and Community Health*

In light of my interest in the interrelationships between voice and health, and in women's voices as resources for community wellness, I reviewed the literature to determine whether these connections and ideas are explicitly addressed and if so, how they are expressed and what has been learned.

A number of authors and researchers have described the negative personal and familial effects of silencing and the resulting loss of knowledge and capacity in community (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Smith, 1984, 1987). As an example of the negative personal effects of silencing, Anne Koedt named the un-nameable in 1970 when she took apart and exposed the Freudian myths around vaginal orgasm. She documented the extremely negative impact this mythology had on women for generations. Not only were women subjected to unnecessary surgeries:

... but the severest damage was not in the area of surgery, where Freudians ran around absurdly trying to change female anatomy to fit their basic assumptions. The worst damage was done to the mental health of women, who either suffered silently with self-blame, or flocked to the psychiatrists looking desperately for the hidden and terrible repression that kept them from their vaginal destiny.” (Koedt cited in Schneir, 1994, p. 337)

This is one example illustrating the ill-effects of dominant theory and belief that situates women's experience and behaviour as “problematic”.

Another dimension of the ill effects of silencing is that women's voices as sources of information and resources for intergenerational learning are displaced by formal, male

dominated institutions. Dorothy Smith (1984, 1987) suggested that the narrowing local or private sphere assigned to women and the enlarging public terrain appropriated and dominated by men results in the loss of the knowledge and skill embedded in relationships between people. This wisdom is disenfranchised as formal organizations and structures become the authority on knowledge. This is of particular significance to the voices of women and the opportunity for community wellness, as the thoughts, feelings, ideas and perspectives that women have, particularly in the context of or arising from their relationships, are not valued or significant in society. Women's experience is viewed as being less relevant.

In a poignant description of traditional practices of learning between generations of women, and how the respect for and value of elder teachings has become irrelevant, Audre Lorde, (1982) speaks to her mother's experience:

What else did Linda know? She knew how to look into people's faces and tell what they were going to do before they did it. She knew which grapefruit was shaddock and pink, before it ripened, and what to do with the others, which was to throw them to the pigs. Except she had no pigs in Harlem, and sometimes those were the only grapefruit around to eat. She knew how to prevent infection in an open cut or wound by heating the black elm leaf over a wood fire until it wilted in the hand, rubbing the juice into the cut, and then laying the soft green now flabby fibers over the wound for a bandage.

But there was no black-elm in Harlem, no black oak leaves to be had in New York City. Ma-Mariah, her root-woman grandmother, had taught her well under the trees on Noel's Hill in Grenville, Grenada, overlooking the sea. Aunt

Anni and Ma-Liz, had carried it on. But there was no call for this knowledge now.

(p. 32)

It could be argued that such a perspective glorifies the past and ignores the reality of many women's lives where they had no voice then, as now. However, if we move beyond the specific contents and context, an interesting set of connections about voice, context, learning and self-identity emerges. Audre Lorde is speaking about the tradition amongst women of sharing knowledge over generations, and about how, in the sharing of that information, women developed a sense of themselves as having knowledge and being knowledgeable and thus developed an identity, a sense of self and a sense of self-worth, at least within certain contexts and relationships. Some of this knowledge is no longer relevant in the context of social, cultural, economic and other changes. However, women's capacity to learn and adapt is not diminished, so they could (and do) develop new knowledge. The loss then, is not about the specifics of the knowledge, but rather that *any* knowledge women have is not valued and is superseded by "the ruling apparatus" (Smith, 1984, p. 7) and institutions of learning. As a result, what was once valued (both the knowledge and the means of sharing the knowledge) is no longer valued. The sense of self is diminished. How does one have a sense of self and value in the world if one is not seen to be knowledgeable or relevant?

Other researchers have described the interconnection between voice and psychological health (Gilligan, 1993; Taylor, et al., 1995) and the ways in which women, in coming into their voices, are able to bring about significant changes in their personal or familial situation and achieve a higher state of well-being. Jill Taylor and her colleagues (1995) suggest that having voice is an indicator of and a requirement for psychological

health – that without voice one cannot be healthy. To have voice is to have a sense of self and self-knowing or understanding. One cannot have voice without having a sense of self, which evolves through experimentation with others in “safe” dialogue (i.e., where someone genuinely listens to hear and understand). It is this intersection of voice, self, trust, relationship and psychological health that is particularly intriguing in their research.

A number of authors have discussed how the women’s movement has created opportunities for women to create communities within which their voices can be uncovered, implying that as this is good for the individuals, it will also be good for families and communities. The women’s movement, and in particular the consciousness-raising aspect of the movement, has created a contemporary context in which women learn from and with each other. As Dorothy Smith (1984) suggests,

We have created an arena of speaking that is uncensored and unmediated by men. In this arena of women there are arguments, dialogue, conversations, bitter quarrels, debates, alliances, feuds, friends and enemies. Here we have learned how to speak in a new way, from ourselves, to speak of our experience and from our experience. Here we have discovered the forms of language demanded by our experience. Above all, here we have learned to treat other women and ourselves as authoritative speakers of our world. (p. 8)

It is suggested that within these “spaces” of women speaking with women that women’s voices have regained value. With the valuing has come increased consciousness, awareness, sense of self, identity and power in the world.

In Carol Gilligan’s preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *In a Different Voice* (1993) she states that, “voice is a new key for understanding the psychological, social and cultural

order – a litmus test of relationships and a measure of psychological health” (p. xvi).

While she does not go on to explain how she knows this or how we may measure voice and health, it is interesting to me that she flags this perspective in 1993, having not considered it in her first edition in 1982.

Mary Belenky (1996) and her colleagues Lynne Bond and Jacqueline Weinstock (1997) describe their work with the Listening Partners Project in which significant personal change was created through the finding of voice in relationship. This led to familial change, resulting in healthier family relationships and parenting practices. Women’s voices as resources for community wellness were explored through research into the “public homeplaces” that have enabled “many marginalized women to gain a voice, claim the powers of their minds, and begin democratizing their families” (Belenky, 1996, p. 395). These are places within which people feel safe, connected, related and valued. Participants come to acquaint or re-acquaint themselves with their own minds, selves and voice. In doing so, they use their voice in ways that promote positive change and growth in various spheres of their lives.

It was noted that the “maternal leadership” approach that was evident in many of the public homeplaces intentionally supported and encouraged healthy human development through relationships characterized by reciprocity, mutuality, dialogue and care (Belenky, 1996, p. 395; see also Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997).

## Critique of the Literature

Throughout the time that I have been preparing for and writing my dissertation, I have been practicing as a community facilitator and educator. I have worked with and learned from hundreds of people who live and work in communities and who share an interest in trying to make their communities and neighbourhoods better places within which to raise children. In many ways, my work is about voice and my success within this work is attributable to the value I place in voice and in creating space and place for people to talk about what really matters to them and to discover with others both the rich plurality and diversity of voices and the commonality in voices. My understanding of and consciousness about my experience in practice has been enriched through the process of reviewing the literature on such topics as voice, psychology of women, development of self, and cultures of community.

However, there is much that is missing in the literature that speaks to this intersection of research and praxis. Using the framework of primary questions that I have about voice and silence, I have identified some of the areas that I believe are not well-developed within the literature. I believe that both our knowledge and our capacity for effective practice and social action would be enriched through an exploration of these topics in a research/practice context.

### *Definitions and Descriptions*

While I am not particularly troubled by the lack of definition of voice and silence, it is difficult to create a shared understanding about the concepts and their significance in the absence of discussion about meaning. A number of authors suggest that women who are able to access and express their inner or authentic voice are more likely to achieve or

maintain psychological health, however, there was little exploration about what inner voice is. How can we identify it? What supports the development of awareness about inner voice? What are the risks in negating or neglecting inner voice or in expressing it? What are the benefits of expressing it?

### *Relationships*

The intertwining of voice and relationships is very complex and appears to shift and change over time and in different contexts. It has been observed that in the course of development, girls and women attempt to make and maintain relationships, but paradoxically keep large parts of themselves out of relationship. There is a contradiction between desire for authentic connection and relationship and fear or resistance to bringing self into relationship, particularly for adolescents and young women (Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Miller, 1978; Taylor et al., 1995). However, we would benefit from more in-depth analysis of how girls and women experience and attribute meaning to this fracture and what contributes to it socially, emotionally, and contextually.

Another facet of understanding about girls' and women's relationships to their voices that is not explored or developed in the literature is that of "synchronicity". Much of the literature speaks to the extinguishment of voice, but there is little that speaks to the finding and expression of authentic voice and consciousness. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1993, 1997) has closely examined the development and evolution of self and consciousness. He suggests that people who have a consistent set of goals - from which one might surmise that they have defined what is of importance and value to them - are more able to develop a coherent sense of self. From this coherent sense of self, people are more able to develop a focus of attention that allows them, for moments at least, to

suspend the confused chatter that often distracts the mind and find a clarity in thought and expression that brings about an integration of self and environment. This has been referred to as a concentration of “psychic energy” that can result in a synchronicity, harmony or flow (Jaworski, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, 1997). It is possible that it is in such states of synchronicity, harmony and flow that voice becomes most clear and most profound as a resource for community wellness. The intentionality of voice – why people say what they say, and the relationships between sense of self and expression of voice bears further exploration.

### *Context*

Despite the acknowledgement of context as an influencer of voice and silence, further exploration is necessary on what aspects of social and cultural contexts have a particularly significant impact on voice, and how girls and women factor context into the decisions or choices that they make about voicing or not voicing. This is an area of inquiry that I find intriguing and bears further exploration if we are to understand the considerations girls and women have in using or not using their voices for individual, familial and community well-being.

### *Influencers*

An underlying assumption in much of the literature on women’s voice is that to have “voice” implies that our perspective is valued and received, we are free to say what we need to say, and our voice and what we say is reflective of our inner selves. Initially this portrayal of voice and the experience of having voice was very compelling, and yet, when measured against the data reflected in the literature on voice, it is questionable whether any woman truly has voice in all social contexts. The data suggest that many

women feel voiceless or silenced, disempowered, ambivalent or distrustful about their own thoughts and ideas (sense of self and mind) or highly cautious about how they use their voice so as to not risk relationships. This dissonance between the desired state of voice and the experiential phenomenon of voice amongst women is not well developed in the literature.

### *Voice, Health and Community*

There is a significant opportunity to contribute to a greater awareness about and understanding of the ways in which girls' and women's voices can be resources for health and well-being at the personal, familial and community level.

### Locating My Inquiry

My inquiry into the literature on voice and silence served to inform me about the topic, as well as about my own voices and silences. I became a keener observer of voicing and silencing experiences and modified my daily practice to reflect my emerging knowledge and relationship to the topic. As I reflected upon all that has been shared in the literature, and all that remains to be researched, and as I circled back to my questions about voice, silence and wellness, I began to refine and focus my questions. In the end, I decided that what was of greatest interest to me was to understand more about women's experience of "coming to voice." What are women's experiences of awakening to their voices? How has this influenced their experience of "self"? What was their experience of the moment or point in time when they knew that they must use their voices?

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In order to inquire into women's experiences with voice I needed to locate myself in a research paradigm<sup>3</sup> and select a methodology<sup>4</sup> that could guide my research. It was necessary to explore a range of methodological options in order to find one that was congruent or compatible with the topic of inquiry, a feminist approach to research and my orientation and strengths as a researcher. This chapter speaks to the outcomes of my exploration by situating my inquiry in a qualitative research paradigm, describing how I have integrated a feminist perspective into my research approach, describing my choice of and rationale for the selection of a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, and comprehensively describing the methods<sup>5</sup> I used in the research and writing process.

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<sup>3</sup> I am informed by Thomas Kuhn's (1996) conceptualization of *paradigms* as universally recognized approaches for modeling problems and solutions to a community of practitioners. The quantitative and qualitative research paradigms both emerge from, and influence the values and beliefs related to, the inquiry process. They each carry different conceptions on the nature of reality, the relationship between researcher and researched, the language and the process for research structure, as well as what is considered evidence, what means are acceptable for gathering evidence, and how the evidence is interpreted and understood (Creswell, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> In defining *methodologies*, I am guided by Max van Manen's (1990) reference to the philosophical framework and basic assumptions that characterize an approach to research: "the general orientation to life, the view of knowledge, and the sense of what it means to be human" (p. 25). Methodologies are approaches that inform how to go about the systematic inquiry of phenomenon (Merriam, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, *methods* refer to the strategies used within the research process to explore the topic of inquiry. They address who will be studied, where the study will be situated, how the relationship between the study participants and the researcher will be defined and enacted, how the researcher will reflect on the process, how information will be collected, how information will be analyzed, and how the findings will be interpreted and presented. The methods that are selected need to reflect the methodology.

## Locating the Research in a Qualitative Paradigm

Qualitative research is a process of inquiry that explores a social or human condition in a holistic manner. Ernest Stringer (1996) states that the qualitative research paradigm pursues “an interpretive task that seeks to describe the historic, cultural and interactional complexity of social life” (p. 6). In so doing, the researcher contributes accounts that speak more fully to people’s lived experiences. As Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990) have stated:

Some areas of study naturally lend themselves more to qualitative types of research, for instance, research that attempts to uncover the nature of persons’ experience with a phenomena...qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomena about which little is known. (p. 19)

Research undertaken within the qualitative paradigm is diverse, however, there are several common elements that characterize qualitative research across a range of methodologies including: a focus on the participant’s perspectives, emergent and flexible processes and methods, inclusive orientation to “data,” preference for field-based inquiry, development of dense and thick description (i.e., fewer “cases” explored in greater depth), and an orientation to understanding phenomenon rather than explaining phenomenon or defining objective “truth” (Berg & Smith, 1988; Cresswell, 1998).

All of these characteristics are congruent with the voice topic, the aims of feminist inquiry, and my personal orientation to research. In particular, qualitative approaches focus on the perspectives of the participants and the meaning that they attribute to phenomenon. As I am curious about how women experience silence, voice, and the transition between the two, I must situate myself within a research paradigm that

encourages discourse, description and interpretation amongst the participants themselves. It is their perspective and the meaning that they attribute to their experiences that will contribute to understanding.

A second desirable attribute of the qualitative paradigm is how the researcher is cast in an active and participatory role within the research. She is a resource, an instrument for the collection of data and must commit to a process of self-scrutiny or reflexivity in the course of the research. As my personal learning style is that of a research-practitioner, with a heavy emphasis upon mindfulness and reflection in my practice, it is essential for me to adopt a research approach that allows me to bring my self into the inquiry process.

A third reason to situate my research in the qualitative paradigm is that the research process itself is emergent; theory, methodology, and method may evolve in response to and in the course of the research experience. The qualitative paradigm offers the researcher a diverse range of methodological options that can be drawn upon, combined and evolved to best reflect and capture the learning opportunities available within the inquiry (Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Reinharz, 1992).

Finally, the qualitative paradigm is most congruent with the aims of feminist inquiry and research. Feminist literature is highly critical of the (white) male-dominated positivistic, rational, or quantitative paradigm due to its intent to generalize experience, find universal truth and minimize difference and complexity. By contrast, the aim of qualitative research is to enhance understanding. This is compatible with the feminist inquiry's desire to understand the lived experience of women in all its complexity and

diversity and without any intention to uncover a universal truth about experience or phenomena.

The qualitative paradigm seems best suited to the development of greater understanding about women's silences and the transition into voice. It not only creates the opportunity for us to learn about women's experience, but also about how women make sense of their experience – what meaning they attach to it and how they view it. This will enable me to develop a more direct and authentic representation of the experience and its significance in the lifeworld of women.

### Bringing a Feminist Perspective Into the Inquiry

Feminist inquiry and research is not a singular or prescriptive approach and there is no consensus on the definition of "feminist research". However, despite this diversity, there are some threads that weave through and connect the range of feminist research and inquiry approaches. These include the foci and aims of feminist research and what the process of research includes. In this section, I describe some of the key characteristics of feminist inquiry and research, and how I sought to reflect these in my methodology and methods.

#### *Foci and Aims of Feminist Inquiry and Research*

Feminist inquiry and research is primarily interested in women's lived experience and perspectives; not as a singular phenomenon, but as a rich and diverse tapestry. The emphasis on women's experience – the ways in which experience is perceived, the way in which things come to be known – presumes that women may think, feel and act in ways that are different from men. It also presumes that there is no unitary explanation for

these gender differences. Nature, nurture, and the interaction between the two accounts for differences not only between men and women, but also between women.

Women's experience, is not shorthand for some sort of monolithic, female 'groupthink' but for a vast array of thoughts, feelings and activities mediated through the lenses of each individual woman's race, class, sexual preference, ethnicity, religion, age, physical condition and state of mind. (Tuana & Tong, 1995, p. 2)

Feminist research is *for* rather than *about* women (see Smith, 1978, 1987, 1999; Westcott, 1990). It is fundamentally *not* about establishing new, universal truths. Feminists reject all notions of universality and singular truths. Instead, the aims of feminist research are to challenge, raise consciousness, reflect the plurality and complexity in the perspectives and lived experiences of women, and promote action and change (Daly, 1973; Irigaray, 1991). Feminist inquiry is both theory and praxis.

Given my approach to daily practice as a child and youth care worker and community facilitator, I embrace the notions of social action and change that are embedded in the feminist perspective. Although the objective of my research was not to bring about social change, in my consideration of research methodologies and methods I was mindful of how both the process and outcomes of doing the research could contribute to consciousness, action and change in myself and for others.

### *Feminist Research and Problems with Method*

Many feminists are critical of any approach to discovery that emulates the dominant scientific processes that have rendered women voiceless and invisible (Daly,

1973; Hekman, 1990; Irigaray, 1991; Sellers, 1994). Mary Daly (1973) stated that the method that is required in feminist research “is not one of correlation but of liberation” (p. 8) in which we as women hear and speak our own words to create “continual growth, flexibility and emergence of new perceptions of reality – perceptions that come from being where one is” (p. 11). In taking up this challenge, feminist researchers have gone about developing and promoting a range of methods that give voice and legitimacy to the experiences of women (Humm, 1990; Kruk, 2001; Lather, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987, 1999). I was mindful of this literature as I set out to select a research methodology and methods that honored voice and the lived experiences of women. This criterion narrowed the field of methodological approaches and methods that I considered for this study.

### *Processes in Feminist Research*

Feminist inquiry and research is not “methodological” in the sense of the logical, rationally-based, positivist scientific method. Rather, it has been described as contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant, multi-methodological, reflexive, open to change, inclusive of emotions as experienced, and subjective (see Reinharz, 1992).

Feminist inquiry has been framed as dialectical (Westkott, 1979) or as a “fusion of horizons” (Nielsen, 1990, p. 29). The dialectical process is a method of argument through dialogue and conversation. Marcia Westkott, (1990) describes the dialectical tension that characterizes both women’s experience and feminist research. Dialectical “refers to discontinuities, oppositions, contradictions, tensions and dilemmas that form

part of women's concrete experience in patriarchal worlds – dilemmas that are only realized with feminist consciousness” (p. 25).

Given the interest in the dialectic, contexts and fusions or interconnections, feminist research and inquiry draws on the voices of women through dialogic methods. Thus it was necessary for me to locate my research in a methodology that embraced these methods.

### The Selection of a Methodology

Within the qualitative research paradigm and within the field of feminist research and inquiry there are a variety of methodological prospects. I investigated eight different methodologies or approaches in the search for one that was best suited to my inquiry questions: action research, autobiography, biography, critical ethnography, emancipatory research, ethnography, phenomenology and qualitative case study. To assist in the analysis and assessment of the different methodologies, I developed a framework that set out the criteria or expectations I had of my research methodology; what I would expect the methodology and methods to honor and achieve. I also identified some of the challenges that I anticipated would arise during the inquiry process so that I could mindfully select a methodology that could rise to these challenges. This framework led me to develop a series of questions by which I evaluated the eight prospective methodologies. The framework and questions were discussed at length in an earlier candidacy paper and are summarized in Appendix A.

## *Selecting a Phenomenological Approach*

### *Rationale for Selection*

After applying the criteria to the eight different methodological options I decided to use a phenomenological approach. There were four aspects with this approach that fit particularly well with my topic, aims of feminist inquiry and my research-practice orientation. The first was that the explicit aim of phenomenology is to understand the everyday lived experience of people from their own point of view, including the private domains of thoughts and feelings and to represent this lived experience through rich, deep description. Therefore it “gets at” the topic of voice by creating opportunities to genuinely hear voice. Contextual exploration and understanding is an explicit characteristic of phenomenological study, thus enabling inquiry into the role or influence of context on women’s voices and silences. Phenomenology is multi-methodological and thus flexible and emergent in method. Finally, contemporary phenomenological practice speaks to reflexivity and the ways in which researchers creatively and experientially brings themselves into the inquiry process (van Manen, 1997).

The weakest aspect of the phenomenological approach in respect to both my criteria and the aims of feminist inquiry is its lack of attention to “research as praxis.” While phenomenology is intended to bring about increased understanding, consciousness, and knowledge about the essence of specific phenomenon, praxis and social action is rarely an explicit purpose for phenomenological research.

## *Phenomenology and Feminist Inquiry*

In the selection of the methodology, I was mindful of the feminist critique of phenomenology. Critics have pointed out the insensitivity of certain attributes and histories of phenomenology to the contextual variables of gender, culture, language and how these constitute meaning. Focal points for criticism include that it is grounded in philosophical traditions that are patriarchal, the grandfathers of the tradition did not account for gendered experience, and that its interest in the essence of phenomenon makes it an “essentialist” tradition, therefore disregarding the uniqueness of women’s experiences in the interests of creating universal and invariant descriptions of experience (Fisher, 2000; Levesque-Lopman, 1988; van Manen, 1997). As a basic premise of feminist research is that there is great diversity and plurality in experience and the aim of feminist research is not to discover universal qualities, but rather to describe the range of experiences that women have, there appears to be a fracture between feminist aims and the general aims of phenomenologists (Fisher, 2000; Lather, 1988). Shulamit Reinharz’ (1992) extensive description of feminist methods in social research is silent on the application of phenomenology in feminist research. Of the over 350 books within the University of Victoria library that speak to phenomenology as a research tradition, only two specifically address feminist phenomenology (Embree & Fisher, 2000; Levesque-Lopman, 1988).

### *“Reconciling” the Conflict*

There are shared epistemological and ontological themes between phenomenology and feminism and there are opportunities to create phenomenological

research that is not only not offensive to feminist principles and aims, but that can advance the aims of feminist research and inquiry. There is, for example, a shared mission to critique positivism (Husserl, 1970), reclaim lived experience as valid and an important source of knowing, radically question the construction of patriarchal institutions and practices, question theorizing and abstractions (that often serve patriarchy) and to “find modes of discourse, voice, and expression that can reveal felt meaning that goes beyond the prevailing paradigm of logic, cognition, prediction, and control” (van Manen, 1997).

Phenomenology as a methodology has many characteristics that are consistent with many of the aims and approaches of feminist research. For example, it focuses intensely upon lived experience, including thoughts and feelings. Long interviews are held with people, which present an opportunity for the researcher to really listen to and understand their voices. While there is an expectation that the researcher’s own voice and experience is suspended during the collection of information from others, this is primarily aimed at preventing the researcher’s preconceived ideas from interfering with her capacity to genuinely hear the lived experience of others. The researcher’s own voice does enter into the equation at a later stage when she engages in a reflective process with the data, the research process and its meaning.

The product of phenomenological research may also be congruent with feminist research in that the lived experiences of others are shared by way of a narrative report, the aim of which is to assist the reader to have a better understanding of other people’s experience of a phenomenon. This serves feminist aims in that it has the potential to build understanding and through this, the capacity for shared awareness and action.

The small body of literature on feminist phenomenology not only suggests that there are ways to reconcile the differences but argues that feminist theory and practice *needs* phenomenological inquiry (Alcoff, 2000; Arp, 2000; Bergoffen, 2000; Fisher, 2000; Kruk, 2001; Larabee, 2000; Levesque-Lopman, 2000). As Sonia Kruks (2001) states, we must move beyond the impasse that exists within feminist theory that “devotes itself to the potentially interminable deconstruction of concepts and categories” (p. 139). She suggests that, through phenomenological inquiry,

First, we can attain a more adequate account of the intentional and volitional aspects of the subject, one that moves beyond the antinomies of ‘Enlightenment versus post-modern’ formulations. Second, we can gain an appreciation of the importance of embodiment as the locus for certain kinds of shared experience between women that may be significant for a politics of feminist solidarity. (p. 144)

Sonia Kruks (2001) goes on to suggest that phenomenological descriptions can serve us in practice. The descriptions engage us, as women, affectively. Even if we have not had the same experience as the women whose experiences are described, we can connect with the essence of their experience. “They can furnish what I will call an *affective predisposition* to act on behalf of women other than and different from oneself; a predisposition toward forms of feminist solidarity” (p. 151).

Because I concluded that a phenomenological approach would be valuable to my research, I approached the apparent fracture between feminist inquiry and phenomenology by attempting to devise mechanisms that would allow me to mend the fracture or bridge the gap between them, particularly with regards to the critique of

“essentializing.” However, after completing the draft of the dissertation I was encouraged to go back into the literature and further examine the nature of the “fracture” and thus my approach to mending it in my inquiry. With this review of the methodological literature I had the benefit of having already applied a phenomenological approach and thus was able to bring this experience into my review and analysis. What I concluded was that uncovering “essential and invariant themes” and the “essence” of phenomenon is not the same as “essentializing” whereby it is presumed that there is only one “truth” and that all humankind, regardless of gender, culture, personal history and experience, can be defined by this truth. Phenomenology does not claim to be about *truth*, as in “this is what this phenomenon *is* and this is how it is *always* experienced” but rather about *possible* human experiences (van Manen, 1997). In uncovering the essential themes, the phenomenologist is concerned about discovering qualities or attributes that make the phenomenon what it is. Without these qualities the phenomenon would be something different. The descriptions that emerge through this process are not theoretical or explanatory and thus do not claim to represent the “truth” about experience. Phenomenological inquirers are cautioned to avoid speculating, over-generalizing, gratuitously filling in the gaps in descriptions, and explaining why things are the way they are (Mohantas, 1989). Furthermore, the “essence” is never presumed to be static or fixed, for there is always the possibility that a richer and fuller description lies just around the corner. The aim of phenomenological inquiry is to uncover that which is hidden and thus to expand understanding and awareness about phenomena (van Manen, 1997).

## *Summary*

My aim has been to offer phenomenological descriptions that resonate with those who have had that experience such that their own experience is clarified and validated and they come to understand “the more foundational grounds of the experience” (van Manen, 1997, 122). For those who have not experienced this phenomenon, it is my aim that they will come away with greater understanding about the experiences of some women with silence and voice, self and consciousness.

As I examined the pros and cons of various research traditions and selected phenomenology and began to work with it, I took to heart Jan Zwicky’s (1992) statement that, “If one is lucky the shape [of methodology] will emerge from the accumulation of flawed attempts. (Although it may not be the shape one had thought it would be [or] had hoped for)” (p. 530). This comment captures my journey through the seven years that I have been engaged in doctoral work. I did indeed accumulate many “flawed attempts” as I navigated and negotiated my research. I abandoned a few paths, discovered others, and even carved out a few so that I could venture into new territory. The methodology and methods have been emergent and the phenomenological approach has for the most part served me well as it has allowed me to apply my learning on a continuous basis and modify method and approach in order to promote understanding and meet the fundamental criteria of honouring voice.

## Orientation to Phenomenological Inquiry

In this section I describe the philosophical foundation of phenomenology and some of the key characteristics of phenomenology, hermeneutics and hermeneutic

phenomenology as a basis for then discussing how I have undertaken this study with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

### *The Philosophy of Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition concerned with the nature of understanding and interpretation of human behaviour and social traditions. Its existentialist, anti-rationalist philosophical tendency is grounded in the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and Hans-George Gadamer. All phenomenological research begins in the lifeworld and brings to reflective awareness the nature of lived experiences. It illuminates and thus contributes to one's understanding and one's capacity for thoughtfulness. It is different than most other approaches in its aim to "gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world...without taxonomizing, classifying or abstracting it" (van Manen, 1997, p. 9).

Phenomenology concentrates on phenomena as objects of perception (rather than as facts or occurrences that exist independently) in attempting to examine the ways people think about and interpret the world around them (Neilson, 1990). It grounds research, theory and philosophy in the flow of lived experience and thus embraces subjectivity. Phenomenological descriptions focus less upon the specific attributes of an object or act and more upon the ways in which they are experienced, from the perspective of the person having the experience, including the meaning that they attach to their experience. Phenomenologists see reality as essentially relative and subjective and meaning as inter-subjective, negotiated and therefore, collective, rather than individual.

Clark Moustakas (1994) describes the process of phenomenological inquiry as determining “what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences of structures of the experience” (p. 13). This enables understanding about the human experience, which is fundamental to our existence (Gadamer, 1982).

Martin Heidegger (1962) believed that Western philosophy had “forgotten” the fundamental question of the meaning of Being and in response proposed that “thoughtfulness” was a primary aim of phenomenology – a “minding, a heeding, a caring attunement...a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life” (in van Manen, 1997, p. 29).

### *Phenomenology and Lived Experience*

To undertake phenomenological research is to rise up and question the way we experience the world with the intention of coming to know the world and ourselves more explicitly, richly and fully.

And since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching - questioning – theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world. [This] inseparable connection to the world [is] the principle of ‘intentionality’. In doing research we question the world’s very secrets and intimacies which are constitutive of the world, and which bring the world as world into being for us and in us. Then research is a caring act: we want to know

that which is most essential to being. To care is to serve and to share [of ourselves]. (van Manen, 1997, p. 5)

In order to understand the transition between silence and voice, and the evolving relationship to self and consciousness I must understand the meaning that people give to their experiences of silence and the movement into or out of voice and how they experience their sense of themselves and their relationships. Phenomenologists understand that this meaning making comes with the passage of time – temporal distance – that enables one to reflect with awareness about not only the parts but also the wholes and see the patterns. Making meaning out of lived experience emerges through reflection and uses language as representations of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1973; van Manen, 1997). Language of some form enables us to reflect, describe and interpret experience and their meanings or significance, and hermeneutics provides us with the interpretive technology as we work with the language.

### *Hermeneutics*

Hermeneutics is similarly rooted in philosophy and is a reflective discipline. It began in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century as an “approach that emphasized tradition, prejudice and the interpretation of classical [biblical] texts” (Hekman, 1990, p. 13), but has evolved in many ways since this time and fundamentally is a “theory and practice of interpretation” (van Manen, 1997, p. 179).

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the acknowledged founder of methodological hermeneutics, established hermeneutics as a “theory or ‘technology’ of interpretation” (van Manen, 1997, p.179). He suggested that hermeneutics is a necessary interpretive

technology when there is a risk of misunderstanding. Through use of the “hermeneutic circle,” whereby the text is continuously worked with in order to arrive at its intended meaning, misunderstanding can be prevented.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1985) argued for the use of hermeneutics as a methodological alternative to the positivistic natural sciences. He developed hermeneutics as a method for understanding a person’s lived experience through an “empathic identification with the subject under study” (p. 260) and through the use of the person’s descriptive text – their expression of the lived experience and their reflective understanding of it. He suggested that understanding was not a cognitive act but an experiential one when “life understands itself” (van Manen, 1997, p.180).

Martin Heidegger (1962) was interested in using hermeneutics to grasp an understanding of the ways in which we are in the world and the possibilities that exist for us through being in the world. His hermeneutics have been described as “interpretive phenomenology” (van Manen, 1997, p. 180).

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1977) held hermeneutics as a foundation for philosophy, not a methodological tool, suggesting that “in interpreting a text we cannot separate ourselves from the meaning of the text. The reader belongs to the text that he or she is reading. Understanding is always an interpretation...” (van Manen, 1997, p. 180). The participant, the interpreter and the reader of the interpretation all create an individualized interpretation of the meaning. This limitation to understanding, he suggested, can be overcome if we understand the standpoint of the “other” (Gadamer, 1982). Applying this notion to methodology, we can see that the researcher must be mindful as they undertake to interpret the lived experiences of others and create meaning in the research.

Paul Ricoeur (1976), as a retort to Heidegger and Gadamer, returned hermeneutics “from ontology (understanding as a mode of being) to the question of epistemology (understanding as a human science method)” (van Manen, 1997, p, 180) and broadened the notion of “textuality” to any human situation or action. Thus, he created more space to incorporate diverse “texts” and to understand the role of context, both of which are particularly relevant to research on women’s silences and voices.

I was struck by the opportunity I have to more fully understand women’s silences and voices by bringing a hermeneutic awareness into my research when I read the following passage by Carol Gilligan (2003). She was describing how her interest lies “in the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others and in the stories we tell about our lives” (p. 2). A central assumption of Carol Gilligan’s research is “that the way people talk about their lives is of significance, that the language they use and the connections they make reveals the world that they see and in which they act” (p. 2). Although she makes no reference to hermeneutics, I believe that there is an undeniable fit between her desire to understand experience, thought, connections and the creation of meaning (which parallels my own desire) and methodological hermeneutics.

### *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*

Hermeneutic phenomenology integrates both terms in its methodology. It is phenomenological:

... because it is the descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning; [and it is] hermeneutics

because it is the interpretive study of the expressions and objectifications (texts) of lived experience in the attempt to determine the meaning embodied in them.

(van Manen, 1997, p. 38)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy of the personal – of understanding the individual in the context of the communal. It is interpretive and reflective, employing “a heuristic of discovery [through which] we discover possibilities of being and becoming” (van Manen, 1997, p. xiv) and are engaged in becoming more fully who we are as a human being. Although there is a phenomenological interest in uncovering the essence of a phenomenon there is also a firm recognition that each person experiencing that phenomenon may have a unique interpretation of its meaning (Heidegger, 1962).

Max van Manen (1997) identifies six research activities that characterize the methodological structure of hermeneutic phenomenology. As I worked through each of these activities, I became convinced that the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology fit well with the intentions of my research. These activities informed and guided my application of the methodology and my selection of methods and so are briefly described below.

### *Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience*

Phenomenological inquiry is never disembodied. It always reflects someone’s abiding concern about the nature of lived experience. It is research that is “being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to be a thinker, a researcher, a theorist” (van Manen, 1997, p. 31).

He appeals to us to “live this question, that we become this question” (p. 43); to bring our passion, our commitment and our being into the inquiry process.

I am a practitioner working within a community context, and working primarily with women (as mothers, caregivers, community supporters and leaders). My life’s work, as I see it, is to support these people to bring about a higher state of well-being and wellness within themselves, their families and their communities. In this role, I am constantly seeking greater understanding about their experiences and perspectives and reflecting upon how I practice and what I do/don’t do that enables or interferes with their capacity to bring about whatever changes make sense or are necessary within their context.

It has been both my personal and professional experience that when we become attuned to our inner or authentic voices, we are poised to take action in a way that brings about change. Often times we make a choice to use our voices or our silences to bring about this change. I am driven to understand the moments (including my own moments) in which we become attuned and know that we must act and the moments in which we genuinely choose to use our voices and silences to bring about healing and growth. I wonder if, in learning more about these phenomena, I could become more helpful to those I work with, who frequently experience a loss of voice, silencing and incapacity to act. Indeed, as van Manen (1997) suggests, I am living the question and I have become the question.

### *Investigating Experience as We Live It*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) proposed that “turning to the phenomena of lived experience means re-learning to look at the world by re-awakening the basic experience of the world” (p. viii). The phenomenological researcher must stand “in the middle of the fullness of life, in the midst of the world of living relations and shared situations” (van Manen, 1997, p. 32).

As a woman, mother, child and youth care practitioner and community facilitator I live in the world of relationship and shared experience; I enter into the flow of experience with others and we co-create meaning and understanding. Therefore, this characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology is consistent with how I choose to be in the world.

### *Reflecting on Essential Themes*

“Phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life” (van Manen, 1997, p.32). Once again I reflect on what the fit between my questions (and my practice) and the methodology. I am curious about the process of coming to voice and the moment of knowing that voice must be used to bring about fundamental change. It has been my experience that there are shared experiences in the process of coming to and using voice and it is these themes and the essence that I aim to shed light on and bring “into nearness”.

### *The Art of Writing and Rewriting*

Underlying the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is the belief that research cannot be separated from the practice of writing. Hermeneutic phenomenological research is always “bringing to speech of something. And this thoughtfully bringing to speech is most commonly a writing activity” (van Manen, 1997, p. 32). This characteristic resonated with my intention for the research – to enhance understanding about women’s silences and voices and to make this understanding accessible to others through my writing. It also resonated at a personal level as it has been through writing and re-writing that I have come to better understand my own voice and sense of self; writing has been a consciousness-raising activity. It also resonated with my experience in community work of using narrative approaches and story-telling to support people in bringing their knowledge, understanding and hopes into conscious awareness.

The fundamental model of this approach is textual reflection on the lived experiences and practical actions of everyday life with the intent to increase one’s thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact. Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life, and semiotics is used here to develop a practical writing or linguistic approach to the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics. (van Manen, 1997, p. 4)

### *Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation*

Hermeneutic phenomenological research is demanding and requires that the researcher avoid the temptation to wander off course by remaining attentive to and

animated by the fundamental questions of the inquiry and not settling for “superficialities and falsities” (van Manen, 1997, p. 35). There is a risk of engaging in self-indulgent reflection or of becoming enamoured of tidy taxonomies and abstract theories in order to make sense of the data, however, the researcher must remain true to the questions, to the lived experiences that are shared with the researcher by the participants, and to the responsibility of the interpretive process.

As I reflect on my own process I can clearly identify times at which I ventured into self-indulgent or narcissistic speculation. Oftentimes I was in the midst of a personal “puzzling-through” process and trying to make meaning of my own experience. I learned to take this personal process to a different place (e.g., writing in my personal journals) and partition it from the research so as to re-focus on the fundamental questions of the inquiry. This challenge is one that I have faced in my community work and I learned there the importance of suspending or holding aside my analysis, judgments, preconceptions and perspectives in order to stay open to the voices of others.

#### *Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Wholes*

I laughed when I read Max van Manen’s (1997) statement that,

It is easy to get so buried in writing that one no longer knows where to go, what to do next, and how to get out of the hole one has dug. At several points it is necessary to step back and look at the total, at the contextual givens and how each of the parts needs to contribute towards the total. (pp. 33-34)

How true, I thought, not only of my own experience with this research but also of my experience in other contexts, including my own voicing experiences. Once again I

was drawn to work with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach as there is a metaphoric fit with the experience that many women have in their experience of coming to and using voice; of stepping back and seeing the whole and attaining an awareness that had not previously existed.

### Developing a Feminist-inspired, Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method

There are no standard research designs, signposts, or charts for phenomenological research. There are no real methods in terms of investigative procedures, techniques, or tools. It has been said that the method of hermeneutic phenomenology is that there is no method (Gadamer, 1977; Rorty, 1979; van Manen, 1997). It may best be understood as an emergent and reflective tradition in which methods are “discovered or invented as a response to the question at hand” (van Manen, 1997, p. 29) and relying on the researcher’s capacity to be “reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. xi). However, there are traditions, bodies of knowledge, studies, histories, and discourses that establish some principles for inquiry and constitute a methodological ground upon which the researcher may build an approach (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Reinharz, 1992; van Manen, 1997).

The topic of women and their lived experience of voice necessitated that I invent an approach that met the criteria that I had set during the early formulation of my research proposal and selection of methodology and was congruent with the aims of both feminist research and hermeneutic phenomenology. The methods had to enable me to “dig deep” into the phenomenon of women coming into voice in order to bring about significant change for themselves, their families, or their communities.

In this section I describe the methods I used to recruit and select participants, engage in the interviews, work with the data, and write and reflect.

### Participant Selection

As I learned more about hermeneutic phenomenology and feminist research practices, I realized the importance of mindfully and thoughtfully selecting the participants. As I had decided to select only five or six women and engage them in an in-depth process of inquiry, it was important that I achieve a number of things through the selection process. I needed to find women who could easily recall a moment or moments of “coming to voice,” had some distance in time from these experiences and a capacity to reflect upon them, and were interested in the topic itself and in exploring it with other women. Despite the small number of participants, I was also looking to bring together a diversity of ages, cultural backgrounds, and types of voicing experiences.

To achieve this I decided to go through several steps before making the final selection of participants. The first step was to engage my network of contacts to “get the word out” about the research and encourage women to contact me if they were interested in participating. The second step was to both share and gather information with the women who came forward in order that a preliminary assessment as to their suitability for the study could be done. This step resulted in a short-list of women who fit core criteria and who were interested in participating. The third step was to meet informally with each of these women so that we could mutually assess the fit between their experiences and the research. At the end of this third step, I decided which women I would invite to participate in the study. Each of these steps is described in more detail below.

### *Identification of Prospective Participants*

I have worked with child, youth, and family–serving organizations and with local community groups in the Greater Victoria area for over 10 years and have developed an extensive and mutually supportive network of people who share my desire to co-create positive change within communities. I turned to this network with requests to help me find women who would like to participate in the women and voice research. I did this both in person and electronically. Over a period of a month, when I was participating in various meetings and gatherings, I asked for a few minutes of time to tell my colleagues what I was working on in my research and ask them for their assistance. In addition, I sent a request to selected colleagues through electronic mail. For both approaches I shared information about the purpose and focus of my research and the characteristics of the women I was looking for as participants. I circulated a personalized letter advising them of my intentions (see Appendix C), a notice that could be posted on their agency notice board (see Appendix D), and a pamphlet that could be passed on to women whom they thought might be interested (see Appendix E). I asked that they do one or more of the following: post the notice, distribute pamphlets to specific women, contact women whom they thought would be interested, and either encourage them to contact me directly or ask if they could pass their name and phone number or e-mail on to me so that I could contact them.

In addition to these more formal approaches, I also began to talk about my research with people in informal settings, such as when we were waiting for a meeting to begin, when we were car-pooling to an event, or when I was out for a walk in my

community. It was not my intention to recruit participants at these times, but rather to share my excitement about undertaking this research with people whom I thought might be interested. However, it proved to be an effective means to identify women who were interested in participating.

Often the conversation would evolve from a casual inquiry about what we were each working on at the time. Without exception, in all of these conversations the importance of my inquiry into women's voice was validated and people indicated that they had either seen this phenomenon of "coming to voice" in women they knew and cared about or that they had experienced it themselves. It was during these moments that I made a judgment call on their possible suitability for participation. I either simply acknowledged what was being said, or went further and asked them to consider contacting the women they knew and whom they thought could speak to this phenomenon, or, in two instances, I asked the women themselves if they were interested in participating.

Through the formal and informal processes for recruitment, more than 20 women were identified to me as being interested in the topic of women and voice. I then began the process of contacting these women to both share and gather information.

#### *Preliminary Assessment*

I contacted each of the women by telephone or e-mail. The first step was to share written information with them about the research and what it would entail for participants. I encouraged all of the women to look through the information first, in preparation for further discussion. Most women (17) responded either by telephone or e-

mail and we arranged to carry on. For all but 2 of the women, I followed up with either a telephone (13) or e-mail (2) conversation. The other two women had become interested in the research through the informal conversations noted above, so that there was an opportunity at that time to share the relevant information and this particular step was not necessary for them.

During the telephone and e-mail conversations I explained that this was an opportunity for each of us to determine whether there was a likely “fit” between their experiences and the type of research that I was doing. I answered any questions that they had about the research and the process and made some preliminary inquiries about their own experience with coming to voice.

My purpose in this step was twofold. The first was to ensure that the women had some basic understanding of what the research was about and what would be required of them so that they could make a decision about whether or not to go to the next step. The second was to gather some preliminary information so that I could assess whether or not the women met basic criteria for participation. These criteria included being able to articulate a “voicing moment” that occurred two or more years ago; demonstrating some capacity to reflect on their experience; a willingness and desire to speak with me and with other women about their experiences; and their availability to participate over the time period set out for the interviews. Most important to me was that the women could clearly recall and describe a moment or point in time in which they realized that they *must* use their voices to bring about a change in their situation, for themselves, their family, or their community.

It was also necessary for some time to have passed so that the women had had an opportunity to “constitute” the experience in their memory (Burch, 1990, p. 134) and create a lived meaning of it through the power of reflection (Burch, 1990, van Manen, 1997). I arbitrarily set a requirement that 2 years had to have passed since the voicing moment, but I also listened carefully to each prospective participant’s description and reflections of her experience. It was important to me that I did not engage someone who was still feeling raw and vulnerable about the experience as this would elevate her emotional risk in participating.

At the conclusion of the telephone conversation, we mutually decided whether there appeared to be a fit and if so, agreed to meet for a more in-depth, but still preliminary, conversation over coffee or a meal. Through this step, the field of prospective participants was narrowed down to 7 women who not only met the core criteria, but also represented a diversity of ages, life experiences, and types of voicing moments.

### *Selection Interviews*

I met in person with the prospective participants for periods ranging from 45 minutes to 2 hours, generally over tea, coffee or a meal. During this time, I learned more about who they were and about their voicing experiences, and they learned more about both the research and me as a researcher, including why I was interested in the topic and what I thought could be learned from conversations with women such as themselves. All of these conversations were uplifting and informative. At the conclusion of these conversations it was clear to me that all of the women met my criteria for participation. I

asked the women to consider whether they wanted to participate and in most cases they were able to tell me at that time that they wanted to participate, in which case I provided them with a consent form to complete before we began the formal interview process. The others contacted me by telephone or e-mail to inform me of their decision.

All of the 7 women indicated that they wanted to participate; however, 2 of them were unable to begin. One was dealing with a family situation that required her to be out of town unexpectedly, and the other decided that the timing for the interviews did not fit with her other commitments and extended travel plans. In the end I felt confident that the objectives of the research could be adequately achieved by tapping into the lived experiences of the 5 participants.

Throughout the selection process I looked for some indication that this topic resonated with the women at a level beyond the intellectual or cognitive awareness that many women have about it. At times there were audible gasps or intakes of breath when I spoke about what I was curious about in women's voices and silences, such as an intake of breath and an exclamation such as, "Oh, I have had that experience" or "Oh, I wonder about that too!" Those who resonated with the topic often displayed some physical connection to it or to me – they leaned forward or talked more quickly and in an animated way, shared their personal experience in some manner, touched me on the arm, looked closely into my eyes. There was a qualitative difference between these reactions and those of the many other women with whom I have spoken about this topic, who cognitively appreciate its significance and have observed silencing and voicing, but who acknowledge that it is not something that they have personally experienced. These

women wish me well but are not as engaged in the topic as those women who have a very personal relationship with it.

My selection process was somewhat intuitive, and it is only with reflection – and a greater understanding about how we must orient ourselves to our topics in phenomenological research – that I realize that the women who participated in this study were already at places where they were grasping for understanding about the phenomenon, as I was. In other words, we were all “oriented” to the phenomenon even before the study was conceptualized and undertaken.

### *A Question of Bias*

It could be argued that this methodical recruitment and selection process introduces a bias into the inquiry. This is true. However, I do not believe that it is problematic. The process of phenomenological research requires that the participants both be knowledgeable and have an experiential awareness about the topic of inquiry, and be willing and able to critically reflect upon their experience (Lindsey, 1994). Therefore, I was looking for women who met a specific set of criteria for participation. Given the in-depth nature of phenomenological inquiry, I was also looking for just a small number of participants. It is not my intention to undertake a study with generalizable results. In fact, this would be contrary to principles of feminist research. Instead, I was looking into both the uniqueness of experiences as well as for any connecting threads of shared experience among the women who participated.

The small number of participants is neither unusual nor problematic in qualitative research (Cresswell, 1998, Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). What is of

greater importance is the richness of the information that can be gathered from the participants: “a single subject who is rich in information is much better than a group of subjects who are lacking in information, experience or the ability to talk about and reflect upon that experience” (Garfat, 1995, p. 50).

In summary, I concluded that both my topic of the inquiry and my methodological approach warranted the multi-stepped and methodical approach to participant selection that I employed.

### Informed Consent and Confidentiality

This research was undertaken with informed consent. The recruitment steps outlined above ensured that participants had opportunities to gather information about the research and the terms of their participation before agreeing to participate. Thereafter, a consent form (see Appendix F), approved by the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Committee, was given to them and the contents were verbally reviewed before the first interview. In addition, before the individual interview, all of the participants received descriptive written information about the research and verbal information about the inquiry and review process, and were then given a chance to ask questions about the process. I assured the participants that I would take all steps to ensure their confidentiality, as outlined in the consent form. Signed consent forms were received before the interviews.

The participants were also asked to complete a participant characteristics form (see Appendix G) in which they provided information about their age, relationship status, age and status of children, education, employment status, income level, any particular

ways that they identified themselves culturally or socially, and what pseudonym they wanted me to use in the written work. The form explained how this information would be used – notably that I would collectively describe the characteristics of the participants so that no one individual could be identified in the description. It was also noted that they could choose not to provide me with the information and this would not interfere with the next steps in the process.

Beyond the familiar requirements for consent and respecting privacy and confidentiality, it became apparent that some additional steps could be taken to further ensure confidentiality. For 2 of the women, their stories and personal circumstances are so unique that providing some descriptive information and describing key details of their lived experiences could result in their identity being easily determined. For one woman, part of the story that had led to her voicing experiences had been the subject of a radio documentary and was thus in the public domain. However, as a video-documentary was also in progress, we agreed that I would not include certain information or attempt to tell her story, as it was most important that she use her own voice to tell the story in the upcoming documentary. All of the women spoke about their parents, and their mothers in particular. However, as several had parents who had unique profiles within B.C. communities, I decided to omit some of the comments about their parents to avoid the risk of identification.

Because of these situations, I decided that I needed first to be very selective about what and how information was presented in the text to minimize the risk of identification, and second, to provide all of the women with an opportunity to review the text and to indicate what information they felt should or should not be included, to ensure that they

had the level of confidentiality and anonymity that they desired. This element of review was introduced to support the participants in being as open as possible in the interviews, knowing that they could control what information was shared about them and how. These considerations have influenced how I have written the findings. I have omitted some fascinating information in the interests of protecting confidentiality. Nonetheless, the stories told and the experiential reflections remain rich and informative.

### The Interview Context

As a feminist researcher, I was particularly attentive to the interview context and how this would influence the process. All interactions and experiences are influenced by the contexts within which they occur (Ricks & Charlesworth, 2003). It is therefore important to understand the contexts within which both the individual and group interviews occurred and to consider how these may have influenced the nature and content of the interactions. I considered three aspects of the interview context – notably the interpersonal-relational context, the physical context, and the author’s personal context.

#### *Interpersonal-Relational Context*

There are three elements of the interpersonal-relational context that I believe are important to consider. The first is the nature of my relationship with each of the participants; the second is the relationships that either existed or evolved between the participants; and the third is the relationship of power and control between the participant and the researcher.

At the inception of the interview process, I knew two of the participants through my work in the community with child, youth, and family–serving organizations and practitioners. One had been the practicum field supervisor for one of my Child and Youth Care students several years before the research, and we had also both been involved in a committee that was allocating funding to community social projects. The other had just recently been hired on a contractual basis by an organization that I had been involved in for a number of years, although at the time I was transitioning out of this organization. In neither of these situations was I in a position of authority or power over the women, nor were they in a position of authority or power over me. Instead, our paths had crossed because we shared a concern for the children, youth, and families in our communities. I did not know the other three participants before the inception of the research.

Several of the participants knew each other before the group interview. Two had been friends for a number of years through having had their children attend the same school. I was aware of this friendship before selecting the participants. The connections between two other sets of participants became apparent as the interviews progressed and people became aware of each other's participation. Two knew each other through their mutual involvement in a non-profit organization in Victoria and two knew each other vaguely through their connections in the Aboriginal community and with a non-profit organization. None of the participants were in any positions of authority or power over the others.

The group interview process was designed to create a conversation among women about voice and silence. I commented to the women at the outset of the group interview

that the reason I had decided to move from the individual interviews into a group process was that I had thought:

How have women figured things out over the generations? Well, they've figured things out in conversations with each other [so] let's do that. Let's figure this kind of thing out together in conversation [and] the conversation will really inform my writing and hopefully will inform us all in terms of what our experiences have been.

The group process created an opportunity for the participants to get to know each other on a much deeper level than is typical of short-term gatherings of people. At the end of the group interview, one of the participants commented on how positive it was to come together with other women "and talk about stuff that we might not necessarily always talk about (P) raises some things and gives us time for reflection that's not just what we do on our own, but to share voice." As will be evident in the excerpts from the group interviews, the participants were able to develop a level of trust and mutual respect that enabled them to candidly share and examine experiences together.

The power dynamics between the participant and researcher need to be considered and managed, especially in qualitative inquiry, if the researcher hopes to achieve the goal of open and free-flowing dialogue (Mishler, 1986). Although I had no prior relationship with the participants that would have created or reinforced a power differential, I did take measures to give as much power as possible to the participants. Their participation was voluntary and they were informed that at any point in the interviews they could stop the process either to give themselves a break or to discontinue it entirely. They were also told that at any time in the course of the research they could withdraw from the process

without repercussions. In addition, they were given the copies of both their individual interview and the group interview transcripts so that they could correct any errors in the transcription.

As the writing of the findings progressed, I checked back with each participant to confirm that I had accurately interpreted and reflected their comments, by sharing with them the interpretations I had made and the sections of their transcripts that I was drawing upon to arrive at the interpretation and that I might quote in the text. Finally, all participants received a draft copy of the dissertation and were given an opportunity to request that certain information or quotes be removed or amended in order to either protect their privacy or more accurately reflect their experiences or the intention of their remarks. The intention of these steps was to ensure, as much as possible, that the participants felt supported and empowered throughout the research process.

### *Physical Context*

It was important to situate the interviews in physical environments that were comfortable and supportive for the participants. When we set up the individual interviews, I asked each participant where they would like to meet and suggested that it could be in their home, my home or office, or another location of their choosing. I suggested that they consider where they would be most comfortable and what time of day would be best suited to these discussions. Four of the five chose to have the interview take place in their homes; the other chose to meet in her office. The times for the interviews ranged from morning to afternoon to evening, on both weekends and weekdays.

The group interview took place on a Saturday afternoon, as this was the day that was most convenient for all participants. After considering various location options I decided to host the gathering in my home so that I could more easily manage the environment and make sure that it was comfortable for the women. Choosing to meet within a home environment also reinforced that this was a gathering of women for conversation.

The next challenge was to determine how best to assist the women in getting ready to talk about their lived experiences of voice with other women who, for the most part, were not only strangers, but were also coming from different age groups and life experiences. All of the participants were invited for lunch with the intention that they would begin to get to know each other over a meal and before we moved into the interview process. The initial awkwardness between the women gave way to chatter and some laughter, and at the end of the meal people seemed ready to engage in the conversation. The group process took place in my living room with people gathered around in a circle, sharing pots of tea and snacks as the afternoon progressed.

In both the individual and group interviews the recording equipment was in full view and consisted of a Sony tape recorder (for one interview), an Olympus digital recorder with either the Sony recorder or a second RCA digital recorder as a backup recording system (for four interviews), and the digital recorder and a Sony micro-cassette recorder for the group interview. The backup systems ensured that there was another recording to refer to when it was difficult to decipher what was being said. The quality of the digital recordings was superior to the other systems and with only a few exceptions

the conversations were easy to hear on the recording. As will be described later, these recordings were transcribed and copies given to each participants to confirm accuracy.

### *Author's Personal Context*

When I first began my doctoral studies I intended to undertake research on “the high-performing child welfare organization.” At that time in British Columbia (1997), we were immersed in a massive restructuring of the child, youth, and family–serving system and I had been on the government’s “Transition Team” responsible for bringing together five government ministries and creating a new system of care and service. Eight months into this process, I experienced a crisis of faith. While I valued and respected many of my colleagues and I believed that a fundamental restructuring of the system was necessary, I doubted that we had the collective capacity to achieve the desired changes, given the political imperatives we were facing and the entrenchment of the systems we were working with. I began to question what my role should and could be. In the end, I decided that I needed to take a position on what was being done, or not done, and I left government service.

At the time I was the sole-supporting parent of 3-year old and 4-year old daughters, and while I had been in private practice for several years when my children were very young, I had little experience running the consulting practice that I was planning to establish. Nonetheless, I began the private practice work and re-connected with my long-time mentor for the purposes of debriefing my experience on the Transition Team and the choices I had made. It was at that juncture that I decided to return to

graduate school after a 12-year absence from graduate studies and examine the high-performing child welfare organization.

After admission into a special arrangement PhD program, I undertook a course of studies examining leadership, governance, social capital creation, and child welfare and community practice, all of which was interesting to me and rewarding to study. During this time, I was also developing my practice as a community facilitator and going through a very protracted and bitter divorce and child custody review. As the events in my life unfolded I noticed that I was continually circling around the topic of silence and voice – my own silence and voice, and those of my children and my colleagues who remained in the child, youth, and family services system, as well as the silences and voices of the women with whom I was working in community projects.

There came a point in my studies and personal life when the topic of voice was shouting at me to be attended to. I consulted with my supervisor and we agreed that I would pursue the topic that I was most driven to understand – the voices of women as resources for personal, familial, and community change. This represented not just a shift in the topic of inquiry but in the whole way that I related to my studies and my research. It shifted from the impersonal and dispassionate to the personal and passionate, and from an organizational context to a relational context.

As described in Chapter One, I can recall with crystal clarity my moment of knowing, without question, that I must use my voice to bring about significant change in my life and my children's/our family's lives. This was a "no-turning-back point" where I knew that no matter what, things would be different, that I could make them be different, and that I was going to use my voice and my actions to achieve this. There was no

alternative, because to move back into the life circumstances that I was coming from would surely mean the death of my self and a compromised life for my daughters. I learned that I was not alone in having such a crystallizing experience. Once I became attuned to the topic, I heard similar stories through my work in community and amongst my friends. It was this phenomenon of coming to voice that I was curious about and I began to wonder whether, if I understood this better, I could practice differently, more compassionately and effectively.

For many years I have been a reluctant researcher, preferring to engage in practice and applied research, at best, rather than the more in-depth research that I have come to associate with the academic world. It is not that I have been opposed to such research – I regularly review and consult the literature and research in my areas of practice but I have just not seen myself as *doing* such research. I was afraid that I could not do it.

As I prepared my research candidacy paper, I first immersed myself in readings on feminist research and then began to inquire into methodologies that might be suited to research on women's voices. While I think I did a credible job in identifying and reviewing the options, and my rationale for the selection of a phenomenological approach was sound, it was not until I began to undertake the research that I really understood how I could bring together my skills in interviewing and analysis, my feminist orientation, and the methodology of phenomenology. In other words, there came a time when I was able to engage in the research in a way that was not outside of or separate from me but rather an extension of me and the way that I practised. I experienced the phenomenological approach as a valuable integrative framework. After I had completed all of the interviews, and then again after I had completed the draft of the dissertation, I went back

into selected publications on phenomenology and the phenomenological approach to check my understanding and application of the approach. Each time I understood more about the methodology and went through a process of refining my application of it. I came to appreciate and value what hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry has to offer to the process of analysis and interpretation of lived experience.

In summary, then, my context did influence the research. It informed my curiosity about women and voice, it led me to look at a particular phenomenon – women moving from silence to voice with great clarity and intention – and it influenced how I engaged in the research process as a research practitioner.

### The Interview Method

Qualitative and feminist researchers have noted that the formal interview approach is inadequate for many of the questions of interest to social science and feminist researchers, “namely how individuals perceive, organize, give meaning to, and express their understanding of themselves, their experiences, and their worlds” (Mishler, 1986, p. ix, see also Levesque-Lopman, 2000). I was mindful of these critiques and alternatives as I set out to develop my interviewing methods.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the interview has specific purposes. Max van Manen (1997) suggests that one may use interviews to explore and gather experiential narrative material in order to develop a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, or one may use interviews as a means to “develop a conversational relation” (p. 66) with the participant in order to uncover the meaning of an experience. Both require a conversational engagement between the researcher and the participant in

which a mutual trust evolves and both people develop a “new or deepened understanding” about the phenomenon and each other (Weber, 1986, p. 66).

Regardless of the purpose, the interview process needs to be disciplined by the questions of the inquiry; they are not unstructured conversations about anything of interest to the researcher and participant. They stay close to the lived experience and explore it to the fullest extent possible. The role of the researcher as interviewer is to be the guide or facilitator in the inquiry process. Suspending assumptions and beliefs about how it should look and what might be said, she follows the leads presented by the participant and encourages open conversation, while at the same time taking responsibility for bringing focus to the conversation and ensuring that the lived experience remains the focus of attention (van Manen, 1997).

The hermeneutic phenomenological interview engages the participants as collaborators or co-inquirers on the topic and research, engaging in a dialogic process that refines understanding about the meaning of the texts and interpretations.

From the outset, it was my intent to facilitate conversations between each woman and me in the individual interviews, and among the women in the group process, rather than conduct a structured interview. I used a variety of techniques to encourage the conversation about lived experience, such as providing encouragement, listening attentively, asking open questions, allowing the participant to lead the conversation, speaking little (i.e., getting out of their way), and allowing the participant to set the pace of the conversation. In the group gathering my purpose was to create a conversation to collectively uncover and explicate the connecting threads of experience, if they existed, and to dig deeper into the phenomenon to more fully understand it together. Given the

personal nature of the topic and the curiosity about voice that all the participants and I shared, the conversations flowed with little effort on my part.

One of the challenges I faced was to find a way be in the midst of the conversation while ensuring that I assisted the participants in telling their own stories and reflecting upon their own experience (Levesque-Lopman, 2000). My involvement as an interviewer brings me into the participants' texts, but I tried to minimize, or at least manage, my influence over the conversation so that each participant's own lived experience came through clearly and unfettered by my perspectives.

In the sub-sections below, I have described the interview/conversational process for both the individual interviews and the group interview. Although I used a conversational interview approach for each, there were some differences in the ways in which I prepared for the interviews and set them up with the participants. There was an intentional flow to the entire process, with the individual interview creating a data set that informed key ideas and questions that were then brought into the group interview process. This sequence allowed us to probe deeper and deeper into the phenomenon.

### *The Individual Interviews*

Each of the individual interviews began with me explaining to the participant that I did not have a set of questions to go through, but that we'd start the discussions with me asking a general question and then proceed to have a conversation about her experience with silence and voice. I began each conversation with some variation of the following question:

Please describe for me a moment or point in time when you felt that you could no longer be silent and that you *must* use your voice to bring about a significant change in your life for yourself, or your family, or your community.

My intent was to encourage the women to select an experience that stood out for its vividness and that would likely enable them to recollect their state of mind, feelings, emotions, and physical responses.

In using the conversational hermeneutic interview approach, the researcher may develop a series of “questions as text” (Mishler, 1986, p. 37). These questions serve as a focal or reference point and a stimulus for the researcher but are not intended to be asked of participants. In preparation for the interviews I developed a set of questions and I periodically glanced at them during the interviews (see Appendix H). On occasion, they served to remind me about key topics that I had hoped to cover and gave me a basis for phrasing follow-up questions. However, I primarily worked with the language and the ideas that were presented to me in the course of conversations and used this as the basis for formulating questions and checking for understanding. For example, one of the questions I had thought about in advance was, “Would the course of events have been any different if there were/weren’t others involved (e.g., children, parents, friends)?” The intent behind this question showed up in the following exchange:

Meg: ...for a long time I’d been staying in the relationship for the children and at one point that was the reason for staying. And then it became a question of no, I began to think that, actually I have to leave for their benefit. And then I think that

was the final thing, that it's not just about them, it's also me. You know I'm not just protecting them, I can't handle this anymore, so [ <sup>6</sup>

Jennifer: You were thinking of the kids, and then you saw yourself in relation to the kids and what was best for them, as well as what was right for you?

Meg: Yes.

As previously noted, my curiosity about women's experience with voice was informed by my personal and professional experiences and there were many times during the interviews when I resonated with the comments or experiences that were being shared. However, I spoke very little about my own experiences, other than to occasionally allude to having had a similar thought or experience – for example, “I wondered the same thing...” My intention in not sharing information about myself or my experience was to ensure that my reflections did not influence or direct the flow of the conversation or shift the focus away from the participant and on to my experience. I had already examined my own experience and I was aiming to set it aside and be attentive to the experiences and reflections of others. During the participant selection process, I had shared some basic information about myself and how I had come to have an interest in this topic, so the other women had some sense of my story. However, I did not bring this into the individual conversations. At the close of one interview, I was asked what my experience had been in my marriage and what had led me to the “no-turning-back point” and I shared a short version of my story, but other than this one instance, the participants did not ask me about my experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> Standardized transcription conventions have been used in the participants' quotes: pauses or breaks in sentences are denoted with a (P) and interruptions or overlaps between speakers are denoted with a left hand bracket symbol ([). Instances of undecipherable speech are denoted with empty parentheses ().

The individual interviews took place over a 3-month period. As I worked with the transcripts from the earlier interviews and began to learn more about other women's experiences with voice, I added new thoughts and ideas into the set of questions that I held in the back of my head as I went into the later interviews. My inquiry was broadened from a focus on the "voicing moment" to the process of coming to and connecting with voice and sense of self and to women's evolving awareness and consciousness about who they were, what they stood for, and how they located themselves in the world. In the early interviews, these aspects were discussed, because this is where the participants took the conversation. In the later interviews, I was more attuned to these aspects of voicing and therefore more intentional in my inquiry. I inquired about the connection between voice and sense of self, how they saw or understood themselves, what had changed for them, and the authenticity and congruence that they experience now between what they think, say, and do. For example:

Jennifer: ... And what's happened for you? How have you been affected through the experience? I know that there're just all sorts of different things, but narrowing it down to that experience of clarity of purpose and voice. How has that changed you in the last couple of years?

Laura: Hmm. It's made me more myself. It's like being boiled down to your essence. I feel like I'm more my true self than I ever have been, and my voice is more authentic. I have better control of my voice. I can exercise my voice in ways that are more useful, purposeful, clearer, stronger. I can use less words to say more things, so it's richer. It's a richer voice.

## *The Group Interview*

The individual interviews provided me with rich information, and stimulated recollections and reflections on the part of each of the women. The group interview gave us a collective opportunity to further explore and understand the phenomenon and see if there were connecting threads or themes that joined women's experiences. This collective inquiry is not a typical approach within phenomenological inquiry, but there was nothing to suggest to me that it was inadvisable. In my view, it afforded me an opportunity to create another link or bridge between feminist research/inquiry and phenomenological approaches.

### *Setting the Stage*

Upon completion of each individual interview I transcribed the recordings and then distributed the transcripts to the women for their review and correction if necessary. I then worked with these transcripts and looked for themes or threads that showed up in several or more of the interviews. I prepared a very simple one-page overview of what I noticed as I reviewed all of the transcripts and shared that with the participants in advance of our group gathering (see Appendix I). Accompanying this was a letter to everyone confirming the arrangements for the day.

### *Building Relationships*

As previously noted, the gathering began with lunch and informal conversation, during which the women introduced themselves to each other and began to share some

more information about themselves and a few stories about what was going on for them at the time. This served to break the ice and get people more comfortable with each other before moving into the focused conversations on voice.

### *Co-creating the Conversations*

After lunch we settled into more comfortable seats in a circle and I introduced the afternoon as:

... really about more of a collective inquiry. Each of you has ... gifted me really, with your time and your stories. And from those stories I've pulled out certain themes and I'll share some of those with you... That was really about me asking you and then trying to tease some things out. Today what my hope is, that we're all kind of explorers, we're co-inquirers into the experience of women and their voice and finding their voice. So I'll ask questions or probe or whatever, but so too can you. This is a conversation. It's really about us all trying to unpack a little bit about women and their voice....

The participants agreed on the terms of confidentiality, and I also said that I would not be asking each of them to re-tell their stories to the others:

... this isn't going to be about going around the room and saying, "Okay, now Karen, would you tell your story, and Jess..." You know we won't do that. Details of your story may come out because they are part of illustrating or whatnot, but this is more about us saying, okay, given that you are experts in voice by virtue of experiencing that, then let's drill down a little bit more and see if we can figure out what this phenomenon is, and that place of difference, of

going from one way of being, or one way of seeing the world or one way of experiencing it, to knowing that it's going to be different. You're different. The situation has got to be different. You've got to be different. So it's really about that difference, how does that happen, right?

I then referenced the summary that I had sent out in advance, noting that this just provided a preliminary perspective on what I thought might be connecting threads. As a place to start the conversation, I asked what they thought about these ideas, and the conversations began.

As with the individual interviews, I came prepared with some ideas and questions that I was interested in exploring, but the conversation was led by the participants themselves. Often, I simply attended to the dialogue that was created among the women and only occasionally asked questions or added remarks or observations. What was of interest to me was the way in which the women built on each other's ideas and asked questions of each other, often indicating that they were trying to puzzle this phenomenon out for themselves. The exchange described below illustrates the mutual inquiry process that we were engaged in.

The group was discussing the value of our inner voice provided that there was a healthy balance between the critical and encouraging internal commentary. It was suggested that the balance was easier to achieve when there was more awareness or consciousness about the inner voice. It was, they suggested, easier to manage it and partition off the negative and critical commentary once they became acquainted with their inner voice and this part of themselves. I then inquired into the relationship between these inner voices and their "no-turning-back" moments of voice:

Jennifer: ... So when you think back to the times, and I think for many of you there has been more than one episode in your life when you thought, 'Okay, there's no turning back, things have got to be different.' What was going on for you? Can you recall that? What was happening either in your head or in your emotions or in your gut?

Karen: Real discomfort.

Jennifer: Real discomfort?

Karen: Yeah. I can't stay in this place of discomfort. I need to be more comfortable than I am right now. This is really going to be unbearable.

Jennifer: Mmhmm. So (P) and that was different than how you'd experienced that discomfort before?

Karen: Mmhmm. Before I just accepted it. Before I wasn't *aware* that there could be something more comfortable (P) You know, I think when you don't know something doesn't fit but it's all you know, it fits just fine. But as soon as you put something on that does fit properly, you realize, oh, that was really uncomfortable!

Jennifer: Yeah. And so what gets us to that place where we know "This is uncomfortable, and I could be more comfortable?" What gets us to that place?

Joanne: For me there was an element of recognizing that I had an entitlement to that, and you know, that I didn't have to live like that. That it was, you know, not something I had to suffer or bear just because I had made the mistake and I'd better live with it now, that I could come out from underneath that and have something better to move into, so [

Jess: What do you think contributed to that sense of entitlement? I'm just (P). My mom is (P) I feel, I see her knowing that she has, she can see something else. But she can't get to the point of taking action to say something or (P) She's starting to act out at work, sort of, as in kind of funny, in funny kinds of ways? Like, as in just all of a sudden being fed up with something, and saying, "I'm going out!" I don't know, she's just starting to do some things, which are not actually addressing the problem, but it's sort of looking like she's struggling, but she's not at a place of thinking like, "I don't have to put up with this, I can make a different decision", so I'm wondering how [

Joanne: Well it's interesting that you use that example, because I think it was my mother's succumbing to the situation that she was in and her lack of willingness to do anything to change it and her giving up of her any entitlement that she had a right to a normal happy life that gave me more impetus to take that for myself. You know, that I wasn't going to let something be repeated. I couldn't help her but I could help myself.

Jess: Right.

### Follow-up Discussions

After the group interview, I prepared the transcripts and began the thematic analysis (which is described in detail below). Once the themes were formulated I went back into both the individual and group interview transcripts and selected those passages that I thought reflected the themes. I then prepared a document for each of the participants describing the themes and inserted all of the quotes from their individual and

group conversations that I thought reflected that theme well. I asked them to review these and indicate whether the theme accurately reflected what they were saying or meaning. If it wasn't congruent, I asked them to help me understand what meaning they attributed to the passage, and also to indicate if one of the other themes was a better fit.

After I completed the findings and discussion chapters I gave copies to the participants and asked them to review and ensure that I had protected their confidentiality. As will be evident in the chapter on the findings, I decided to use the women's words extensively to illustrate the themes. As this is a dissertation on voice, it was important to me that the voices of each of the women who gave me the gift of their time and experience showed up "loud and clear" in the pages of this text. I therefore wanted to ensure that the way in which their words were represented was fair and accurate and most importantly "safe" for them, and this was something they needed to judge for themselves. I was concerned about protecting the confidentiality of each of the women so this gave them an opportunity to remove any words or passages that they felt might compromise their confidentiality. As a result of this step and the feedback I received, I decided to create composite stories that incorporated quotes and interpretations from each of the women. What has been created are five new "stories" that belong to all of the women in some way.

These follow-up and review steps reflect a dynamic phenomenological approach of inquiry, reflection, formulation, inquiry, reflection, formulation, etc. (van Manen, 1997). They also made the entire process more transparent and accessible to the participants, which was congruent with my feminist approach to research.

## Working with the Data

### *Data Sets and Transcription Conventions*

The data for this inquiry were gathered through five individual interviews of between 1-1/2 hours and 3 hours in length and a 3-hour group interview. Each of the interviews was recorded and the audio recordings were transcribed either by a professional typist or me. All of the transcriptions included every word and verbal expression audible on the recordings. Pauses or breaks in sentences were denoted with a (P) and interruptions or overlaps between speakers were denoted with a left hand bracket symbol (⌈). Instances of undecipherable speech were denoted with empty parentheses (). Repetitions of words, and all “ums,” “uhs,” and “mmmhmms” were kept in the transcripts. I reviewed each of the transcripts two times while listening to the recordings (three times for the group interview), before I released them to the participants. In most cases the transcripts were accurate; however, there were instances where words or verbal expressions had been omitted or the sequence of words had not been accurately captured, and these small errors were corrected. In addition, each participant received a copy of the transcript from her individual interview and of the group interview and was asked to correct any errors.

The recordings and transcripts were my primary data sets. However, I also referenced my notes from follow-up discussions with the participants and notes from my personal journals. Throughout the 4 years that I have been working on the topic of women and voice I have kept a journal. I have journaled about my own experience of and reflections on silence and voice and have recorded my thoughts, feelings, and reactions to both the topic and the research process itself.

### *Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection*

In developing my approach to working with the data, I have been strongly influenced by the approaches described in Max van Manen's text, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (1997). He describes hermeneutic phenomenological reflection as a process that enables the researcher to gain insight into the essence or meaning of a phenomenon. The process involves reflecting on the lived experience, conducting thematic analysis, reflecting on the themes to discover thematic aspects, clarifying essential themes, and constructing meaning. In the subsections below I have described my methods for this process.

Although this description of the process implies that there are discrete steps or procedures in phenomenological reflection, my process was not linear; I moved back and forth and in and out of the different elements. This was necessary because the meaning or essence of phenomena is multi-dimensional and because one is never done – no conceptual formulation will ever fully capture the mystery or richness of experience (van Manen, 1997).

#### *What Is a Theme?*

Max van Manen (1997) proposes a range of descriptors for themes (pp. 87–88), including the fact that themes are constructs or means to get at the topic under study and begin to characterize or express key notions or aspects of its essence. They “give shape to the shapeless” (p. 88), make sense of experience, and describe aspects of the structure of the experience. “Themes give control and order to our research and writing” (p. 79)

enabling us to proceed to phenomenological descriptions, but they are not categorical statements, objects or generalizations (p. 90).

Themes have also been described as:

... something akin to the content, or topic, or statement, of fact, in a piece of data; expressed more simply, what the data segment is about... a major dimension, major aspect, or constituent of the data studied; expressed more simply, a partial description of the phenomena. (Tesch, 1987, p. 230)

Renata Tesch (1987) suggests that there are themes and metathemes in phenomenological research. Themes are brief statements describing units of data and metathemes are the major dimensions of the phenomenon under study. I found this construction useful as I began to see the ways in which themes were interconnected and how some themes (now metathemes) seemed to encompass others.

### *Thematic Analysis*

The uncovering and articulation of themes in hermeneutic phenomenological reflection is not just a cognitive act or skill requiring the systematic application of techniques and strategies. The emergence of themes is described by Max van Manen (1997) as “a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (p. 79). It is “invention” because it is an interpretive product; it is “discovery” because it emerges through the researcher’s “dialogue with the text of life” (p. 88); and it is “disclosure” because the meaning or interpretation is “given” to the researcher by the “text of life itself” (p. 88).

Despite the lack of a formulaic approach to thematic analysis in phenomenology, there are strategies that assist the researcher in the discovery of themes. In the holistic approach the text is attended to as a whole and the question is asked, “What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?” (van Manen, p. 93). For the selective or highlighting approach the text is read or listened to a number of times and the question is asked, “What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (p. 93) These are then highlighted. The final strategy is the detailed or line-by-line approach in which the following question is asked of every sentence: “What does the sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (p. 93). The strategy that I used most consistently was the highlighting or selective reading approach, as described below.

### *First Reviews – Tentative Uncovering*

Upon completion of the individual interviews I began to look for ways to organize the data and ways to express my understanding about the lived experiences of the five women with their voices. Much as I do in my community facilitation work, I looked for repeating ideas and shared experiences as well as linked or connected ideas and experiences. I began to develop a series of what I called the “big ideas” – those organizing concepts that connected a range of ideas, experiences, thoughts, and feelings, as expressed by the participants. I then shared my preliminary formulations with the participants during the group interview. These general concepts were confirmed by the

participants and served us well as we dug deeper into experiences and our understanding of the phenomenon during the group conversations.

On completing the group interview, I worked with the transcripts in a similar fashion, highlighted text that seemed particularly revealing and attending to the passages that had elicited certain reactions from the other women. Emphatic or enthusiastic responses, such as “Exactly!” or “Absolutely!” or “Definitely” or simultaneous acknowledgement by a number of the people following the expression of an idea or concept, suggested to me that the notion that had been expressed resonated with the others and thus suggested something significant about the experience.

### *Immersion*

The way in which I worked with the data at the outset did not feel substantially different from the processes I use in my facilitation work, and I realized that I was not yet deeply engaged in the data – I was still separate from them and not allowing myself to be experientially connected to the data. This was partly because of the sheer volume and diversity of transcripts, recordings, personal journals, and working notes and my fear that by getting too immersed in the data I would either be disabled or drown. The consequence of holding back was that I had difficulty becoming attuned to the “precious elements, which take the form of descriptive expressions, that are ‘at the center’ of the experience, those that address ‘its nature’ or ‘directly pertain’ to the phenomena” (Tesch, 1987, p. 233).

It was at this juncture that I was able to retreat for a week to a little cabin on a cliff overlooking one of my favourite stretches of water on the West Coast. There,

stripped of familial and professional responsibilities, armed with all of the data, and fortified by a glorious winter view, I pulled out of my fear of drowning and instead began to bathe in the rich data soup. I became more emotionally available and connected to the data and to the “precious elements” (Tesch, 1987, p. 233). After several days of reading, listening, and reviewing the texts and the tapes, meaning units or themes began to come clear and both the whole and the smaller parts started to come into focus for me (Tesch, 1987; van Manen, 1997).

During this week of total immersion I moved back and forth between the themes and the data. Working with the transcripts and with the thematic framework beside me, I went through each transcript and made marginal notes about what appeared to fit with each theme. I kept track of passages that did not appear to have a place in the themes framework and then specifically looked for similar ideas elsewhere in the data to see if it showed up elsewhere. If it did, I reconstructed the themes framework.

Once I was satisfied that the themes reflected what was showing up in the data, I worked further with the themes themselves, putting some together, separating some out, and redefining the parameters or scope of others. It was at this point that I began to consider the metathemes. I then clustered the themes and metathemes into four groups that reflected the movement from silence to voice over time: silence and silencing, coming into voice, the voicing moment, and using voice/evolving voice.

### *Choices – Incidental and Essential Themes*

My next step was to once again go back into the transcripts and select passages that illustrated each of the themes. I did this for two reasons. The first was that it gave me

one more means to check the fit between the themes and the data. Some of the themes were illustrated by dozens of quotes, whereas for others there were only a few examples or illustrative quotes. With the latter themes, I was then faced with deciding whether the theme actually reflected a shared thread of experience or the experiences of only one or two people. If it was not a shared thread, then I reflected on whether this was something that should still be included in the analysis or set aside. The choice was arbitrary, but informed by my assessment of what it could add to the overall understanding about the phenomenon and how women experience their voice.

For example, Jess spoke in both the individual and the group interviews about how she has lost voice or been silenced at different points in her life and how her process of coming back into her voice and power has been connected to finding a place to speak from – of connecting with aspects of herself that allowed her to situate or locate herself somewhere:

[I started], exploring my identity more as an Aboriginal woman. And I started to realize in class there was a huge lack of voice for Aboriginal women in, in those classes and in the community, and all departments.... All my writing started to be sort of as an Aboriginal woman ... naming myself that way, which now has shifted because I'm mixed so I identify more that way.... It wasn't really a moment of (P) well there were lots of moments of speaking, but it was more finding a place to speak from.

She also spoke about how her sense of place or location has shifted over time:

... I think you always remake the place maybe you're speaking from. Where I'm speaking from now is a lot different than 5 years ago when I finished my B.A., so

... it's where you're situating yourself or whatever within where your voice is coming from.

The other women did not speak explicitly about this theme, but I decided to include it as a theme for several reasons. The first was that when Jess spoke about this in the group, the others were very attentive to her and indicated that they too had a sense of this from their own experience. It seemed to resonate with their own experience, although before Jess articulated it this way, they may not have been conscious about the significance of having a place to speak from. In other words, she seemed to be illuminating an aspect of voice that had been obscured. This theme adds another dimension to our understanding of women and voice. The second reason that I included it was that it was consistent with my own experience of coming into voice, and circling in and out of voice. While I have not used my personal experience of coming to voice as a data set, it nonetheless informs the research and the writing, and in this situation, "tipped the balance" in favour of including this theme.

#### *Reflecting with the Participants – Interpretation Through Conversation*

The second benefit of going back into the transcripts and selecting passages that illustrated these themes was that I was then able to go back to each of the participants and ask them if my interpretation of their words was valid for them. I had not thought to include this step until I read Thom Garfat's (1995) description of his phenomenological inquiry into the child and youth care intervention. He undertook to give his participants copies of his writings about potential themes as well as their:

... verbatim quotes from the transcripts so that they could see how I was drawing from our conversations to develop these themes .... This transparency about how I was using the transcripts of our conversations, and the encouraging of participants to assist me in re-writing what I had said, helped, I believe, to avoid the ‘possibility of betrayal’ (Weber, 1986, p. 71) which is always present when we use transcripts to reflect conversational exchanges between people. (p. 85)

I have been very concerned about appropriating the voices of the women – and thus silencing them – by superimposing my interpretations on their words. This checking-back step reduced the risk of betraying the women’s voices by ensuring that they could influence how I represented their voices in the text. To achieve this I shared with each woman a brief description of the themes and the verbatim quotes from their individual interviews and their contributions to the group interview that I thought reflected the theme. I asked them to consider whether the themes reflected their experience with silence, coming to voice and voicing.

### *Summary*

The image that I carry of the analysis process is that of an elliptical spiral. Although I established steps to go through, I was continually moving around the data, looking at them from different vantage points, sometimes close in to them and other times moving farther away from them, but always circling and always relocating myself in relation to the data. Before beginning the process, I did not understand what “immersion” in the data really was; however, after months of living with them and becoming connected to the data, I understand the power of the phenomenological

approach to spiral into the deeper understanding of experience, the meaning that we make of our experiences, and the power of the reflective process to bring knowledge into our conscious awareness. After completing this process I became reacquainted with the description of the hermeneutic circle (Garfat, 1995; Heidegger, 1962; Lindsey, 1994) and recognized this process as similar to my own:

In this process the researcher moves into the data, immersing oneself completely and then moves back to consider that context within which the experience of the individual units is occurring. This process of moving in and out, of experiencing the detail and the context within which the detail is contained, causes one to constantly reflect on the parts and the whole and the relationship between them. Through this process relationships become evident and the meaning of the parts becomes context bound by the frame within which they are experienced. (Garfat, 1995, p. 86)

The themes have provided me with an opportunity to represent the data to others, to connect this research to other related research on women, voice, self, and consciousness, and to suggest what we might learn from this research and take into community practice. In the end, however, despite my efforts to present themes that do justice to the data, they represent just one possible construction. Someone else working with the data would likely “see” different meanings. But this is both the challenge and the opportunity of the phenomenological approach. In the next section I discuss the methods I used to bring the themes and the essence of phenomenon to the reader.

## Hermeneutic Phenomenological Writing

### *Writing as Method*

Hermeneutic phenomenological reflection and writing enables the researcher to take the data and transform it from descriptive data to phenomenological description, which is the intended objective of the research process. In practice, the researching, reflecting, writing, and reading processes are intertwined and are not separable. The notion of writing as method is captured by Jean Paul Sartre's (1977) comment that "the only point to my life was writing. I would write out what I had been thinking about beforehand, but the essential moment was that of writing itself" (p. 5). In phenomenological writing the author produces not only a text; they also produce their self. "Writing is a kind of self-making or forming. To write is to measure the depth of things, as well as to come to a sense of one's own depth" (van Manen, 1997, pp. 126–127).

Max van Manen (1997) suggests that to write and rewrite is to measure our thoughtfulness, exercise our ability to see, show something, and deepen the description (pp. 127–132). In the writing and rewriting process we aim to create depth and multiple layers of meaning (Sartre, 1977).

My objective was to create a phenomenologically powerful description, which is not the same as a descriptive account of the data. The description I aimed to create:

... acquires a certain transparency, so to speak; it permits us to 'see' the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes. How is such transparency achieved? It is a function of the appropriateness of the themes that we have identified as well as a function of the thoughtfulness that we have

managed to muster in creating exemplary descriptions.... A description is a powerful one if it reawakens our basic experience of the phenomenon it describes, and in such a manner that we experience the more foundational grounds of the experience. (van Manen, 1997, p. 122)

My writing and rewriting process was similar to the process of working with the data; I moved in and out of sections of texts, looked at things from different vantage points, and shifted ideas from one context to another. I also frequently became frustrated with myself for never quite “getting it”; there always seemed to be something missing, or more that I could find, and yet I knew that I also needed to pare things down and strip away the extraneous information. It was a paradoxical process of both adding layers and stripping them away.

### *Challenges with the Language – Conveying Desired Meaning*

“Lived experience is soaked through with language” (van Manen, 1997, p. 38) and thus language is the means through which we come to understand lived experience more fully. However, there is an interpretive challenge in using language to access and represent the unique and private sensations of lived experiences. Not all experience can be sensitively and fully captured by text (Langer, 1997) as language is socially constructed and there may be multiple interpretations of texts. We are left wondering, “Is the textual representation of the experience sufficient?”

Language, despite its limitations, does assist us in discovering our inner experiences. This may seem somewhat paradoxical, but really it is not – although language may not be able to adequately capture the essential qualities of lived

experiences it does serve to bring us closer and once engaged in such reflection, there comes a point at which the language is not necessary and within the spaces between the words, we come to understand and know. It is like being taken down a long path and then being presented at the door of knowing and left to enter on our own. We move back into the inner experience.

This is the “conversational relation” (van Manen, 1997) that is set up between the writer and the reader. Powerful phenomenological descriptions bring the reader into the phenomenon. They are able to resonate with the description and they can participate in the conversational relations or discourse with the text: “A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience...the validating circle of inquiry” (van Manen, 1997, p. 27).

The challenge to create powerful description given the limitations of language led me back into both the words of the women themselves and the rewriting method. The words of the women often captured aspects of the phenomenon in ways that I could not, so I chose to use their words not just to illustrate a theme but also, at times, to define the essence of the themes. The rewriting process created opportunities for me to re-reflect, re-think, and re-cognize, and in so doing, re-work my linguistic efforts to describe the phenomenon.

### *Developing a Style*

Connected to the linguistic challenge of creating powerful description was the challenge of creating my “style” for phenomenological writing (van Manen, 1997) – one

that was unique to me and served to convey what I see and have come to know about the phenomenon. I am working within an academic context with specific expectations and conventions and I understand that I am responsible to that “master.” However, I am also writing about voice, self, and consciousness and I am working with the thoughts and ideas that have been entrusted to me by five women. This topic emerged out of personal as well as professional interest and I am bound up in it. Thus, my style needed to fulfill the expectations of the university, my responsibilities to the women to represent their voices with sensitivity, and my responsibility to myself to speak about the topic with the passion that drew me to it in the first place.

How I reconciled these responsibilities was to bring first rigour and then grace into the writing. I aimed to bring the rigour of thorough and careful review and analysis into the literature and methodology chapters, and the grace of sensitivity (particularly to the women and their voices) and insightful reflection into the chapter on findings. In practice this has meant that I have used quotes extensively while not avoiding my interpretive responsibilities. The final chapter was where I decided I would take the risks and “write myself in.”

## CHAPTER 4: THEMES AND DESCRIPTIVE INTERPRETATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to share the phenomenological descriptions of five women's journeys through silence into voice. These descriptions evolved through a writing, reflecting, and rewriting process that aimed to create descriptions that both honoured the voices of each of the women involved and deepened our collective understanding of women's experiences with silence, voice, and the transitions between them.

The initial focus of my inquiry was on the moment or point in time at which each woman knew, without a shadow of doubt, that she must use her voice to bring about significant change for herself, her family, or her community. However, the women all located their moment or point in time of coming to voice within the broader context of their lived experience with silence and voice. As we engaged in conversations and as I worked with the data it became clear that it is necessary to describe their processes and journeys through the themes. The themes clustered into four groups: "Experiences with Silence," "Coming to Voice," "No Turning Back," and "Evolving Voice." The themes in "Experiences with Silence" describe the women's experiences with silence, being silenced, and what contributed to the lack of connection with their voice, sense of self, and consciousness. In "Coming into Voice," the women experienced becoming informed about or awakening to other possibilities and becoming more acquainted with their voices and selves. In "No Turning Back," their experiences of voicing are manifest in the thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with this moment or point in time. The themes in "Evolving Voice" speak to the growth in awareness and consciousness that the women experienced, as well as the constantly shifting relationship that they have with voice.

Within each of these four sections there are two levels of themes. The first level are metathemes that encapsulate the concepts represented in the second level of themes. They serve to describe both the thread that connects the second level themes and the shifting relationships that the women have had with their silences and voices over time. The framework of themes is outlined in Table 1.

The themes are described and illustrated primarily with the participants' own words. Many of the themes are reflected in each of the women's lived experiences and quotes could have been drawn from each of their stories and conversations. However, I have selected quotes that best illustrate and convey the characteristics and nature of the themes. These quotes or "exemplars" convey what one woman thought but can be taken as a representation or reflection of the thoughts, feelings and actions of other women within the group. In order to protect the confidentiality of each of the participants I have interchanged names and quotes so that, for example, Joanne's "story" is actually a compilation of descriptions and reflections shared by all five of the women. This approach does not compromise the methodology as reporting on the details of any one woman's life story is not a requirement of phenomenological research. We are more interested in what we can learn from the composite of women's lived experiences with silence and voice. Most importantly, this approach protects the confidentiality of the participants as no single story is a true story that belongs to one woman.

| Section   | Metathemes (Level One)                              | Themes (Level Two)                                 |  |
|---|---|--|--|
| Experiences with Silence                        | Silencing in Significant Relationships              | Silencing in Families                              |  |
|   |   | Silencing in Intimate Relationships                |  |
|   | Silencing and Personal Context                      | Isolation and Disconnection                        |  |
|   |   | Trapped and Responsible                            |  |
|   |   | Not Entitled to Have Voice                         |  |
|   |   | Can't Trust Experience                             |  |
|   | Consequences of Silencing for the Self              | High Stakes  |  |
| Unconscious/Don't Know – Disconnected from Self |   |  |  |
| Coming Into Voice                               | Receiving New Information and Interrupting Patterns | Experiencing Disability, Loss and Death            |  |
|   |   | Receiving New Information                          |  |
|   | Seeing Life Situations Differently                  | Connecting With Allies                             |  |
|   |   | Becoming Aware of the Struggle                     |  |
|   |   | Assessing Risks to Self and Others                 |  |
|   |   | Beginning to Question – Can I Have My Own Truth?   |  |
|   | Defining the Self                                   | Discovering Entitlement to Have Voice              |  |
|   |   | Defining Personal Boundaries and Responsibilities  |  |
|   |   | Finding a Place to Speak From                      |  |
|   | Working Around the Edges of Voice                   | Practicing and Experimenting with Voice            |  |
|   |   | Working Through a Long Process                     |  |
|   | No Turning Back- The Voicing Moment                 | Crossing the Line Into Voice                       |  |
|   |   | Taking Action                                      |  |
| Achieving Alignment - Voice and Self            |   | Coming to Life<br>Emergence and Congruence         |  |
| Evolving Voice                                  | Integrating Self and Other – Self in Relation       | Authenticity and Identity                          |  |
|   |   | Confidence and Shifting the Terms of Relationships |  |
|   | Using Voice Strategically                           | Protecting the Self                                |  |
|   |   | Choosing What Matters                              |  |
|   | Works In Progress                                   | Voice and Context                                  |  |
| Voice and Growth                                |   |  |  |

Table 1: Themes Framework

## The Participants

My commitment to the participants was to not describe each of them by name, but rather aggregate their personal information and describe them as a group. The women range in age from 27 to 56 years. When asked if they identify themselves as a member of a particular race, cultural, or ethnic group, one defined herself as Welsh, another as Woodlands Cree, and another as mixed blood-Kwagiulth band. One woman said, "As I consider myself Two-Spirited, I feel that my personal gender is multi-faceted. I can relate easily to those who identify as transgendered, gay, bisexual and heterosexual and all the many variations among and between those identities." Another woman said, "I am influenced by my identity as a queer woman, having been in relationships with both men and women."

Three of the women are divorced and single, one is in a committed relationship, and the other is single. Three have children. Of the three parents, one has two daughters who mostly live on their own, another has two daughters and a son all living on their own, and the other has four daughters, two of whom live with her. One of the women is also a grandmother.

The educational journeys of all five women are intriguing. Four of the women completed high school, and one left high school before completion. All of the women have pursued post-secondary education at some time in their lives. Two of the women went into university out of high school and completed their undergraduate degrees in their early 20s. Two of the women undertook training in early childhood care in their 20s, although both left that field at a later date and went back to school and shifted their career

paths: one went to college and retrained for administrative work, while the other went to university and obtained an undergraduate professional degree, later returning to complete a Masters degree. The woman who had left high school before completion returned to school years later. She first went to technical school and entered the workforce, then several years later went to university and completed both undergraduate and Masters degrees. One of the women was also in the midst of returning to graduate school at the time the interviews were held.

All of the women are in the paid workforce, three in salaried positions and two in contract situations. Of the latter two, one considers herself self-employed. Two of the women earn incomes of between \$20,000 and \$30,000 per year, while the others located themselves in the \$30,000 to \$40,000 income bracket.

In the paragraphs below I have provided brief descriptions of the characteristics of each of their voicing experiences as a way to orient the reader to the range of situations faced by the women. Four of the women could recall a specific situation or moment in which they knew they had to use their voice to bring about change. The fifth woman talked about a point in time when the “light went on” but without locating that moment in a particular context or place. It should be noted that although each woman could recall a moment or point in time, their experiential descriptions spoke more to their journey from silence to voice and the ever-shifting connection that they have with their voices, than to the particular moment of coming to voice.

Three of the women came into their voice in response to unhealthy or abusive marriages. All of them came to a point where they realized what and how much they had lost in their relationships and what was at stake for them, and in some cases for their

children, if they stayed. For all of them, their self was at risk of being lost or annihilated. One spoke clearly about realizing that if she did not create change in her life she would literally die. These three left their marriages and raised their children as either the primary or sole parent. One of the women also described a process of coming to voice with her mother, with whom she had a difficult relationship.

Two of the women each shared several stories about coming into their voices. One spoke about a moment when she was in Grade 9 and she realized that the Aboriginal<sup>7</sup> voice was not being represented or heard in a protest rally concerning the traditional lands of First Nations people. At that moment she spoke as an Aboriginal person. She also shared stories about her experiences of coming into her voice in university, where she found a “place to speak from” as an Aboriginal woman and realized that she needed to use her voice to increase awareness and confront mythology and misunderstanding. The other woman also spoke of first coming into her voice when she was at university. She described finding a place to speak from as a Native adoptee. Years later she had a profound moment of “knowing” that she had to use her voice in a public context when she learned of the circumstances surrounding her adoption at birth.

I have used names to personalize the quotes for the reader. These are Jess, Karen, Meg, Laura, and Joanne. To protect confidentiality I have mixed the names and quotes up so that the “stories” that emerge are actually composite stories.

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<sup>7</sup> The terms Aboriginal, First Nations and Native are used throughout the text, both in the quotes and in my descriptions and interpretations. My choice of words for the descriptive and interpretive text was informed by the terms used by the participants. Laura tended to use the term “Native” as in “Native adoptee” so when I refer to her experience I use the term Native. Jess tended to use the terms “Aboriginal” therefore, when I refer to her experiences I use the term Aboriginal. Outside of these contexts I use the term “First Nations” if I am referring to land-based Aboriginal people and the term “Aboriginal” for non-specific references.

## Experiences with Silence

This section describes the women's experiences with silence and silencing and locates where they came from, how they saw themselves, and what relationship (or lack of relationship) they had with their voices at the inception of their "journey" into voice. Three clusters of themes emerged from the women's experiences. "Silencing in Significant Relationships" describes the influence of the women's early family experiences on their sense of self and voice and how this continued into their adult relationships. "Silencing and Personal Context" describes how the women experienced their world and their place in it before becoming acquainted and connected with their voice. "Consequences of Silencing for the Self" describes and interprets the impact of these experiences on how the women defined themselves and what they saw as possible.

### *Silencing in Significant Relationships*

#### *Silencing in Families*

Three of the women described experiences that they had within their families that silenced them and defined the relationship (or rather lack of relationship) that they had with their voices well into their adult years. The messages that they had received from authoritarian, abusive, pre-occupied, or unavailable parents and family members were that they did not have much value as girls or young women. They were expected to be quiet or obedient, "seen and not heard,"<sup>8</sup> and were discouraged from asking questions and

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<sup>8</sup> Single word or short phrase quotes are generally not referenced or attributed to a particular speaker for two reasons: often the words were spoken by more than one of the women and thus are shared; in sequences of short quotes I thought that the references to each of the women speakers would distract the

“taking up energy” of other people by speaking. If bad things happened to them they were either told that they were responsible or they assumed responsibility in silence. This was further reinforced for two of the women as their mothers were silenced in their relationships. They grew up feeling no sense of entitlement or right to have voice and to have some influence over the way their lives unfolded. Meg described how she:

... was raised in a very patriarchal household where I really didn't have ... value.... [M]y mom and I ... we didn't get the same food as my brother and my father and things like that.... there wasn't a lot of value to who I was as a human being. And I'd been abused as a child as well so that had left me not really having much belief that I had a right to voice.

Karen talked about how the sense of not having value and a right to have voice showed up in her behaviour: “When I was younger [my speech] was so fast that people had a hard time even understanding it because I wanted to take up as little space as possible.”

Jess described a different dynamic within her family, but nonetheless one in which she received confused messages about her right to voice. Her mother encouraged her voice and communicated in many ways that she was entitled to a voice and that her voice could be influential. In her words, “from a very young age ... my mom taught me to speak up for what you believe in, to be different than everybody else.... [S]he taught me about social justice and Martin Luther King ... what's important and to stand up for those things.” However, Jess grew up watching her mother be silenced and voiceless in her interpersonal relationships. Her father was also absent from her life for significant

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reader from their words. Unique short quotes and all longer quotes from the women's conversations are referenced.

periods, and she learned that her voice was not valued or encouraged by him. There is still a great deal at stake for her if she uses her voice and shares who she is and what matters to her with her father, so she shuts down her voice and who she is in order to safely maintain some modest connection with him and with her half-sister. These early mixed messages about how she should and can relate to her voice have created a challenge for her as she tries to find her ground and her voice, particularly in interpersonal relationships.

Laura had a different experience in her family. She received many positive messages about her value and worth as a child and young person, and internalized the message that she could do anything and be anything, and that she was strong and capable. However, as a Native adoptee raised in a non-Native home and environment, she struggled at some level with knowing who she was and where she “fit.” In the passages below the positive messages she received as a child are juxtaposed with her comments about how she felt despite the loving care she received:

Well, I grew up with ... ‘Laura, you can do anything you want. Anything you want to be, anything you want to do, anything you want to accomplish, you can do it. *You can do it.*’ So I was given all those real self-affirming messages of independence, power [

Karen: And choice. You talked about making choices.

Laura: Opportunity, choice. Yeah, like these were all the gifts my parents gave me, when raising me.

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Apparently when I was just little, a toddler, I woke up in the middle of the night screaming, 'Who am I, who am I?'

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And [my parents] even moved to [another community] when I was 3, thinking that that would be healthy for me to be surrounded by lots of different First Nations and it totally backfired. And I grew up just feeling 100% outside of Native... and non-Native social spheres, just caught in the middle and trying to figure out....

Although the experiences of the women were diverse there is a connecting thread of confusing messages that they received, either from their family members or within their social context, about their right to voice, and their identity and sense of self.

### *Silencing in Intimate Relationships*

These early experiences defined the women's sense of themselves and influenced how they entered into adult relationships. Joanne talked about how she had "gone from being controlled by an abusive controlling father to being controlled by an abusive husband." Meg talked about entering into a very traditional marriage at a young age. Although her husband was controlling and abusive, she had no concept of a right to have a voice and had such a diminished view of herself that she felt:

... lucky to have him ... I was this bad rotten person, he was this beautiful guy that was with me so how could anything about me be of any importance or worth?  
... And so when he hit me, it was my fault and ... when he belittled me he was right and all those kind of things.

Karen also spoke about the patterns in her childhood carrying over into her marriage. She did not have a voice and had little influence over her life as a child and when she entered into marriage she took on responsibility for quietly doing whatever was necessary to make things work as illustrated in the following two excerpts:

When I was younger we saw very little of extended family, my father was ill so he was actually in and out of hospitals so he wasn't really much a part of my life .... [My family] ... moved a lot so I didn't establish any relationships for more than a year or two with friends so I didn't have much influence on my life until I was say 16 ...

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Karen: When it came to myself and my needs ... I didn't [speak up in the marriage] ...

Jennifer: With some reflection, how do you make sense of that?

Karen: ... there's been all different kinds of factors that relate to that. I think that I didn't have good role modeling growing up with a marriage. My parents' marriage ended when I was young and it was not a good marriage. So I didn't have that .... [W]e were together very young. We moved in together when he was 19 and I was 20...so very young, and then you form these patterns in your marriage of the way you communicate or don't communicate and they're hard to change, so I think that's probably part of it. Part of it's ... just our personalities and that I allowed him to ... set parameters and things in the marriage.

... as a child, I don't feel like I had a voice ... so I think that had to have an influence on how I went into my marriage, and my relationship with my mother. I don't feel I grew up with that [sense of entitlement to voice] at all .... Jess described how in her adult interpersonal relationships she has had the experience of being disconnected from her self:

... there's something that happens where suddenly... something overpowers you or the situation takes over or something shifts, where it's not like you're making a choice to not speak up anymore, it just becomes habit [to be silenced]... It just made me feel like part of me had gone away.

The common thread that connects all of the women's experiences in early adult relationships has been that they have not felt entitled to claim voice or identity, or have been confused about how to be "authentic" and "whole" within them. For most of the women, this awareness has come about only with the passage of time and reflection – when they were in the midst of the relationships they were not conscious of what they were giving up in terms of self and rights to voice.

### *Silencing and Personal Context*

#### *Isolation and Disconnection*

In a variety of ways, all of the women described experiences of being disconnected, isolated, or alone, or of not having a sense of belonging. Sometimes this took the form of not feeling connected to a part of themselves and their heritage. Laura described her experience as:

... feeling like, 'Oh I'm the only brown-skinned person on the planet who doesn't fit in, who's a fraud, who's not Indian enough to be an Indian....' So that's where my little voice of, 'Who are you to be saying, thinking, doing?' That comes from that voice, 'You're not authentic.'

Other women described being disconnected from others and even from information and knowledge. They were not encouraged or allowed to have relationships or connections outside of their immediate family, or they felt such shame and embarrassment about their situation and themselves. As a result, they did not reach out and connect with others, or their circle of connections was very limited.

Joanne felt isolated and disconnected from others for a number of years and described how her experience as an immigrant to Canada contributed to this and influenced the course of events in her marriage:

... we both were immigrants ... to Canada, and ... we didn't have the circle of support when we first came here, and we didn't for a long time. We just had sort of casual acquaintances, and it wasn't really until the children started school that I started making friends of my own, otherwise they were sort of more fleeting. So for quite a few years I think it had the effect of throwing us together, making us more dependent on each other.

Jennifer: That's interesting. So your circle was small. That would reinforce some of the isolation?

Joanne: Absolutely.

One of the women talked about being unable to be with other people unless her husband either was present or gave his permission:

... he could see that I ... had things to offer the world and he didn't want the world having them. He wanted only him having them so that was the only way he thought he could keep me was ... keeping me ... enclosed in this world.

Meg was only allowed to read material for her children's schooling or home care. The impact of this isolation was that she had no way of getting alternative perspectives and new information: "there was no place of making that common connection, and even if it was there, I didn't see it as common...." This kept her unconscious about her voice and her self.

Sometimes the women's unique circumstances – such as being an immigrant or being in a non-traditional relationship that others disregarded or judged – resulted in their feeling disconnected, as this exchange between Meg and Jess illustrates:

Meg: ... if you're with somebody who's going through something, who's in crisis it's very hard to legitimize your needs when the other person's needs are so much higher .... So I mean in terms of culture [and judgment] ... it's only thought that happens in certain kinds of relationships.

Jess: And it's difficult because...if you talk about it to people outside of that group, all kinds of stereotypes come up...so it can also cause you to be silent as well.... I was in an intercultural relationship and it was very difficult for me to talk to a lot people about that because of racism. I just got this racist reaction...and it wasn't about that. It wasn't about where he came from...it was about our relationship. And so it ended up silencing me around a lot of people because I couldn't talk about what was going on.

### *Trapped and Responsible*

The women talked about carrying a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others and for the difficulties in their situation. They felt highly responsible to others and they often gave themselves over to accommodate the interests of others and kept silent for fear of “hurting others with my words.” Their descriptions conveyed a strong orientation to the interests of others, yet unconsciousness about “self.”

Karen’s sense of self only went so far as sensing a need to “survive.” She had no awareness about self and entitlement but she carried a burden of responsibility for others, “I had a friend who said, ‘I hate it when you say you’re sorry cause you really mean it. You really actually feel responsible for everything that’s going on in the world.’” Karen did not tell anyone about the abuse that she experienced within her marriage. She described how a close friend of hers shared information about how her husband hit her, but Karen did not disclose that she too was hit by her husband. She didn’t make the connection between their experiences or see them as similar. She understood that her friend’s husband was at fault but she didn’t believe that her own husband was responsible for his treatment of her. She protected him (the “other”) and never said anything because, “I was afraid that if I said he hit me then she would think badly of him and that wouldn’t be fair to him because it was my fault.” Karen had no concept of self or her rights.

The women described how they gave little or no consideration and care to their selves when they lived with silence. When I asked about “self-care” the group laughed. Self-care was simply not within their conscious awareness. They had “no sense of self,” therefore there was no capacity to care about something that they did not have. Joanne shared her assessment of this with the group and struck a chord with others who shared in

this experience of the subjugation of the self and a lack of care for the self in the interest of “others”:

I think for me it’s partly back to that hierarchy, you know Maslow’s hierarchy.

When you’re sort of fighting for your life in your relationship ... everything else becomes submerged under many layers so that ... you can’t access those needs ... that you might have because they’re superfluous really ... because you’re in survival mode. I remember just doing the bare minimum to get by, and if I did do anything outside of that it was just treated as such an indulgence, that it wasn’t really necessary for the well-being of the family and I really wasn’t entitled to it ....

Laura spoke about what she notices amongst the women within her own family and the strong socialization we receive as women to care for others over self. This led into a conversation about how one’s identity can be wrapped up in the identity of others:

I do think that ... as women we’re socialized, I think a lot of this [lack of self and self care] is normalizing .... [M]y grandma ... will still say, “I’m so lazy!” Never mind that ... you’re 85, you have osteoporosis and arthritis and all that stuff. But no ... she thinks she’s lazy and she thinks it’s being selfish if she takes time for herself, or if she has a nap [

Joanne: She’s wasting time, she should be [

Laura: She should be doing something to take care of somebody because she’s been doing it her whole life. And she had several mental breakdowns after my grandpa died, after he got sick and was out of her care. I think part of that

was she'd been holding herself together for somebody else and then she didn't need to do that anymore. Now it seems that her sense of self is so tied up in, in [

Karen: Caring for others [

Laura: ... I think that we learn [this]. We're just outside the typical mold [to be questioning it now].

Joanne: Sounds like my mom.

Jess: You lose sight of yourself too, your identity is so wrapped up in someone else's.

Some of the women described how they felt trapped for many years. They felt responsible for how things were in their lives. They either felt that they had created it and had to live with it or they deserved it and this was the best they would get. They felt no capacity to effect change in their circumstances. Joanne speaks to this:

There was a period of time when I was in a state of recognizing that I couldn't continue but I didn't really know that I could survive, and I was afraid of being on my own. So I felt that I had to stay in the relationship because I wasn't going to be able to manage, you know, to look after children, and I felt that whole sense of giving up one problem but getting another one, and of being trapped, completely trapped. So that went on for quite a number of years....

### *Not Entitled to Have or Use Voice*

A recurring theme throughout our conversations about silence and voice was about entitlement to voice. Karen spoke of years of "feeling very much voiceless and silenced." Meg talked about not even being aware that she could have a voice. It took

years before she became aware that she was entitled to have a voice, and then some years again before she began to exercise that right:

There was a time when I didn't think I had any right to have any voice or any sense that there was a notion of 'voice' for me. It was very much a sense of I needed to do what I was told and I didn't have that right to have voice, so there was a point where I moved to 'I do have a right to have voice,' and ... since then ... I've done a great deal of struggling. I continue to struggle about how to have voice, and when to have it and when not to, and be curious about when I'm okay with it and when I'm not. But there was a time where I really didn't think I had a right to it, whereas I know I have a right to it now, even though I might not exercise it all the time....

Jennifer: ... Do you think you would have had that kind of conversation with yourself back a long time ago, about, 'Gee, why didn't I use my voice then?' Would you have even had that kind of consciousness?

Meg: No, there was no reality of that (P). If I did say something that I wasn't supposed to, then I'd question why I spoke.

### *Can't Trust Experience*

Flowing from this notion of no entitlement to voice, some women talked about having some sense of entitlement but of not trusting their own perspectives and experience and being confused about how to express their voices. They also spoke of their frustration with others not talking truthfully about what they saw and assisting them to find their ground and affirm their right to have a voice.

Jess had a sense of being entitled to use her voice, but within the context of a chaotic and abusive relationship she lost her perspective on what mattered to her and who she was. She remains puzzled as to why others did not assist her at the time to regain the sense of entitlement to have a voice. The lack of participation by others contributed to her continued silencing:

Jess: ... I went away ... to grad school as a strategy to get out of the relationship and we ended up staying together somehow.... [I]t didn't work. And there were a couple of times where really violent things happened and I came to Victoria to stay with my mom ... but I went back. And even though my mom knew, my best friend, like people knew what was going on, but they supported (P) nobody (P) I needed somebody else to help me but nobody did. I don't know why in that situation (P) but nobody did (P).

Laura: Someone to tell you what you should do?

Jess: Yeah.

Karen: I think I can relate a little bit (P) I am thinking in my marriage I had a lot of support from my friends, but for a while ... sometimes I wish someone would have sort of shook me and said, 'What are you doing? Why are you putting up with this?' Is that kind of what you mean, that someone would have just maybe helped you a little more in that way?

Jess: Well, it became acceptable. And then it was sort of like, well, if all these people that I love and respect know that's how I'm being treated in my relationship and they think it's okay, then I guess I'm not worthy of something else.

In the context of her university experience she had similar “crazy-making” experiences when she wondered, “Doesn’t anyone else see this?” and had a hard time hanging onto her sense of self and voice in the face of other’s silences about things that mattered to her.

The doubts that the women had about their own experience, their perspectives, their right to have a voice, whether they had something meaningful to say, and where they stood contributed to a fear or reluctance to use their voices.

### *High Stakes*

All of the women described the risks they face in using their voice, even now, although the nature of risk and their consciousness about the risks has shifted over time. Before they became more connected to their voices some of the women described the risks of being hit, blamed, or judged. Given their experience of other people’s words being harmful to them, several women thought that their voice would hurt others. They therefore kept silent in order to avoid this risk to others.

For many years Joanne did not challenge her husband’s view of the world or advocate for her children or herself with her husband, because “It didn’t work.” She described how she “was always playing interference” to try and mitigate the damage he did to the children with his insensitive comments about their appearance or behaviour. It was too risky for her to directly confront her husband. He would either become violent and lash out at her, or he would become the victim and fall to pieces so she would have to come and take care of him and make it all right for him again:

... the reaction was, either he'd be violent with me or he would cry and say, 'Oh yeah, I'm wrong, I'm bad' ... he'd go off the deep end one way or the other. He would either do it by, by crying and beating himself up and rolling up in a ball and, and me needing to bring him back to reality or else he would just start beating on me ... they weren't good outcomes, [chuckles] let me put it that way....

For two of the women what was at stake for them was their loyalty to their marriages and their perception of their ability to "fix things." Meg said, "I saw myself as being married forever, it was very important to me. And so I think that was part of the thing, what made it harder, not wanting to give up on that...." Karen described her fear of the "cultural stamp that is put on divorce ... how that was going to be perceived." In the course of their marriages they had taken responsibility for the well-being of others, for "pleasing" others, and for making their marriages and families "work." Karen described herself as taking on the role "to be the one that could be able to cope with whatever it was that got put in my direction," and of "turning herself inside out" in an effort to make the relationships functional. For them, and for others, their sense of identity was so connected to the well-being of others that in acknowledging that all was not well in their worlds they risked losing a large part of how they had identified or located themselves in the world.

## *Consequences of Silencing for the Self*

### *Unconscious/Don't Know – Disconnected from Self and Voice*

We did not attempt to define “voice” through our individual or collective conversations, but there was a shared understanding and awareness that “voice” was not the same as “speaking.” Some of the women experienced struggles with speaking as well as voicing, but others did not. One even described herself as always having been “the outspoken one,” although she knew that this was not the same as being “the one with voice.” On reflection, all of them spoke to the ways in which their voice and self were intertwined. Without a sense of self there was no place to voice from or no sense of what to voice about, and without voice there was no access to the self. Voice was connected to a deeper awareness or sense of knowing the self.

All of the women had some experience of being disconnected from their voice and their sense of self. They talked about “not knowing,” or being “unconscious,” “unaware,” or “submerged.” Several talked about not even knowing that there was a self to be discovered, known or created. They internalized the ways in which others defined them rather than creating their own definition and sense of self. Joanne described it this way:

...I think that I had lived with a lot of criticism, and huge amounts of self denigration as a result of the abuse, the emotional abuse that I took within [the marriage], and I had internalized a lot of that, so ... I had very little confidence and I really was, I thought of myself as fairly (P) did I think of myself as useless? I had internalized his view to some extent and I'd lost that sense of self...

Laura described how she took on other personas as a way to avoid facing aspects of who she was that she didn't fully understand and was not able to connect with – particularly her Aboriginal heritage:

I had always had a fear of Native people, and I'm not sure why. Probably it was because I understood that I was Native but didn't know what that meant, and was too afraid to ask.

Jennifer: That fear kept you from having any voice?

Laura: Yeah. And then I lived in [a large urban community] during my coming-of-age years. People there, I mean, it's so multicultural, I could be anything, so I never had to be Native. I could be Egyptian, or Lebanese, Polynesian, or Moroccan, or, you know, you pick it, I could be it, no problem! (laughter) [Depending on the situation] ... this guy looks interesting and I happened to be in the Greek part of town, I'd say, 'Oh you know, my grandmother was Greek.' Yeah, lie through my teeth (laughter). I'm not going to see him again, you know, I'm just in a coffee shop, chatting up a stranger, and that was it. And it was kind of fun. But invariably people would say, 'You're Cree, aren't you?' ... I would just say, 'Sure,' and then be like, 'Okay, I'm going this way now.' I don't want to talk to you. Because *they* know more about who I'm supposed to be than *I* do.... Yeah, that was the big one. *They* know more about who I'm supposed to be than *I* do.... And that's too intimidating of a scenario to be in .... So I'd just leave.

When there is no sense of self, there is no sense of caring for the self or the voice.

Meg talked about going through the motions every day:

For the longest time before [coming to voice] I'd get up and I'd get the family off to school and work and I'd ... do what I needed to do around the house and then I'd say, 'I'm going to lie down. I'd lie down and I'd lay there and I'd think, 'You should get up now. Why don't you put on the TV or the radio?' but it was just too much effort for me to even move and do that and I'd pretty much lie there all day until I knew the kids were coming home and then I'd get up and run around and do things and make like I'd been (chuckles) working all day...

Karen also resonated with this experience, as the following exchange with Joanne illustrates:

For the longest time getting up, and breathing and eating, and moving through life and not getting hit or hurt, was all I thought about, was how I could get through each day, breathe, eat and survive. I think I was in survival mode, and at some point [

Joanne: You could do that automatically and give up your self [

Karen: Yeah....

### *Experiencing Disability, Loss, Death*

Jess and Meg both experienced significant health issues and their bodies “fell apart” as they became more and more “worn down” and disenfranchised from their voices and the risks to their emotional well-being and safety increased. It was as if their bodies were signaling the seriousness of their situations through weight loss, illness, physical disability, chronic pain, anemia, and exhaustion. Physical manifestations of being silenced and holding silence showed up in some way for all of the women.

Several women described how they lost their self. Joanne can recall a time between the ages of 18 and 23 when she felt strong and capable however, this “started to dissipate about the third year in my marriage, that I lost my self.” Jess described how she said to her partner “I feel like something in me has died.” She thinks, “it was partially my voice and my ability to know where I was coming from.” During this time she dropped out of university, stopped performing and writing, and had no contact with friends. She still has moments in which she grieves for the “loss of my self when I was silent.”

Meg recounted in both the individual and group interviews how she was “unable to breathe,” always “vigilant” and watching to see what she needed to do to make sure “bad things” didn’t happen. This involved her children, too, as they were raised in a household that required vigilance and “watching over” each other. She and others talked about the extraordinary energy that it took for them to just survive, and about the awareness that was building that they were “dying,” that their sense of self had died, or that if things continued the way that they were they would surely die, or make the choice to die as a viable and more appealing alternative, as Karen described:

... I was also kind of suicidal at this point in the sense that I’d be driving down the road and think, ‘Well gee, I could just go straight here and I’d go off the edge instead of turning the corner’? ... And these kind of things, thoughts, would pop into my mind ... It was interesting ‘cause I didn’t feel desperate or anything ... these suicidal thoughts would come to my mind off and on.

## Coming into voice

This section describes the women's experiences with becoming more aware about themselves and their circumstances and beginning to define or redefine their sense of self. This process creates an opportunity for them to become acquainted with their voice and begin to work with it in new contexts. Four clusters of themes emerged from the women's experiences. "Receiving New Information and Interrupting Patterns" describes how the women received both new information and allies into their lives and the ways in which this interrupted or challenged patterns of silence and silencing. "Seeing Life Situations Differently" describes the impact of having new experiences and allies. They became more aware of their situation and what was at stake for them and began to question the way things were. "Defining Self" describes the growing sense of entitlement to voice and self-definition that the women experienced. As a result, they began to become more attuned to the self, establish boundaries, speak their truths and take personal responsibility for their circumstances. This was manifest through exploring their identity and finding a place to speak from. "Working Around the Edges of Voice" describes their experiences with practicing, preparing, testing and experimenting with their voices, their movements in and out of voice, and their growing awareness of and desire for new possibilities and opportunities.

### *Receiving New Information and Interrupting Patterns*

The women described numerous new experiences and supportive relationships that enabled them, if only for a moment, to wonder. They wondered about the way things were in their lives, if there might be another "truth" and if their situation could be

different than it was. Some of the women shared visual images: turning into the light, uncurling from a closed ball, scaling a wall and looking out beyond their enclosure, and growing larger and standing taller. What was happening for them in these experiences was that they were receiving new information or relationships that were not entirely congruent with their past experiences. These experiences could not be accommodated in their current frameworks and formulations about how the world worked, their place in the world, or their inherent value as human beings.

The use of the word “received” is intentional in these descriptions. Several of the women talked about their reflective awareness that the “new” information and supportive relationships had been present at other times in their lives or had “probably been out there,” but that they had either not allowed themselves or had been unable to receive the new experience into their lives. For a variety of reasons, ranging from being “worn out,” “unable to continue,” on the verge of “death,” or being in new contexts, the women were able to receive information and allies into their awareness and lives.

### *Receiving New Information*

The women described many different instances of receiving new information that interrupted or questioned the established patterns and formulations that they had about their worlds. Some examples are described below to illustrate the diversity of meaningful new experiences.

Jess talked about how she had an exchange with a professor about his version of the “truth” that lead her to wonder about the validity of “expert” voices and arrange a directed studies course on Aboriginal women’s writing and film. Before this she had

never read or seen any works by Aboriginal women. Working with her mentor and with the texts and film she not only learned about the whole body of knowledge and experience that was now available to her, but she began to locate herself as an Aboriginal woman writer:

In one of the textbooks there was a chapter called 'Origins of the Destructive Potlatch,' which was not true in the facts .... I tried to go and talk to the teacher ... I said ... 'I go to potlatches and this is not true,' and he said 'Oh, that's interesting.' I had no say, he didn't care, he was really the expert and I was just a student. So I went running to [a professor] and asked if she would consider doing a directed reading with me in Aboriginal women's' writing and film, and she did. So that ... was sort of a start of exploring my identity more as an Aboriginal woman. And I started to realize in class there was a huge lack of voice for Aboriginal women in those classes and in the community, and all departments.... So I sort of started to, all my writing started to be ... as an Aboriginal woman. You know, naming myself that way.

Karen talked about noticing things about herself and was able to receive this as new knowledge and information that made her wonder about what was going on and where she stood. She noticed that she had stopped talking to others, not even to close women friends, about her life situation and relationships. She noticed that her respect for herself was slipping away. She also shared an experience with a counselor in which she received new information about how relationships could work:

One of the things I remember the counselor saying was, 'You know you can ask for things in your marriage.' Like she was talking to me. I had always thought

that you accept the person the way they are ... that's who they need to be ... It just really struck me ... It didn't occur to me that I can set some ground rules here or I can say what's important to me or what I need.... I kind of just left ... realizing ... I can say, 'This isn't ok in my marriage, I don't want this, I won't accept this.'

Meg talked about instances where she received information about her talents and strengths in university and she began to wonder about the validity of her husband's characterization of her as not capable:

[I had been] feeling very much voiceless and silenced for a very long time. And a couple of points that I can remember when I was doing my degree where there was that sense of, give yourself permission to do this, to speak up, to say what you need to say, to lead this particular activity or group and realizing, 'Oh I can!?'

Laura talked about experiences of connecting with others who shared a similar life path of adoption as a Native child into a non-Native family.

I was adopted at birth into a non-Native family and I am Native. And I'd grown up believing I was the only Native adoptee in the world. [B]ecause I felt like I was the only one, I felt very silenced in general, from all different parts of society and just in general, the world, the universe.

In [the 1990's] ... I met another Native adoptee and she opened the world to me of the Native adoptee world, the Native adoptee universe. There's hundreds, there's thousands, there's a hundred thousand of us in Canada and I didn't know that.

### *Connecting with Allies*

All of the women shared descriptions of having supportive relationships and allies that have assisted them in some way in their voice journey. These allies often created a bridge to new experiences and new perspectives that enabled them to begin to wonder and question. What they achieved through these relationships and experiences was a sense of “I am not alone” and “I am okay”. Several women captured the importance of allies in the process of coming out of silence and into voice:

... That’s how I got my voice ... because people gave it to me, and I feel lucky to have people in my life that have done that, and have been able to support me through the transition to give me voice when I didn’t have it. And still having people now that ... help me keep it, you know? And so for me that’s really important. I have to rely on external voices .... (Joanne)

... There’re certain parts that I can think that I was still trying to go solo, and it generally doesn’t work for me .... But once I’m willing to, okay, get over it ... just be willing to share what the struggle is ...It’s way easier for me, when I’m able to do that. (Meg)

When I looked at the transcript [of the individual interview] that Jennifer had written out ... and my own words and memories of experiences that had happened, and significant things that people had said, or just had heard me through a particularly difficult time, and I realized, my goodness ... that’s so powerful.... (Jess)

Of interest is the diversity of types of allies and circumstances and places in which these alliances and supportive connections arose. The participants described supportive connections and allies with both male and female friends, colleagues, teachers and professors, physicians, counselors, special interest group members, supervisors and mentors. One of the women spoke of a man she met in a college course many years ago that validated her strengths. She can't recall his name but recalls the experience and described how this had been tucked away in her memory and gave her a "glimmer" of hope. Another woman spoke of the supportive relationships that she had with her animals. The nature of these supportive relationships is captured in the selected descriptions below.

Laura talked about the connections that she has with her colleagues and how this has enabled her to go through both her adoption reunion and the public exposure of the very disturbing circumstances of her placement for adoption:

This is the most incredible place to work, the most incredible team of people who love and support and lift me up as we love and support and lift each other up all day every day. Where I worked previous to here, if I had said, 'I have to go and meet my biological family, I need three days off,' they would have said, 'Well, that's two days off without pay, you need to give us two months notice, blah, blah, blah.' ... [J]ust total bureaucratic crap. And here, it's 'Laura's embarking on this amazing journey of self discovery,' and they see it as part of the holistic being that makes up me in my spiritual, mental and spiritual and emotional way. And they're supportive, and I know that there're prayers for me. There's *no way* I

could have done this working for McDonald's ... I needed to have lots of love and support and care all around me.

Jennifer: ... That's an interesting thing when you think of it, that for all your strength and capacity and abilities and what not, you couldn't have done it alone?

Laura: No, couldn't have done it alone.... And they've all supported me through every step of this. Everybody has just been incredible.... They have all, and especially my boss, have encouraged me to raise my voice, and helped me find new ways to do that, and better ways to do that, and stronger ways to do that....

... I love it here. It's nurturing. They care. We all help each other have our voice in a big way.

One of the women spoke about the influence that her friends had and how she was able to imagine and work through the process of separating from her husband, supporting her children, and establishing herself financially by speaking with friends who had gone through similar life transitions:

I phoned up a friend, who's an old friend from ... 25 years ago that I rarely see, but her and I see each other every few years, kind of thing. But for some reason I phoned her and talked to her a lot about it and part of that was that I had known that she had had a marriage end too. I think for her specifically I kind of looked for strength of getting through the ending of the marriage as I knew that had been kind of difficult for her and so I sought her out for, 'What am I going to do now?

How am I going to manage financially? What's it going to be like?' 'I'm thinking of the kids' ... and I really looked to her ....

Meg received the support of a variety of allies and one of the first was an animal. She was extremely isolated and her connections with other people were monitored and managed by her husband. As an illustration of the tremendous need for connection, the ally she found was a dog that had been rejected in its earlier life. What is notable too is that the loss of her ally resulted in her questioning many aspects of her life:

And so her and I had a fine relationship ... I never had any problems with her and so she kind of felt like my ally a bit, you know what I mean? ... I could relate to what that dog was doing....

After a series of events, some of which she feels responsible for, her animal died. Her relationship with her dog was so strong that she felt that she'd lost an ally, ... it probably sounds really silly but you know, I *thought* [when I tended to the dog] every day for a number of years .... I lived an isolated world ... But my relationship with her (laughs) was totally unmonitored so I think because of that in some ways I was able to develop a different kind of relationship with her.... So when she died it really kind of broke my heart.... I really questioned what I was doing with my life, and questioned my relationship and where my loyalties lie and what I was doing.

There were also connecting threads in what the women said was significant about the way in which their allies treated or engaged them. They valued being listened to, accepted, validated, reinforced for having good ideas, acknowledged for their strengths and capacity, being given opportunities and encouraged to reach out and take some risks.

Karen's description of the way in which she was treated by a family friend illustrates the significance of this support:

He'd often come for dinner and ... he used to ask me how my day was like it meant something, like it was important. ... He'd ask if there were problems with the kids. He'd want to talk about it and ... he was interested in my life as if it mattered or was important....

I remember (sighs) when I applied for this job and and I got it ... and [my husband] came home from work and I was excited and then I got scared. I thought, 'I can't do it, I can't do it.' And [his] reaction was, 'You're such an idiot. You're so stupid,' ... which just of course made me feel even worse. The guy said, 'Leave the room. I want to talk to Karen.' And he sat me down, and he went through everything I had succeeded at doing. And he said, 'You can do this.' ... It was huge having him in my life.

Meg spoke about the allies she has experienced both at university and in her work. They have generously shared their support and wisdom. Her experiences with them have enabled her to recognize her own talents and worth and encouraged her to learn, grow and take risks:

I think the biggest thing for me has been having people in my life who not only will tell me... that they believe in me, or whatever, but will give me opportunities. In a way ... they put something on the line too.... it's like a generosity of trust. There's no weird power-thing. It's like people wanting to share that with you and wanting you to be. (P) So it's just people being really generous with ... wanting you to just feel like you're somehow important, or what you have to say is really

valid, or what you're doing is... And, having people say, 'You have something to say' ... And people being on board and just using the power that they have strategically to help you ... Something about the way that I've been treated has made me think ... 'I can learn from this and I can grow.'

It was significant to the women to connect with others who shared similar interests, who either were experiencing or had experienced similar things and successfully worked through their challenges or who were "living a principled life" and helped them reconnect with their sense of what was right. One spoke about the power of connecting with other Native adoptees and another spoke about connecting with others that were willing to engage in a dialogue about their experiences,

... There used to be a group of mixed race people and we'd meet and talk and write, talk about our families and write and stuff. (P) I've been in writing groups. I'm trying to support myself through having ... people with common interests... Because it's easy, I think, to feel isolated ... especially if you are trying to speak out or make a difference... But there are people ... who want to have space for that kind of dialogue all around, so you just need to bring those people together ... that feeds me a lot, just having more people in my life like that. I don't feel alone.

It is also interesting to note that the connections need not be long-term, intense or sustained in order to have a significant impact. Joanne talked about brief connections that she'd had that had been powerful. Reflecting on these recollections and their significance for her own practice and way of being in the world she said:

I think that we tend to not to think of ourselves as having a great impact on others, but chances are we do.... [I]t's nice to think about that - that we have that

opportunity to have that kind of significance in whatever journey [others] happen to be on.

The new experiences and relationships that the women had contributed to them becoming more aware of their situation and what was at stake for them. With evolving awareness they began to see themselves and their situations differently and question the way things were.

### *Seeing Life Situations Differently*

#### *Becoming Aware of the Struggle*

All of the women spoke about becoming aware of the discomfort, conflict or struggle that they were experiencing in their lives. This awareness grew out of receiving new information and being more connected to other perspectives. This was illustrated in a conversation amongst the women that began when I asked the group:

When you think back to the times, and I think for many of you there has been more than one episode in your life when you thought, ‘Okay, there’s no turning back, things have got to be different.’ What was going on for you? Can you recall that? What was happening either in your head or in your emotions or in your gut?

Laura: Real discomfort.

Jennifer: Real discomfort?

Laura: Yeah. I can’t stay in this place of discomfort. I need to be more comfortable than I am right now. This is really going to be unbearable.

Jennifer: ... And that was different than how you'd experienced that discomfort before?

Laura: Mmhmm. Before I just accepted it. Before I wasn't *aware* that there could be something more comfortable.... I think when you don't know something doesn't fit but it's all you know, it fits just fine. But as soon as you put something on that does fit properly, you realize, oh, that was really uncomfortable!

Karen's critical awareness was that she was losing respect for herself:

... A big thing was that loss of self-respect. That I got to a place that I knew I wasn't respecting myself in the situation, and then that realization was just really huge for me ... like a light going off for me... That to me was just kind of rock bottom.... And I guess I couldn't see that that could change in that situation, so that I had to make it different.

Meg described how she became aware of her emotional struggles:

... I cannot put myself through that emotionally anymore ... all of this energy that I've put into this and it's still come to nothing. I can't continue to fill that void all the time, whatever it is that I keep doing.... I'm getting nowhere.

Joanne described a range of experiences that brought to mind a ticking clock or walking slowly up a spiral staircase; each new experience shifted her vantage point and perspective. Over a number of years the array of new experiences and information enabled her to locate herself very differently in relation to her marriage and life situation. She had experiences of finding and losing allies that brought her new information and awareness, of reaching out and receiving help for her child, of going to classes with other

women, of going back to school and learning that she had skills and abilities, of being with other women and learning that they didn't live in the way that she had had to live, of going into the workforce and being valued. She watched her teen children become aware "that this whole new exciting world was [out] there and it was open and there were all these things that you could do." She recognized that she had never experienced that excitement and realized that she was in the midst of a struggle for her survival. She began to contemplate suicide and realized, "I will die if I stay here" and continue to try and live the same way.

Tied to the growing awareness of the struggle, some of the women felt that they were completely worn down. They experienced ill-health or exhaustion and they simply could not continue to manage with the way things were. Some talked about "dis-integrating." The world as they knew it was starting to fall to pieces or they were "falling apart". This did not necessarily carry a negative connotation for the women, particularly now that they look back and see the significance of the disintegrating process and the opportunity that created for them to recreate their identities as the following exchange illustrates:

Jess: ...our identities are totally fluid and multi-layered and they're not static at all. They're very dynamic...

Jennifer: It's almost like there's a 'dis-integration' that happens at different times, and to some extent the pre-voice place is a disintegration ... things are falling apart as you have known them to be.... And then you find some place in yourself and you see the world differently, you put things together differently and therefore you walk in the world differently?

Several: Mmhmm.

Karen: There's a Chinese character that is the same symbol for crisis and opportunity.... Sort of out of the ashes of one thing grows something new....And it's because of that crisis that you have the opportunity to do that. So in some way I've sort of thought about that one, you know. Wouldn't I have liked the sort of regular, boring, ordinary type of normal life, and what would have happened? Would it have brought out certain things in me? Maybe it's better that it happened this way.

Laura: Yeah, yeah! When we're dis-integrating or in a space of disintegration, we're creating space for new things to grow and bloom which wouldn't be there otherwise. We have to be uncomfortable to want to move.

Being "uncomfortable" and more attuned to the struggles in their lives opened the women up to seeing themselves and their situations in a different light. There was a shift to being more attentive to and aware of the self and how the self was located in relation to others and what was at stake for the future of the self.

### *Assessing Risks to Self and Other*

Becoming aware of the high stakes of staying silent was a significant shift for all of the women. For some, they had stayed silent in the past because they either believed they would cause others harm by speaking or they were at personal risk. But at some point they recognized that there were greater risks associated with keeping their silence. The risks included not being able to help others or make a positive difference in other's lives, their children being damaged in some way, repeating unhealthy family patterns in a

new generation, continued absence of happiness in their lives, substance misuse, the loss of their principles and values, the loss of self respect, the annihilation of their self or death.

Jess captured her assessment of several risks of being silenced in relationships in her reflections about her mom's experience. Her mom has always been a vital encourager of Jess' voice and entitlement to speak and be heard and valued. However, Jess also sees clearly what has happened to her mom through being silenced over many years and in multiple relationships and contexts, where being in a relationship was more important than being valued and supported. Jess recognizes the risks to her of repeating these patterns as she has been in "tortured" interpersonal relationships herself. She sees that she's at risk of losing her sense of self, her passion for living and the opportunity to make a contribution to the world. In talking about what happened to her mom and what she has learned from this she says:

I can see that she had a lot of passion that somehow got taken away through just being diminished in her relationships and then she couldn't (P) somehow didn't get that back (P) somehow the personal relationships took that out of her cause she got the wind taken out of her sails or something.... So I think I've somewhat learned that I don't want ... to be silenced in my relationships.... And I learned through my experience that it does take away your ability to then do what you are passionate about in the world....

Joanne also spoke about recognizing the risks of continuing in silence in the same way that her mother had, and she extended this to thinking about the risks to her children if she continued to model such silence. In the following exchange she illustrates how she

becomes aware that the way in which she had been subjugating her self in the interests of others was damaging to both self and others. She saw for the first time that there were risks to her self, her children, and her husband if she continued to participate in the marriage under the old terms. This enabled her to hold both her self and the interests of others in balance:

Jennifer: You said something that a number of people have talked about, that there was so much at risk in staying, in the sense of it was *that* close ... to the death of the self. One person even talked about contemplating suicide because she couldn't imagine carrying on in that way, so does that fit for you? ... [T]here was a lot at stake if you stayed, just as much as a lot of stake in leaving.

Joanne: Very much so. For me it was my relationship with my husband mirrored *way* too closely what my parents had gone through... ultimately realizing that if I stayed, that I would be enabling a person to be abusive, and that's really what my mother was continuing to do, and that sort of recognition that I hadn't been able to change my parents' relationship and neither had my mom and the tragedy of that. You know, seeing a woman sinking for basically all of her married life, to the point where I don't know that anybody could ever recognize anything about my mother because she's so lost as a person. Yes completely. So recognizing that that's not going to happen to me, and for my children. They won't see that, they won't have to come and rescue me as I'm trying to rescue my mother. I can rescue myself.

Jennifer: ... So was that thought about being a mother of daughters and wanting to model the kinds of things that you thought were important, was that a variable for you? Was that going through your mind consciously?

Joanne: Yes it was ... it did. You know, I think at first it was my own experience of frustration and the emotional toll that it was taking on me, and then my realization that this is also affecting the children.... [T]hose layers of consciousness, as one layer after another peeled off. Okay it's not just about what's good for me now, but it's about what I'm modeling for the children about intimate relationships in general. And you know that sickened me to think of (P) that they would grow up thinking that this was normal or okay. I can't be around and let them see this is going on. I was really, really scared about that, what damage was being done to them....

Laura described what she came to understand was at risk for her if she stayed disconnected and voiceless about her experience as a Native adoptee:

Jennifer: ... But how do you even get to the place where you see what's at stake if you don't do something? You saw it, (referring to Laura) 'I'm going to self destruct,' and how did you see that? What do you remember?

Laura: ... I met lots of Native adoptees ... like hundreds ... and I met so many who I really (P) I related to them and I saw them going down real self-destructive paths. And there was one woman in particular. I met her and I just thought she was fabulous, really enjoyed her company. And then we were at a party one night and I saw how she was when she drinks. And then I started seeing her more and more like that and thinking, 'She's just like me. I'm looking at a

mirror, and I don't want to go there because she's one step ahead of me on that ladder of self destruction.' And I don't want to go there. I really don't... I don't ever want to have those things [e.g., addictions] as part of my life. So it was more about avoiding [

Several: Mmm, yeah.

Laura: Than it was about going towards something. It was seeing that that's the logical end of this pathway, and I don't like it, so I gotta do something different.

Many of the women began to be aware that the risks of not acting, and remaining silent, outweighed the risks of acting and using their voices. Although they were not necessarily ready to use their voices and take action, some did begin to experiment with their voices and test the possibilities.

One woman described seeing, "who I was becoming and I didn't like it. I didn't like it one little bit...." She became aware of the risks of maintaining the status quo - her state of numbed survival. "I got to the point where [I realized], this isn't enough. Survival isn't enough. As a matter of fact, if I don't get more, I will die." She found her voice with her husband enough to insist that she be permitted to enroll in school:

I knew [going to school] was my last ditch effort to be alive and I really felt that ... it was really clear to me that this was my chance to (P) live.... So that gave me a fair amount of resolve around it .... I mean it, there was no turning back, there really wasn't.... I knew that I had to fight the fight and so I did. I bit my tongue a lot.... [my husband would] talk about how I'm taking away from the children....

there was a certain amount of blackmailing going on with me and ... I stood up to it all.

This passage illustrates a shift that a number of the women made from being aware of, concerned about, and feeling responsible for the interests and well-being of others only to having a glimmer of the self and what the self needs. She began to be aware of both “self” and “other” and accord some importance to both.

*Beginning to Question – Can I Have My Own Truth?*

The way in which I have presented the themes and threads that describe the process of experiencing, connecting, wondering, becoming aware, assessing risks and preparing to act may suggest that it is a linear process. It is not. The image that I carry of the process is of a river with slow moving and fast moving sections and many back eddies and whirlpools. For the most part there is forward motion and it would be difficult to turn back and swim upstream once one has jumped into the river of awareness. However, the back eddies and whirlpools characterize the swirling and blending experiences of the women – having a new experience, wondering, questioning, assessing risks and so on might all blend together and be difficult to differentiate.

This is particularly so of the theme of “Beginning to Question.” Here, the women go beyond wondering and puzzling and begin to question themselves, their situation and what they had thought to be the “truth”. This questioning is illustrated by the following passages:

I really questioned what I was doing with my life, and questioned my relationship and where my loyalties lie and what I was doing. (Meg)

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I started to see that maybe I didn't need to do that ... other people didn't live like that, maybe I didn't need to live like that. (Karen)

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I started to realize in class there was a huge lack of voice for Aboriginal women in those classes and in the community ... so that started it .... Over the years then, I started to write ... fiercely in the margins as I was having problems in class and started to read those poems out in public and started to speak out more when I found things that were being said offensive and (with a chuckle) storming out of classrooms, and just being more vocal where, when I first started university, I didn't.... (Laura)

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... when you're in a relationship that's with someone who's kind of manipulative or abusive or whatever, you start to justify things that don't really make sense to you.... I just found that I didn't know...well if I don't believe in that ... if I don't believe in these (P) principles and how women should be treated or whatever... Like I'm somehow justifying all these bad things, then who am I? ... Where am I coming from? ... I just started to question all those things and I didn't know. (Jess)

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[Regarding the representation of Aboriginal people's experience in the media and literature]... how would you like it if I wrote all about you and told everybody who you are, using my words? And without asking you, just decide, you know,

‘I’m going to write about you and tell the world what you’re like. I haven’t asked you, haven’t checked with you. I’ve just decided this. Did my own research, I’m not going to tell you what that is. And here I am publishing all about you.’ What is this? Why can’t I speak for myself? (Laura)

All of the women also asked questions of others and stopped simply accepting other people’s versions of events. It was when Karen started to speak up in her marriage and ask questions of her husband that she realized that she needed to make the shift: “... when I started speaking up then I really realized he’s not committed to this marriage, I know he’s not. He’s not committed to making some changes that are important to me so that’s it, the marriage has to end.”

Joanne began to question her husband about why he treated her the way that he did which was differently than other men treated their wives. His response to her was that she didn’t deserve better treatment, but she began to question his perspective on her worth and value:

... things that he said to me were making me really angry.... I’d gotten to the angry stage about things ... and I started asking him questions like, ‘I noticed ... so and so is really loving with his wife. Why don’t you treat me like that?’ [He said], ‘Well you’re not that kind of woman. You don’t deserve that kind of treatment.’ ... I started to see that that was *his* problem, not mine.... Again, there was [a] shift in my thinking.

She described several instances when something happened to her and she expected her husband to respond with some concern and caring. Instead he,

... started complaining that it was my fault he didn't come [to help me] ... and this was fairly typical. And in the past, I just would have felt bad, I would have felt, 'Yeah, it was my fault,' but I didn't. I thought, 'Ugh, you jerk, you [could have] come ... to see if I was dead or not.' ... It was funny, there were little things I started to notice. There was a shift in how I saw what he was saying and I saw our relationship....

Jess questioned the absence of Aboriginal voices in various contexts, the earliest of which was in her teen years:

I was in grade nine, and (chuckles) skipped school to go to this rally and ... they were talking about [traditional territories] and saving the land, but there was nobody from the Aboriginal community speaking. So I went up to the organizer and I said, '.... I'm an Aboriginal person and where are the Aboriginal voices?' and he said, 'Well, do you want to speak?' So I wrote out something to say and got up and spoke in front of all these people.... It was a similar moment I think (P) at university or a similar experience of just realizing, 'Hey something's missing here!'

Laura described how she began to question herself, other people, and then systems when she discovered a new truth about her adoption:

I definitely got just unbelievable rage and anger, and then I thought, 'Well, what am I going to do about it? Am I just going to react, and be all raging angry? ... How am I going to address this, really? What is the truth that needs to be said here, and understood? ... Who is accountable? Who's going to be held accountable?'

Karen and Meg described the shift in understanding that they had about “truth” and “the way things needed to be” and the significance that it had for them:

Karen: I came from a very black and white childhood in that there was only one truth, and so finding out there’s more than one truth was really helpful for me as well. Knowing that I could have my truth and it might be totally different than somebody else’s. They look at the situation from a totally different perspective. It took me a lot of years to find that out, but that was a really important piece of information for me.

Meg: ... I mean as a child learning about different families [

Joanne: Learning that there could be other realities [

Meg: Up until I was about 16 or 17, yeah, I didn’t know that there were other ways and then I went into other families’ homes, like ‘Oh my gosh, they function completely differently, like this is another way to be! This is how this whole thing works? And I like this better!’

The questioning and exploration into whether their situation had to stay the same, what other options existed and how they could define their own truth was intertwined with their process of discovering and defining self.

### *Defining the Self*

#### *Discovering Entitlement to Have Voice*

The women began to see and become acquainted with the “self” and realize that they had inherent value and rights, including the rights to have voice or choose to be silent. It was hard for some of the women to identify what enabled them to make this

transformative shift of letting go of being completely responsible to and defined by others to becoming more attentive to self and self in relation to others. One woman captured it this way:

... when he hit me, it was my fault and ... when he belittled me he was right and all those kind of things. So what shifted that to think that I had the right to be in the world and to breathe and to have feelings? I'm not a hundred percent sure. I think it was partly having people show some interest in me....

... I started to see that ... I had a right to breathe because people were telling me I did, and people were telling me I was an okay person ... and people were starting to tell me he wasn't perfect either.

Jennifer: ... So you were getting not only information about yourself and validating you but you were also getting others questioning the validity of his perspective?

Joanne: Yeah. But not, not like ... '[he's] a jerk' or anything like that but more ...telling me that I could be different. You know what I mean? In the relationship.... It wasn't so much against him as I had a right ... to do things.... I didn't have to always be doing things for other people.

Meg described how she looked at her self with more clarity and realized that the way in which her husband defined her was not the only way she could be defined; an alternative view was possible. She was:

... recognizing that I had an entitlement to [an alternative], and ... I didn't have to live like that. [The marriage and emotional abuse] was not something I had to suffer or bear just because I had made the mistake and I'd better live with it

now.... I could come out from underneath that and have something better to move into ...

At another point on the conversations we came back to this point,

Jennifer: And what do you think led you to the place where you could see that, or view it that way?

Meg: (Long pause) Feeling that I was holding back, that I was not fully able to participate, to relax, to enjoy, to embrace opportunities, sort of almost seeing myself out there ... like I was participating through a glass almost.

Jennifer: So you had some sense that you were looking out at the world and you weren't in it yet, and you wanted to be more in it?

Meg: More that I was looking at my self through that.

One of the women brought an additional dimension to the notion of voice during conversations about the sense of entitlement or rights with respect to voice. For many years she had believed that she had no rights to decide or manage her own voice and silence. Both were out of her control. The messages that she had received about her voice were very clear: be obedient, be seen and not heard, and speak only when spoken to. She believed that she had no choice but to answer questions, regardless of how intrusive, private or personal the question:

For me, having the choice not to speak was huge. It was just as big as having the choice to speak, because I didn't think I had the right not to give out information about myself.... And there were certain things that I did not want to share with people [such as abuse]. So I spent a lot of my life avoiding certain conversations and certain places, because I didn't want somebody to ask me a question that I'd

have to give the answer to... So I can't even begin to tell you how much energy it took to constantly be trying to keep a secret, because I didn't think I was allowed to, and didn't want to live with the consequences of giving out any of that information.... As soon as [particular] subjects came up, I had to find a way of vacating in case somebody asked me.... So it was a lot of work....

... I didn't know how to tell [people] it was none of [their] bloody business .... So for me choice and voice.... And being purposeful and being able to make that decision about when to speak and not to speak is such a huge part of [my entitlement].

One of the conversations that the women had was around what it takes to gain that sense of entitlement. Jess has watched her mother work around the edges of voice but recognizes that she hasn't come to an awareness of her entitlement as yet and inquired of the others what they thought had enabled them to gain that sense of entitlement or right to have voice:

What do you think contributed to that sense of entitlement? ... I see [my mom] knowing that ... she can see something else. But she can't get to the point of taking action to say something.... She's starting to act out at work, sort of ... in funny kinds of ways.... I don't know, she's just starting to do some things, which are not actually addressing the problem, but it's sort of looking like she's struggling, but she's not at a place of thinking like, 'I don't have to put up with this, I can make a different decision,' so I'm wondering how?

This was a difficult question for the women. Joanne described how her sense of entitlement grew as she recognized and understood what had happened to her mother as a

result of years of being silenced and decided that the costs were simply too high for her to follow in her mother's footsteps:

I think it was my mother's succumbing to the situation that she was in and her lack of willingness to do anything to change it and her giving up of her any entitlement that she had a right to a normal happy life that gave me more impetus to take that for myself. You know, that I wasn't going to let something be repeated. I couldn't help her but I could help myself.

### *Defining Personal Boundaries and Responsibility*

The women described a range of ways in which they began to define and claim their values and principles and limit the extent to which they were willing to take on responsibility for others. They spoke of opening themselves up to caring for themselves, not just others, and of taking personal responsibility for their future. They were starting to lift their heads up and see a bigger world of possibilities, opportunities and relationships. The intention of their actions was to "protect" their emerging sense of self and give it a chance to grow without being shut down by others or re-submerged.

Jess described how she had lost her touchstone of values and principles in her intimate relationship and how this loss had made it difficult for her to assess what was right or wrong. She reflects on how important this touchstone is to her now and how she connects with other people who "live a principled life" as a way to be reinforced for following that path and not losing the connection to her self again:

I'd lost that set of principles, which was where I was acting from before [the relationship]. I'd lost ... touch with what the bottom line was for me. And, when

you're being treated in a certain way that is not okay, that doesn't fit with those then [you have a reference point] ... I've sort of just seen the value in that, in being grounded. Reminding myself of that and if something happens that's not right with me or that doesn't sit right with me or a choice I have to make in my personal life, or whatever, that it's really about the larger picture, and that I have some kind of a reference point.

Meg described how she had no boundaries around her self and how she felt that she had to obey no matter what request was made of her. As she became aware of her right to have voice she was also able to create a boundary that distinguished her self and her rights from those of others:

... when I was younger and people asked me things, I thought I had no right to not answer them. So if somebody came up to me and [asked me an intimate question] I felt I had to answer that. So I spent a lot of my life keeping myself in situations where I would not be asked questions that I did not want to answer because I didn't know how to say, 'You know, that's none of your business.' So for me ... the important part in having voice is not talking as well as talking and that is probably as big for me because I just never felt I had the right to say no to anybody including about my personal information.

All of the women described ways in which they had stopped taking on sole responsibility for the well-being of others, the success or failure of their relationships, or the education of others. They became aware that they could both care for others and the self. This awareness of self and other, or self in relation to other, rather than just the "other" was experienced as very freeing. Karen had spent years trying to create a

relationship with her mother that fit a certain image. She described learning new information in a psychology course on interpersonal relationships and becoming aware that she was:

... really knocking myself out trying to have a good relationship with my mother and it felt like I was the one that was doing all the giving and wasn't getting much back you know and I had this conversation with the instructor and ... it was like those kind of 'aha' moments ... I saw better what I was doing in the relationship and how I had to change it some.... I had to change how I was relating with her to some degree but I also saw that there were some things here I just can't change. My mother is who she is and I am who I am and you know we can have a relationship but it is not going to be what I'd like it to be ideally....

Jennifer: ...It sounds as if there are ... some parallels in those two experiences [with husband and mother] where there's a lot of 'keeping it in' and it was your responsibility to fix things or to acquiesce and to accommodate and then, for different reasons, you came to a place in both of those, it sounds like, where you thought 'It doesn't have to be all on me and I have some rights here.' These aren't your words but... 'I'm important too and I have something to say and it is acceptable for me to set some limits and expectations.' Do you see that as happening?

Karen: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah.

Jess described how, for many years, she felt very responsible for being "the Aboriginal voice" in situations where this vital perspective was missing. She was concerned about her community and she was a medium, as an Aboriginal woman, to

bring the Aboriginal voice and perspective forward. This helped her in the journey to find her own voice:

... just starting to see myself as part of something, like a community that wasn't based on location, but in something else. [My professor] sort of said it was 'finding my voice' but also writing myself into that larger dialogue.... It shifted over time, because I got more comfortable.... I stopped feeling so defensive. I think at first ... I was angry, like, 'Why am I the only person saying something?' ... and then (laughs) I started to just get used to it or something....

However, beyond "getting used to it" Jess also described a process of clarifying her personal boundaries and learning how to select what she says and in what contexts in order that she can care for her self. When she first started to test her voice she took on responsibility for being a "medium" through which the Aboriginal perspective was communicated and shared with others. Over time she has realized that "I'm not just a bridge, and I'm not just a tool." She is a talented and skilled person who can make choices about what she speaks about, when and to whom so that she can continue to care for and honour her self, while also making a difference in her community.

The women described a variety of ways in which they became aware of their responsibility to get out of or make something of their situation. Meg described becoming aware of what she needed to do for herself and her children:

... recognizing that I was the only person that was really holding me back...

Being able to sort of understand it and take it apart afterwards, you know, was (P) well that's a lifelong thing that I'm never quite done with. But recognizing that it was me that needed to make the shift there, it wasn't that I needed other people to

do anything differently, or I couldn't rely on anybody, that it wasn't about other people.

Jess: So how did you come to that awareness?

Meg: Well, the rest of the world wasn't going to change, so whatever it was, the barriers that I was thinking existed that prevented me from being able to step forward and be strong and say what I needed to say, do what I needed to do, they were artificial in some cases, because I perceived them to be there. And if they were real, emotional barriers, then they were going to be there constantly unless I was prepared to dismantle them. So I needed to do it myself. I couldn't rely on being re-parented or having another childhood that was a more solid one or whatever. I had to take control.

Laura described her awareness that the experience of many Native adoptees was similar or far worse than her own. She had been fortunate to have a loving, caring adoptive family that gave her many powerful and important messages about her worth and value as a human being and her capacity to do and be whatever she wanted to do and be. Despite this, she had experienced confusion and doubt about herself and her place in the world and recognized this in other Native adoptees. She took on personal responsibility:

... and just in that year, I realized that I have something to say that needs to be said, and I think that I'm somebody who can say it so that it can be heard, and so that I can help mediate cultures, build a bridge, form foundations that somebody might be able to build a bridge over top of, those kinds of things. I was thinking

about planting seeds as opposed to conquering nations, but I had the conquering nations in mind, but I knew the seeds had to be planted first....

In addition to making shifts in the how they took on responsibility for others, they also shifted the way that they cared for themselves. Establishing clearer boundaries about what was acceptable, what they would take on and what was not their responsibility to fix was part of caring for self. Joanne described how she vacated the role ascribed to her within her marriage:

I have abandoned this position that I've maintained within it ... there's nobody there in that anymore.... I have ... attached myself to who I *really* am and I've vacated this role that he thought I should occupy and that I tried to attach myself to *so* hard, you know, to be that person, and to be the one that could be able to cope with whatever it was that got put in my direction. But I suddenly viewed it that I'm not there anymore ... I'm back to discovering who I was, being loyal to myself instead of trying to be another person to satisfy the need of the relationship.

Emotional and spiritual self care was discussed by the women. Laura described the way in which her colleagues and friends have supported and celebrated her and how this has enabled her to be more connected and integrated in her self. Her colleagues describe it as: "Laura's embarking on this amazing journey of self discovery", and they see it as part of the holistic being that makes up me in my spiritual, mental and spiritual and emotional way...."

Jess spoke of going to a traditional healer to help her deal with writer's block during the time she was writing her thesis on a very emotional and powerful topic. She was unable to "speak" about what she knew in her text:

I got sent to see a woman who's like a traditional healer, an Aboriginal woman.... And she said, 'You don't have to tell me anything ... you don't have to tell me your story.' She said, 'I'm sure you've told it many times to other people. You tell it to yourself all the time, you know what your issue is, your problem, you talk yourself through, why, why aren't you doing. That's not the level that change happens on. It's at a deeper, spiritual or emotional level that change has to happen.' So the stuff we did together was not at all about talking. It was at a different level.

### *Finding a Place to Speak From*

In speaking about the theme of finding a place to speak from, another dimension is added to the earlier image of floating down the river of emerging awareness and consciousness. Here the women find a place to stand, they gain their footing on a rock or on the bank of the river – they "locate" or situate themselves for awhile. It is here and at this time that they integrate or re-integrate their sense of self and their sense of self in relation to others. This is a powerful shift in terms of finding voice, defining voice and connecting to a sense of purpose. To relate back to the image of the river, they have their feet on the ground and can see where they have come from, where they might be going and are beginning to gain a sense of confidence about their journey. There is a connection between self, voice, and purpose or meaning in relation to the larger context.

In conversations with Jess she described how her journey into voice really began when she “found a place to speak from” as an Aboriginal woman. Since then she has circled around the notion of identity and finding a place to speak from. She described a continual process of re-locating herself and re-forming her identity:

I think you always remake the place you’re speaking from....

... the other day I was saying to my best friend, ‘I’m having an identity crisis again!’ (laughter in group) Like I go through times of thinking, ‘What am I doing? ... I’m not acting like myself. I’m doing these silly things that don’t make sense to me intellectually.’ But that’s just part of [growth] I know that in order to come back to something that’s truer or whatever.

When Jess has had a sense of where she stands, her voice has been more accessible to her and stronger. When she has lost her footing and the “ground” of her principles it has been more difficult for her to locate her voice.

Several of the women described how they found a place to speak from through their studies in university. They acquired language that enabled them to access, explain, and validate their experiences. One spoke about finding herself resisting the efforts that were being made to “groom” her as a middle class academic, she discovered that she was comfortable locating herself as a “working class” person and she found a place to speak from and a way to bring her life experience into her relationships with others:

I got to the point where I said, ‘Excuse me, you’re interrupting my integrity as a working class woman here because this is all about being middle class and this has nothing to do with my reality.’ So being working class is okay.... Because for the longest time I thought it was bad and wrong because I attached it to all of

the negative parts of my life.... And eventually I figured out that it wasn't really ... there are some negative things about being working class but a lot of the things I was attaching to being working class weren't really about class at all.

The women discussed the relationship of voice to contexts and where we "locate ourselves" as we speak. They considered the challenges of speaking about certain topics in certain contexts, such as speaking within Aboriginal communities about issues that are uncomfortable to talk about, such as violence, sexual exploitation, substance misuse, and intergenerational abuse. Laura described a situation that was difficult at the time but that lead her to locate herself as a Native adoptee that was willing to ask for guidance and as a person who was going to speak up so that others in her situation did not experience the shame of "not knowing":

... At one point in those early years [of the Native adoptee group] we had some fellow who came to one of our meetings, and I'd made some comment about this eagle feather that somebody had given to me and it had fallen off the special place I kept it, and I noticed that the cat had batted it around. Well, that's kind of like the cat batting around a bunch of blessed hosts in the Catholic Church, I mean, its just pretty sacrilegious stuff. But I didn't realize it at the time, and I said, 'I sure hope the creator has a sense of playfulness and forgiveness because it wasn't my intention that the cat would bat around my eagle feather.' And he just said, 'Oh yeah.' But he never came back to any of our meetings after and he never returned our calls. So somebody else in the group asked him, 'What's going on, you said you were going to help us?' And he said 'Well, there was a blatant disrespect for eagle feathers in your group.' So it ties back to my little story about the eagle

feather falling off its perch and the cat playing with it while I was at school....

Totally harmless things in my universe, and ... I felt terrible after that. I thought, 'Oh I've gone and offended this person who's a cultural leader and is going to help us and I've wrecked it for the rest of us.' And I didn't realize that I could have said, 'I'm really sorry, I didn't realize and I'm always open to learning. I know I don't know a lot of stuff, I'm really sorry if I've offended you in any way, if you could help me out here I'd really appreciate being pointed out what I need to learn.'

And since then I'm pretty clear with my, 'You know what? I don't know everything, and if I'm doing something wrong, please tell me.' And people do, and it's like, 'Okay, I didn't realize, I'm sorry, okay, I'll take note of that.' And I appreciate that. In the moment I always feel a little bit humiliated and bad - why can't I do everything right? Why do I always mess up? But afterwards I think, 'Okay, well I didn't know. Now I do know, and I can carry that with me and apply it, and help others too who don't know and just say, 'Maybe you don't realize this, but the protocol is...' just fill in the blank.

Jennifer: What you were hoping to achieve with your use of voice.

Laura: Right. So I was hoping to help other Native adoptees understand that it's okay to ask questions, it's okay that you don't know everything. It's normal, the feelings you have are normal and natural. You're not a freak, you're not a weirdo. We can't help our situation, it's not our fault...

## *Working Around the Edges of Voice*

### *Practicing and Experimenting with Voice*

The women described experiences that suggested that they were working around the edges of voice. As they became clearer about the need for change and their need to use their voices, they began to consider how they would bring this about; what would they need to do in order to make it happen? They were both mentally and physically preparing for action and in some cases “convincing” themselves that they could do it and would make it. Several of the women reached out to others who had experienced similar situations in order to learn from them and receive some guidance.

Jess described how she and her mom “practice” on each other as they are preparing to use their voice in new or different contexts and when they are being silenced in one context they test their voices out with each other:

... how we assert ourselves with each other has always had a relationship to our other relationships. If I’m being silenced in my relationship, I’m really outspoken with my mom because that’s a safe place.... And she says the same thing. She says, ‘I’m putting a boundary.’ Like the other night I wanted to go to her house and she said, ‘I’m going to go to bed early, and I’m putting my foot down with you, but I know that I’m doing that as practice for putting my foot down at work.’

Laura described how she practiced with her voice by writing university papers on topics that mattered to her once she’d located her self as a Native adoptee:

I was a C+/B- student before that.... Then I became an A student, because I had something to say. I would go to class, they would say, ‘I want you to write a paper on this,’ and I would say, ‘Well, you know what? I’d like my topic to be

this, can I?' I wrote papers, I exercised making a voice by writing papers and through my study.

Many years later, Laura is once again experimenting with her voice as she creates a relationship with her birth mother and tries to find her voice in the midst of a very complex situation. She described a process of tentatively discussing the details of her first visit to meet her birth family while at the same time carrying inside of herself a desire to speak out in a public way about what she had learned about the circumstances of the adoption placement :

... so we spent two months talking on the phone preparing for this visit. We talked about what we were going to wear ... how it should be. And she said, 'Who do you want to be there?' I said, 'Well, whatever, everybody, anybody, the more the merrier, it's fine by me.' She said, 'Can I invite my friend?' and I said 'Yeah.' 'Can I invite your cousins?' 'Yeah!' 'Can we invite the girls' boyfriends?' I'm like, 'Yeah!' I was just totally game for everything.

And I think we were talking about what we were going to wear, and I said, 'I don't know what I should wear,' and she said, 'Me neither.' I said, 'I want to look nice but I also want to be comfortable, I'll be coming from one climate into another, and I'll be unsure and I really want to look good and (wail)! You know, and especially if we're going to be taking pictures.' And she's like, 'Oh yeah we have to take pictures,' and I'm like 'Yeah, we have to take pictures. I'm going to bring my camera, are you going to bring your camera?' 'Yeah,' she goes, 'You know it'd be good if we had somebody taking pictures for us.' I said, 'Yeah I was thinking that too.' And then she said, 'You know, in fact it'd be good if we had

somebody like videotaping it.' I said, 'Yeah! I was thinking that too.' And I said, 'In fact, it's a really good story to tell.' She said, 'Yeah, I was thinking that too!' ... (laughter) ... Finally, I think she said, 'I was wondering but I didn't want to bring it up because I was afraid you might not like it, but I was wondering if you want to, do we want to tell our story?' And I said, 'OH! I've been thinking the same thing too!' And then ... it's like we pulled off our gloves and started having a real conversation, or pulled off our masks or something. It was like, let's just take away this silly sheet that's hanging between us that we're talking through, and really just cut aside the bullshit and talk about what we really want to talk about.

Karen experimented with and tested her voice in new contexts and through this became more acquainted with it and built some confidence in her ability to contribute to conversations and have something meaningful to offer. She described an experience as a member of a community board that worked on issues that were very connected to her experience as a marginalized woman. She tested her voice with the other women and learned that her voice and life experience (self) was valued in some contexts:

... when we talked about the issues and how we needed to deal with things I often would feel at a fairly deep emotional level.... Everything was by consensus of course, any decisions. And I remember this one particular time, I don't even know what we were deciding on, and I just said ... 'It doesn't feel right to me.' And they said, 'What is it?' And I said, 'I have no idea. All I know is my gut is twisting. It just doesn't feel right to me, but I can't tell you why.' And they said, 'Well fine (laughs). Until your tummy's okay we're not moving on this.' And

we talked a lot and finally I was able to figure out what it was that didn't sit right with me by talking it through ... everybody said, 'Okay! Totally valid, totally valid.' Because ... I wasn't working from a brain place, I was working from an emotional place, and they knew that and they honoured that.... They'd often say, 'So how are you *feeling* about this, Karen?' ... I wasn't always able to articulate... But what I think was amazing was I had the confidence when they said, 'We're not going to move until you can get voice around this. We will wait,' that I said, 'Okay.' You know in the past I wouldn't have. I would've said, 'Oh, I'm being stupid.'

Another dimension of working around the edges was the shift that the women made from being "angry", "reactive" or "outspoken" to "having voice" or being "strategic" with their voices. Several women experimented with speaking and being outspoken in university and this enabled them to learn things about their voices and the impact that they could have.

Laura: Somebody actually kind of pulled it out of me [in university]. They said, 'I want you to talk about that, can you do that?' (laughter) 'Oh, uh, er, well ok, sure! What do you want me to say?' (laughter) I want to take notes! Somebody thought that I would be a good voice for this topic, and said, 'You need to speak about it'.... It was for an assignment actually. To present on this.

Jennifer: ...And by somebody saying they think you have something to offer?

Laura: I thought, 'Oh, I suppose I do.'

Jennifer: Okay, and then what happened? ‘I suppose I do...’ but you didn’t leave it at this level [

Laura: Well no, because the reaction of how people accepted my words and interpreted them and held on to them and experienced them, then created this whole discussion which brought us to all these other levels.

Jess: So that was quite external then, it sounds like, as well as internal.

Laura: Yeah, but I didn’t know that at that time. I didn’t realize that, it wasn’t a flip switching (sic) at that moment. It was just, I’m thinking now, that somebody thought I would be good to talk – ‘Well, she’s the outspoken one in the class, let’s get her to talk about it,’ which is always happening in my life because I *am* the outspoken one. (P) And a dialogue was created, a discussion I should say, was created and it brought us to these new levels, and it brought *me* to new levels of understanding.

Through the process of experimentation and testing and reflecting on experiences, the women had moments of realizing that their voice could make a difference. Joanne used her voice tentatively with her husband in order to get some help for her child, and experienced success. She tried it again to get help for herself to go back to school and experienced some success. Meg’s experimentation with her voice in university lead to criticism from some people, but also validation from others whom she respected. Jess’s voice encouraged new conversations and collective inquiry and awareness. Karen’s voice started to establish clear boundaries with her husband and with her mother. Laura tested her voice in university and began to develop a sense of possibilities for her future.

### *Working Through a Long Process*

All of the women described experiences of moving in and out of awareness about their voice and self and that “coming to voice” was a long process for them that is still not over.

Several of the women described how they spent many years thinking that their lives were as good as they were going to get. One described how she felt that she was “unworthy” of anything more. It was a gradual process of getting new information and validation that enabled them to question these belief systems and develop some measure of value for themselves. They experienced a gradual process of practicing new ways of being – going to classes and community events, reaching out for help for their children, challenging their partners, receiving affirmations from friends and colleagues, going to school, getting jobs, and having “tastes” of what was possible beyond their current, often controlled and restricted, worlds.

Karen spent four years working around the edges of voice in her marriage and trying to locate her self and voice within that context. It took many more years of exploration and effort to come to her voice with her mother. Joanne spent many years feeling “trapped” (since being pregnant with her first child), knowing that it was not a healthy marriage. Her beliefs were that she had to stay for the benefit of the children, she had created this and she had to live with the consequences of her actions, she could make it better, and she couldn’t survive on her own. It took thirteen years before she was reached a point where she could began to make some fundamental changes.

Laura talked about questioning her place and identity and feeling that she did not belong in either the white world or the Native world throughout her childhood,

adolescence and young adulthood. She also talked about her fear of facing that and of moving away from encounters with people who she thought knew more about who she was as a Native person than she did. Encountering another Native adoptee in her 20's when she was away from her home community initiated a process of coming to locate herself in the world and gave her a place to speak from.

Jess's story of moving in and out of voice over her adolescence and young adulthood and in different contexts captures well the fluidity and elusiveness of voice. Her story of not finding voice in the midst of her relationship with an abusive partner was particularly moving as her questions about why she couldn't find voice, why she didn't use voice, why she gave up her self and what mattered to her, what it was that kept her there when she knew that it was not healthy or right, described for many of us that in-between place of knowing but not knowing; of knowing that something is terribly wrong, but of not knowing how to get out of it. Being stuck but also aware enough to know that one is stuck and struggling. Her story gave the opportunity to look into the process and the challenge of finding voice.

The women's experiences of coming into voice and sense of self illustrates how once we have a new scene before us we cannot pretend that it does not exist. We may try to shift our gaze away from that which is coming into view but it does now exist in our consciousness. Our existence and our experience are now mediated by our knowledge. To ignore what we have come to know is a conscious decision to suppress the self, as the next section describes, none of the women were willing to make that sacrifice any longer.

## No Turning Back - The Voicing Moment

In this section the women describe the moment or point in time when they knew, with great clarity, that they must use their voices to create greater well-being, for themselves, their families or their communities. The details of each woman's experience are different but threads connect each of the stories. It is these connecting threads or themes of thoughts, actions and feelings that I speak to and interpret. "Crossing the Line Into Voice" describes their transition from unclear to clear, from silence or tentative voice to clear voice, from not knowing to knowing, from awareness to consciousness. The focus here is on their intellectual process and thoughts. "Taking Action" describes and interprets the effect of this transition on their behaviour; what action did they take? "Achieving Alignment – Voice and Self" describes and interprets the sensations, feelings and emotional awareness that they experienced and the impact of this awareness on their sense of self and consciousness.

### *Descriptions of the Voicing Moments*

#### *Story One*

This participant has a vivid recollection of the moment that she became crystal clear about the need for change in her life. It was at this time that her inner voice became strong and clear and she knew that there was no turning back:

There was a period of time when I was in a state of recognizing that I couldn't continue but I didn't really know that I could survive, and I was afraid of being on my own. So I felt that I had to stay in the relationship because I wasn't going to be able to manage ... to look after children, and I felt that whole sense of giving

up one problem but getting another one, and of being trapped, completely trapped. So that went on for quite a number of years, that I was in that situation, of sort of knowing that I had got to change, this has got to shift. And then there was a time when my parents were visiting...

We were on an outing, and we'd had several discussions, my husband and I at that time, about what things needed to improve and we'd reached the point, I felt, of no return, and he'd made some commitments about what he would do differently. And on this particular day we were [in a park], in the middle of a picnic, and it had just been absolutely awful, and that sort of sense of realizing, it sunk in. You know I can remember the moment quite clearly, that it doesn't matter what I have to contend with in the rest of my life, I will not continue with this. And he walked away from me. I remember saying something to him, and he kept walking and I called across the beach. So ... lots of other people having their picnics, and I just yelled, 'You let me down' quite loudly.... I was in a state of falling apart at the time, in as polite [and proper] a way as I could with my parents as observers to this, so ... the height of embarrassment. But it was just like, 'That's it!' So from that point on then it became a question of looking to be able to contain the situation and do it as quickly as possible, and as painlessly as possible, and with as least damage ... to the children as possible.

### *Story Two*

This participant shared two voicing "points in time," both of which took years to attain and fundamentally shifted the nature of her significant relationships. One voicing

experience was with her mother. In the one shared below she speaks to coming to know that she had to end her marriage.

... Two instances [voicing moments] came to mind, and two different situations because I guess they're just strong vivid memories when ... 'This is it!' One was in my marriage.... My marriage ... had been very rocky for a few years and it was reaching a point where I was feeling like I was losing respect for myself and that's when it finally really clicked with me that I felt ... not only was I putting up with things I didn't want to put up with, and things weren't getting better and I was working at it and trying to make changes. But then when I realized that that wasn't going to happen, that my husband wasn't going to change.... Or to me he wasn't committed to the relationship and trying to rebuild our marriage ....

It was within myself that I realized, 'I've really lost my self respect in this, I'm not feeling good about myself. It is no longer that I am feeling bad about him and what he's done, I'm really feeling bad about myself.' ... It was just like this trigger for me so that I (P) instead of kind of being sweet and (laugh) ... kinda going along and trying to give him lots of space you know, it was just like, 'No – this is not okay any more - I will not accept this.' And so from that point on I was just able to speak up more clearly for myself and about myself and suddenly began to feel stronger in myself because I was doing that.... When you experience that - of this so much better speaking up – it just becomes easier to keep doing it.

### *Story Three*

I have shared this participant's experience through two passages – one that speaks to a process and point in time and the other a defined voicing moment. In the first she describes the process of becoming more aware and concludes that her transition to voice happened when she began to see both what was at stake and that there might be other options. She expresses her puzzlement about what happened to trigger the shift. In the second passage she describes an experience she had just after she had left her husband. It was during this moment that she attained heightened clarity about what was going on and what needed to happen in order that she could stay alive. This was her “no turning back” moment:

I can't think for the life of me what it was for me [that triggered the shift]. I'm trying to think what it was, and I just keep thinking about that song, “Amazing Grace,” you know, “I was blind and then I could see”, and I don't know what happened. (sighs) Maybe it was sort of like that Maslow's thing. That for the longest time getting up, and breathing and eating, and moving through life and not getting hit or hurt, was all I thought about, was how I could get through each day, breathe, eat and survive. I think I was in survival mode....

... I got to the point where it wasn't that important anymore. I got to the point where... ‘This isn't enough. Survival isn't enough.... I don't know what it was. It certainly wasn't thinking through anything...

But ... I think it's also kind of living in that tense place of survival for so long, and watching. ‘Vigilance’ is the word ... where I was watching all the time, what I needed to do to make everything all right, so that the world wouldn't

collapse around me. It was that always being vigilant. I think I just got tired, I just couldn't do it anymore, and I started to see that maybe I didn't need to do that.... Other people didn't live like that, maybe I didn't need to live like that. I don't know what happened that threw that switch. It's an interesting question. And I really don't know, and it may have been just hitting that wall of realizing that I was at the point where I was too tired to do that anymore....

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In this second description, the woman describes her reaction to receiving a call from a close friend who was assisting her husband as he was very upset about the decision she'd made to separate from him. The participant's husband was threatening to do harm to himself,

My friend phoned [me] and said, 'You know ... I can't help him, I've got to get the counselor ... I don't know what else to do.' And I said, 'Don't worry about it. I'm fighting for my life here. It's him or me. So, I'm not going back to him.... Here's the number [of the counselor] and I'm sorry you need to do this.'

So, he just tried everything he could to get at me, and I just (laughs) ... got stubborn. I just put my feet in and ... by this time I'd seen something: a life that I wanted.... I didn't want to die but I knew if I went back to him I would because it was worse than death, you know it was just worse than death because I was lost and I was destroyed in it.... I wanted to find out who I was...

... I can still remember, I can still see where I was sitting when that phone call came through...It became crystal clear to me in that conversation.

### *Story Four*

This participant shared several stories about coming into and using her voice. Her first experience was when she was in grade nine. She became aware of the absence of Aboriginal voices in a rally concerning lands that were traditional territories for the Aboriginal people and she used her voice to bring forward an Aboriginal perspective. In university she became aware of the absence of Aboriginal voice and this started her along a path of learning, writing and discovering both a place to speak from and issues to speak about. Her stories were interesting in that she didn't define particular moments in which a transition from silence to voice occurred but she reflected on experiences that were defining for her along the way, as illustrated by the following example:

I think that my (P) speaking at least in the last (P) well - eight years ... has been driven by the knowledge that there are so many of my relatives and so many Aboriginal women who *are* silenced.... I left [my relative's] funeral feeling ... she had so much still to say. And she had spoken and nobody had listened to her about abuse and things like that, and somebody needed to speak. And I have a lot of privilege in my ability to succeed in the university classroom too.... I don't have as much at risk. I have a fairly comfortable life compared (P) to her, and to so many other people in my family. (P) I've always had the ability, say, to go to the reserve where my family lives, but I've also been able to leave, and they don't have that necessarily.... All of the issues there that my cousins and everybody is [living with] there's so much alcoholism and violence like intergenerational abuse and poverty and all those things that I've seen when I've been within that community. But I've also been able to step out and have the tools to speak to that,

and to try to bring about change... You can't be, (P) it's hard to be creative when you're immersed in it.... So I think that's mostly where my speaking comes from, or trying to find a way to make people listen, because I do know that I have more [privilege and opportunity].

### *Story Five*

This participant shared two voicing experiences. The first took place in her 20's and evolved through developing connections with other Native adoptees. The second happened a few years ago when she found her birth family after many years of searching. At this time she learned that her birth mother did not even know she was alive, having been told after she gave birth that her baby had died. The woman's descriptions of both of these experiences are shared below as they illustrate the different ways that one woman can come into voice – through time or in the midst of a critical event. In the first experience the participant had been working with other Native adoptees in a support group and had decided that they wanted to take their work to a new level:

Well, we wanted to advocate on behalf of Native adoptees so that the adoptees could go home to their communities, can get some help and support, so that the communities aren't just receiving somebody out of the blue and turning them away which was the general practice back then. It was like, 'We don't want to know who you are, and we don't really want to have anything to do with you.' So we wanted to go to the communities and go, 'Here's the thing. We didn't pop out of our mother's wombs and go, 'I want to be adopted.' You know, it was totally out of our hands and we had to make our way ourselves.' We wanted to create

something changeful that would support adoptees going back through their reunion process.

... One of the persons in our group was a journalism student and she had contacts in the media... She decided we should write an editorial for [a national newspaper] based on this little Native boy that had been adopted into a non-Native home, same as his mother, creating this big uproar in the media at the time. She said, 'This needs to be written by tomorrow at 4 o'clock, we're going to get in the [media] and we'll get paid for it.' Okay, so we all got together and in a few hours pounded something out. So that happened that year, and I was also interviewed on CBC Radio... CKNW in Vancouver... CBC Radio North ... McGill station at McGill University...

And just in that year, I realized that I have something to say that needs to be said, and I think that I'm somebody who can say it so that it can be heard... That whole year, just every time it happened ... that kind of feeling came over: I have something to say, they're going to listen. I'm no longer just some little 17-year-old kid who doesn't really know anything...

Jennifer: ... So in that period when this was happening, was there a point or a time where you looked back and went, 'Whoa!' This is, as you said, 'I'm no longer a 17-year-old kid anymore.' Was there a transition in your view that you're kind of aware of or conscious of, of having been silenced or silent, to 'I have something to say, I am the person to say it, and I'm going to do that because it's best for my community, and for others?' Was there that kind of realization at any point, do you think?

Woman: I think so, but it came slow, and it's still unfolding because there's still things at stake and there's still different things to be said, and there's still lots of silencing happening....And I can either chose to let it occur. I can say, 'No I'm not standing for that, I need you to hear me,' or something in between the two.

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In the following, the woman describes how she learned about the circumstances of her adoption and how this critical event brought her to crystal clarity that she needed to have and use her voice:

So then a flurry of emails back and forth [with members of her birth family] was how we discovered that I'm a stillborn baby to them, and they're my long lost family to me.... So I actually discovered that while sitting in this office, and I just went numb. I thought, 'This can't be. This cannot be.' But I'd already heard through other Native adoptees of similar things... They actually find their family and the family says, 'It can't be you. They told us you died when you were 4.'

... So I thought, part of my head's already working. They're not going to get away with this. I have to speak up, and I thought long and hard about it and I thought, 'Oh, but if I speak up I'm going to be scrutinized by the media. I'm going to lose my privacy, I'm going to be explaining myself to family, blah blah blah.' And I didn't even think about the family right off the bat, it took about two minutes for that to trickle in.... What are they going to think? How are they going to take this? Oh my God! What is going to happen? Of course they didn't do anything illicit in adopting me.

... I knew that I had something to say, but I didn't know how to say it, or when to say it ... or what to say. But I also knew that I wasn't going to let this slide. That it wasn't enough for me to just tell people in my environment....

Jennifer... Well, I guess it's almost like there was a part of you that was mindful of the risks and what was at stake in both speaking and in not speaking.

Woman: Mmmhmm, yeah definitely.

Jennifer: There wasn't an easy way out, was there, once you got this information?

Woman: It's like ignorance is bliss. Yeah, can't I go back to 'not knowing', I'd like to not know, but I *did* know, and I knew that I had to do something about it.

Jennifer: So did you know at that moment that you had to do something, like was that clarity there despite all the confusion?

Woman: That clarity was there, but I wasn't sure how, or when, or what. I knew too, that I would have to be very careful to consider how I present it. Can't just walk in a room and say, 'Hi! ... I was stillborn. According to my birthmother I was stillborn, but here I am, and I found her 13 years later.' That's not going to have nearly as much impact or meaning behind it.... (P) I have to use my voice properly.

### *Crossing the Line Into Voice*

As the descriptions illustrate, some of the women recall specific moments at which they found their voice, whereas others speak to a point in time during which the

shift occurred for them. Several had both types of experiences. Some recall with visual images and can place themselves in a location, a time of day, and in relation to other people and conversations. Others connect the experience more to sensations and feelings that grew over time and to the point where they looked up and saw things clearly and knew that they needed to act.

Although there is diversity across and even within the women as to their experiences, there are a number of connecting threads. One thread that connects all of these experiences is that the women had all been engaged in a process, over years, of experiencing, reflecting, wondering, inquiring and questioning about themselves, their voice and their circumstances. These processes increased their awareness, sense of self and ultimately their consciousness. As Jess said, “Well there’s no going back, right? (laughter in group) If you go back that’s a conscious decision to suppress ourselves.” Joanne describes her thoughts about turning back and how this made it even clearer to her that she could not turn back:

I nearly gave in [to my husband] but, I just thought about how it felt to be with him and, and I thought ‘No, I can’t do it, I can’t go back there, I can’t go back there.’

Jennifer: There was literally no turning back?

Joanne: There was no turning back. ... [J]ust the thought of him touching me, and me not being able to get away from his touch, I just felt like I’d vomit so ... I couldn’t go back. And I was starting to get angry at his manipulation....

Meg spoke about telling her mother and mother-in-law of her decision to end her marriage and they both tried to dismiss her husband’s behaviour as “boys will be boys”

and implored her to “work it out”. When I asked if this response raised any doubts in her mind about her decision she acknowledged that it would have up to the point that she attained the clarity of knowing what she needed to do:

Jennifer: ... And when your mom for example was saying, ‘Can’t you work this out, boys will be boys,’ that kind of thing, did you ever have any doubt? Did that change the way you felt?

Meg: Not at that point, no. It made me sad I suppose that she couldn’t see it. I guess I felt she didn’t see it enough from my perspective. I think with my mother too there was some embarrassment and probably some ... sadness too so I think that was part of her reaction.... But there wasn’t any doubt with me....

Jennifer: So you weren’t questioning your voice or your self or your decision?

Meg: No, but that took, like I say, that was a process. If I had talked to my mother earlier ... I might have said, ‘Yeah ... I’m not going to throw away a 20-year marriage here’ ... because I wasn’t ... I was trying to make it, to do something with it. But I was at this point where I felt just 100 percent sure within me that the marriage had to end, so no one could have swayed me in any way.

Jennifer: It was a ‘no turning back’ point?

Meg: Exactly!

Laura described the angst she has experienced with trying to speak about the circumstances of her adoption while protecting her adoptive family as they feel very vulnerable:

And I've been very clear with them [her adoptive family], 'I have to say this. I can't not. I can't not tell this story. Sorry that it affects you in the way that it does. But if you want to have a part of it, you've got to raise your voice too.'

Jennifer: Yeah, I really get from you that there's just no possibility that you could keep a lid on this....

Laura: ... This is what I'm supposed to be working on, absolutely!

The intellect was very much engaged in the process. As people described their movement from silence to voice their language shifted from "I didn't know" to "I thought," "I knew," "I got it," "It was in my mind," "I was clear in my mind," "I realized," and "I decided." They had achieved a level of awareness about who they were (sense of self), what was going on, what was at stake, and what was possible. They were seeing things that they hadn't noticed before or that they had thought they just needed to accept, and they consciously realized that they could bring about change.

Whether there was a definable moment or not, all of the women knew, both intellectually and emotionally, that there was no turning back and that they must move forward. Most were not clear at the outset how they would operationalize this understanding and resolve, but knew that they could do it and that they had to do it.

### *Taking Action*

For most of the women, their voicing moment did not immediately translate into "speaking out"; the voice that they had achieved was more of a clear internal voice and a resolution to attend to it and honour it through their actions. They knew that they needed to act, although it was not necessarily clear what to do, how to do it, or when to do it.

This was a time of confusion and anxiety for many of the women as they tried to work out the details however they plunged into the river and kept moving forward, taking action, as is illustrated below.

Karen knew she needed to leave the marriage, but knew she couldn't achieve this without help so she encouraged her husband to go to a counselor with her and then asked for a trial separation. She realized that she had to be cautious but strategic if she was to safely leave the relationship:

I ended up deciding I had to leave him. I couldn't live with it any more once I got a bit of taste of freedom and being treated like a human being, I just didn't want to go back there.... [H]e was starting to get pretty desperate because he knew he'd lost control, so he agreed to see a counselor.... [W]e went to this guy ... and we got around to trying a trial separation....

[My husband] was always trying to find excuses to see me and the psychologist was, was pretty plain about no contact whatsoever.... I just didn't feel safe ... so finally I 'fessed up to the counselor that I never wanted to go back to him.... He was really angry with me. He said that I used him ... and I'd been dishonest with him ... He said, 'Why don't you just tell me the truth ... because this was a trial separation to save your marriage or try and save your marriage and yet ... you entered it knowing that, and having no intention of wanting to save the marriage.' So what I told him was that I was terrified of [my husband] ... because he had confined me so much and controlled everything I did so much and he always won....

Jennifer: The stakes were very high....

Karen: ... He always won.... I told the counselor that.... 'I didn't know how to get away from him because I'd never gotten away from him before ... and this was the only safe way because you got him to agree.'

Laura described how she "didn't know how to say it, or when to say it ... or what to say," but she knew that she needed to do something. Over time, she created a vision, with her birth mother, about how she wanted to tell others about the circumstances of her adoption and what she wanted to achieve and then has started to take action and connect with others to bring this vision to life. In the passage below she is describing how she and her birth mother selected a producer to assist them, and defined the terms of his participation:

...[my birth mother] met this producer ... one day and had him call me and I got him on the phone and went up one side of him and down the other, and totally interrogated him, and I said, 'Look, the most important thing is the integrity of the story, our privacy and our dignity. And if you can't do that justice, we can't work with you. You have to follow our guidelines, it's that simple.'

When Meg became clear that she needed to end her marriage and reclaim her self she "vacated" her old position and began to create a new role and way of being. It took over a year to finally separate from her husband but throughout this time she was taking action on practical matters, establishing herself in a career, becoming more financially stable, and planning for what she had hoped would be an amicable separation. In addition to managing the practical aspects of a separation, Meg was also taking action to assure her family and friends that she could cope and would not be dependent on them for

support. The effect of this was that she took action on her self; she convinced her self that she could make it through:

So I was very anxious that people know that this was going to be very different for me, but I don't know that I really [believed it] ...(laughs)

Jennifer : There were some doubts?

Meg: Yeah. Big time. So I knew that I was going to have to do some persuading ... that this was going to be okay. So I think in doing that it had the effect of preparing me mentally for it, so I was rehearsing for a year.... I mean I don't think I ever really thought of that until this moment, but that's kind of how that worked.

Jennifer: Imagining how best to take care of other people's views of things and in persuading them you were somehow persuading yourself?

Practicing for that?

Meg: Exactly, yeah. In other words, that I was going to be able to cope, and this was how I would proceed, and this was how we would minimize the fallout, and the damage to the children, and, you know, it wouldn't be these things that I'd observed other people run into, that it was somehow going to be different for me ...

I just, I had *no* idea, really, how it was all going to work out.... I was worried and very anxious about how it was all going to all fall into place, or not fall into place, but ... I just tried to convince myself that it would be okay. So, that was what got me through ... I just did a sell job on my self. I was busy doing that for other people, so it was just like, 'Okay, let's keep going on this!'

All of the women read literature, poetry, magazine articles, and books as means to gather new information and perspectives and help them either in recovery, reclamation or discovery. Joanne described the impact of taking this action, “C.S. Lewis said, ‘We read to know we are not alone,’ and [reading] for me was quite pivotal in that ... I’m not crazy, other people are feeling that too.”

### *Achieving Alignment – Voice and Self*

#### *Coming to Life - Recovery*

As the women chose voice and self, they created a place to come into their lives again or more fully, with more intention and mindfulness. They experienced intense physical and emotional sensations. Some of these sensations felt positive: “being able to breathe again,” “relief flooding over,” being relieved of the “weight of the world,” finding pleasure and joy in living again. Others were difficult: “reliving the years of abuse,” and questioning what had happened to them and how it had happened, trying to recover their health and ability, grieving their losses and experiencing tremendous sadness. Many of the women experienced both extremes of sensation; they were relieved and they also needed to grieve. Laura was both thrilled to find her birth family and devastated when she discovered the circumstances of her adoption placement. She was clear in her self that she needed to find her voice but still needed to wade through intense feelings to discover how she would bring her voice out in the world. She describes the grieving process that she needed to go through in the following passage:

I cried for three days straight [after connecting with birth family].

Jennifer: The crying, what was that triggered by? What was the essence of that sadness?

Laura: Oh boy (P). Being caught in the middle of two families, both of whom had been deceived. I cried for my parents being deceived and raising me all this time and thinking they were doing something good and beautiful and wonderful. Crying for [my birth mother] for having her baby stolen from her. Crying for the outrage that this government would allow something, this government, this country, this state would allow something like this to happen. Crying for the fact that they never searched for me for the 13 years that I've been searching for them. Crying for the fact that I had been beaten up before I was even born. Crying for the fact that I came from a place where that could exist....

A number of the women went through periods of questioning themselves and how they had got to the place of being voiceless and silenced - where did they go? They wondered if they might lose their voice again and go back into voicelessness or selflessness in the same or other contexts.

Joanne spoke to the experience that other women shared of feeling many different emotions including anger (often at self), sadness, relief, and joy, as illustrated in the following passages:

I went through about a year or two where I ... almost relived my whole life with him (P) but seeing it from this different view right? [I thought] 'What an idiot,' ... 'Why didn't you,' (P) you know what I mean? ...I had to go through this whole process all over again... and I just spent a lot of time crying and, and being upset....

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... it just felt like the weight of the world had been taken off of me.... I can't tell you what it felt like to be out from under that.

Jennifer: And had you expected that?

Joanne: Well ... I'd been holding my breath for a long time right?... And I loved it.... I just would read in bed at night and I just loved that freedom... I loved that I could walk down the street and I wouldn't have to ... explain every person that walked by and what they did or if they looked at me ... my comings and goings weren't being monitored (chuckles) continually....

Jess had not experienced a "voicing moment" in the abusive relationship that she had been in but after her partner left the relationship she began a process of recovery and reclamation of both voice and self as she describes in the following passages:

... two years ago when I moved back here, my body stopped functioning very well. It was like my emotional and mental world, my body also decided to match that and I lost tons of weight and I just cried all the time and I felt sick to my stomach for a while. And then it was a process of coming back to life.... I remember sitting by the water and reading this beautiful literature ... and there was one sentence that was so beautiful, and then this otter came out of the bush and went into the water. It was just like this picture-perfect sort of thing, and I felt this bubbling up of emotion and started crying.... I wasn't sad or I wasn't thinking of anything bad, it was just like this bubbling up of living again. But I had to go through that like total dysfunction (laughs) in order to like let myself really be in that place, in order to come to, to come back to [life]....

... it was like, (sigh) just a big release or something like ‘Okay! I’m here now.’ You know, somehow I’d shut things down enough to cope in that situation and then this process of coming back to life....

### *Emergence and Congruence*

All of the women shared experiences of emerging more fully into themselves, of having a sense of possibilities and purpose and of liking what they saw. We discussed how they had “dis-integrated” their old ways of being and created space to “reintegrate” a new self. They described “rising out of the ashes” and reclaiming their health, rights, identity and self.

Meg recalled an image that she carried with her after she had reached her “no turning back point” and as she was in the midst of taking action and making the preparations for her future. Her description of the image illustrates the shift in how she saw her self and what she was capable of achieving:

... I was with a teacher [at my children’s school] ... and we were in the annex ... which was being renovated at the time. And we’d just gone up to look and see what progress they were making, and there were these huge beams and the enormous ceiling, the rafters, and we were up there and talking about what I was going to have to do [through the separation], and this friend of mine who’d already gone through the process was really saying, ‘You know it sounds to me like you’ve reached that point and it sounds really clear and ... what’s going to help you to do that? What are you going to attach yourself to?’

And I don't know what it was about the space that we were in [but] everything was crystal clear for me at that moment. It was the image of an eagle ... it's there but you're holding on to it ... it's got to be freed. [The] image of an eagle flying. I had a pair of earrings, carved earrings, and I remember ... I'd put them on and, I'd [think] 'Okay, there we go! I'm going to stick with that.'

... And the light coming into the annex at the time, and something about the size of those beams and strength. I don't know what it was, but ... things came together ... it was a powerful moment for me.... So that was good, to be able to replay that one. [The] image of being able to soar above and ... rise above all that, that whole sense of being strong and competent and able to detach....

The process of emergence and congruence has continued to evolve and shift for each of the women in unique, but connected, ways, as described in the next section.

### Evolving Voice

The experience of coming to voice and bringing about significant change in their lives in one context did not mean that the "switch was flipped" and that the women claimed or had voice in all other contexts, or even that it always remained true and confident in the initial voicing context. Returning to the image of the women's journey down the river, sometimes they experienced periods of time when they relaxed in the sunshine on the banks of the river and other times they plunged deep into the torrents again. However, they were never in the same place again and were constantly evolving. In this section the women's experiences of their evolving relationships with their voices, selves, and conscious minds are described. Three clusters of themes emerged.

“Integrating Self and Other – Self in Relation” describes the impact and results of the ongoing process of reclamation, recovery and re-integration, including the heightened sense of an authentic self that is connected and confident. “Using Voice Strategically” describes the ways in which the women now use their voices in strategic and intentional ways, and the choices they make about when to use both voice and silence. “Works in Progress” describes the ways in which voice, sense of self and consciousness have continued to evolve for the women, including the struggles, fears, hopes and opportunities that they have experienced along the way.

### *Integrating Self and Other – Self in Relation*

#### *Authenticity and Identity*

The experience of coming into voice was also a process of coming into the self and into a heightened state of awareness and consciousness. The women described how they have “reclaimed” or “recovered” or “discovered” the self in ways that had not been possible before they attended to and honoured their voices and how they are better able to hold in balance both the interests of the self and the interests of others, including the people that they care about and people in their broader communities. They are both independent and closely connected; there is “self” and “relationship.” They spoke of being “more authentic,” and “more my true self”. They spoke of “growing,” “emerging,” and being more proactive, open, and receptive to experiences and opportunities. As they described who they are now, as compared to who they were before they claimed voice and self, they used words and phrases that conveyed more energy, engagement (with self and others), clarity and authenticity: “I think,” “I feel,” “I am aware,” “I am passionate,” “I

am clear,” “I am congruent in my self,” “There’s no pretending.” The following passages illustrate shifts in the sense of self and voice for both Joanne and Karen:

Jennifer: And what’s happened for you? How have you been affected through [having] the experience ... of clarity of purpose and voice? How has that changed you in the last couple of years?

Joanne: Hmmm. It’s made me more myself. It’s like being boiled down to your essence. I feel like I’m more my true self than I ever have been, and my voice is more authentic. I have better control of my voice. I can exercise my voice in ways that are more useful, purposeful, clearer, stronger. I can use less words to say more things, so it’s richer. It’s a richer voice.

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Jennifer: So how did your sense of self, and your confidence, your competence and capability evolve through time? What’s happened? Who’s Karen now, as compared to Karen then?

Karen: Well, if I sort of think about a visual representation. It’s sort of a small person that was backed into a corner, whereas now I’m comfortable in my own skin and able to hold my own and not apologize for my existence. So ... a real being able to move into my body and mind and ... fully engage in activities, and things that I want to, ways of thinking, without that being controlled or punished.... The sense that in some way of doing what I like to do, or thinking the way I like to think, speaking how I like to speak. *So huge.*

The women described how they have become more attuned to their inner voices. They have noticed that the self critical inner “chatter” that they have listened and

responded to in the past are often voices transplanted from other people, such as their parents and partners. When they go beyond these voices and discover and begin to listen to their own inner voices they can be more authentic and true to self. Their challenge is to “not put [my inner voice] down anymore. To listen to it... To let that voice be stronger than those other [self-critical] voices!” (Meg). Laura described how her inner voice and sense of self are intertwined:

... my voice is integral to my sense of self, clearly. I can't have one without the other, in both directions.... I can't (P) Even if that voice is just to myself, it needs to be present.... Could I be a whole person with my sense of self and a voice without a voice? No, I still need that voice to myself.

Jennifer: And the voice to yourself, or the [inner] voice, how does that help you define yourself?

Laura: It brings everything that's back here, and brings it up front here, and makes it real. That's it. If I don't voice the thoughts in my head and bring them forward and front and center, how can I manifest them?

Jennifer: Mmhmm. So it's thoughts, paying attention to thoughts, right through to action, it's all connected.

Laura: But actually consciously bringing the thoughts that happen way in the back, bottom, and giving them space and room to grow to come forward, and sometimes reaching back and pulling them out, and making them manifest.

Jennifer: Mmhmm. And then how's that connected to your sense of self and your evolving self?

Laura: I think I'd be an empty shell without it.

Several of the women described how they re-created a sense of identity or “relocated” themselves. Laura’s experiences of finding other Native adoptees and then her birth family gave new places to speak from; a connectedness to her Aboriginal family and to the betrayal of Aboriginal families in the history of Canada. Jess described how she is engaged in a process of recreating where she speaks from and her identity, but she recognizes that this is important and contributes to her growth and awareness:

... What I’m doing at school and my life is really bound up in slippery things (laughs) that are not fixed, in any way. And so my identity and where I speak from is constantly shifting, and I’m interested in that. So that’s what I’m doing in school.... I’m invested in not having a fixed place to speak from [in my creative work]... I’m constantly losing.... But that’s just part of [it], I know that in order to come back to something that’s truer or whatever....

One woman described the challenge she faced hanging onto her sense of self and her roots in the academic context. When she was doing graduate work she felt that she was expected to conform to a middle class standard that would have required her to give up a part of herself that she was beginning to value and respect. She had come to realize that her lived experience as a working class woman who had first hand knowledge of marginalization and silencing was an asset given what she wanted to understand about and contribute to the world:

... I needed to hold on to my integrity about who I was... and in a sense, going back and relearning in the same way that I relearned around my marriage. I was going through a similar process around university going back and checking... ‘So does that really feel right to me?’ ... So when I was learning about that stuff

(e.g., racism, double ghetto, marginalization of women] in school I had memories [from my own experiences and observations] that were very painful and very real - they weren't a text book ... and I found it very difficult ... sometimes the way they were discussed so clinically when to me they were they were part of my being, they were part of my blood and my bones.... So I felt it very much at a very emotional level and at a body level [what was] often discussed at a brain level and mind level and I found that kind of difference very difficult at times.

I often would leave class and just go home and cry for an hour.... I didn't even know why I was crying.... I was getting language to express my experience for the first time, and validation of that....

Other women also carried images of themselves and their connections in the world and these images served to encourage them and remind them of their strength and resilience. Jess's image illustrates how she located herself contextually and in time – with connections to her past and to her future:

... a lot of things that I speak about are so intimately connected with my heritage and ... my sense of community, and my role in that community. [Because my family's from this island] I think that I feel (P) I have this belief in having a *purpose* and being, not guided necessarily, but ... all around me are things that my family's been connected to for a long time, and that gives me a place ... [a] sense of rootedness.... If I need reassurance about anything I just have to go to the water.... There's that sound of the pebbles being pulled back into the water and ... as long as that sound is being made, everything is okay (laughs). That that sound has existed here on this island for longer than I can imagine and it will

continue on long after we're gone. And, that is a meeting place, and I see myself in that place because ... of my role of ... being mixed race.... A lot of the issues that I speak up about I'm trying to bridge ... university and community....

### *Confidence and Shifting the Terms of Relationships*

The women described how they are better able to sustain their voices, stand their ground, and be safe in the face of pressures and challenges to their voices and also how they have shifted the terms or nature of significant relationships over time. They are more sure of their voices and perspectives and “what I know.” While they noted the risks that they still face in losing their voices in certain contexts or having their voices challenged, there was an underlying sense of confidence that they were aware enough about who they were, what they stood for, and what they were capable of that they would never go as deep down into voicelessness and silence again.

Karen spoke about the tests she has faced in hanging onto her voice and her resolve to create a better life for herself and her children. Her ex-husband withheld financial support for a period of time, threatened her and members of her family, and acted in destructive ways towards them. However, she decided that she was going to hang onto her voice and stand her ground and not respond as she had done when she was in the relationship, even at the cost of not being “nice” which had mattered to her. At one point she had to involve the police because of threats that he had made:

... I remember thinking, ‘Like this is what happens in the real world, people don’t just ignore those kinds of things.’ He’d said things like that to me throughout the relationship, about what he was going to do. He controlled me a lot, and I wasn’t

going to allow that to continue, so I went to the police... He got a visit from them and it was taken seriously. So that was another sort of juncture at which I remember thinking, 'I have to stand my ground.' But there were many along that path that first year where I just had to, I couldn't do it and just be nice [although] that's kind of what I had attached myself to ... like this is going to be such an amicable divorce ... we're going to be the perfect partners.... [B]ut I lost that altogether, got lost in the wash, and there's some sadness about that because that meant that there was a lot of animosity for quite a while....

So I stood my ground and it was worth it. So I didn't just roll over....

Connected to the sense of confidence was a sense of emotional and personal safety. They had come far enough along their journey that they knew they were not at risk of "going back in" to that place of silence or abuse although they recognized that they may still circle around or move in and out of voice and silence from time to time, particularly in the context of intimate relationships, as Joanne describes:

I've been in other relationships since my ex-husband that were not too good and struggled with a lot of the things that [other participants] struggled with ... 'Why am I here and why do I keep staying here?' But it wasn't to the same degree that it was when I was with my husband. So I know that I will continue to cycle, but it's like a spiral, I know that I will never go as low again (laughs), do you know what I mean? ... I don't think I'm 'fixed,' (laughter in group) but I do feel that there's a certain level of safety I have that I never had before, and I know there's a certain place I will never go to again. But will I always keep myself safe and healthy? Absolutely not. I mean, I'll be surprised if I do. Like I want to, I'm not

saying I'm not trying, but it continues to be a struggle for me and it will continue to be....

All of the women spoke about the ways in which their relationships have shifted. Three of the women described how they have been strong enough in themselves to re-create a safer relationship with their ex-husbands:

I've maintained a relationship with my ex-husband and I can be in relationship with him differently now. ... [H]e comes to Christmas dinner and all that kind of stuff ... (P) most people think it's beyond bizarre. But it's ... a choice that I've made around how I'm going to go through my life.... (Joanne)

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[I am] able to have [a] relationship with the very person that ... caused a lot of those troubles - my ex-husband - in a way that ... I can manage and maintain my emotional safety. That ... feels like it's put me again on the other side of that line where I was at where I was not being my self, not being able to be congruent. So yeah, 'safety' is a word that seems to come back to me, but I'm no longer at risk of not being my self, which is nice. (Meg)

Other shifts in relationships were also described. The relationships that Meg, Karen and Joanne have with their children, and daughters in particular, have evolved and been enriched because they are now stronger, healthier, happier and more connected women/mothers than they were when they were in the midst of an unhealthy situation. Laura's relationship with her adoptive family is evolving as they each find a way to incorporate the new information that has come into their midst about the circumstances of

her adoption. She is also creating a new relationship with her birth family and trying to find ways of having voice within that new context.

Jess also spoke about what she has noticed about her relationship with her father and how she has come to terms with the risks she faces if she tries to express her voice and self authentically within that relationship. She knowingly keeps a part of her self out of the relationship with her father as this is safer, and expresses her authentic and fuller self within more meaningful, healthier and safer relationships, such as with her mom, as the passages from the individual and group interviews illustrate:

Like with my relationship with my father, he says things all the times that I totally disagree with. (P) And he doesn't know so many things about my life because ... he's very judgmental and I feel like there's a lot at risk. And in a way, I don't think it really matters if he knows who I am, which sounds strange, but he's been in and out of my life so much that it's not worth it for me, at this point anyways, for me to risk. (P) I have a ... half sister that I haven't seen for years at a time because they were out of my life. So right now, I don't say a lot of things because I don't want to lose that. And even though it's like losing something kind of false, if you're not being honest about who you are but....

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... I would rather have a superficial relationship with him than none. It's not that I don't speak up and I'm struggling ... I don't care anymore. I've realized our relationship is based around something that's totally different than with my mom ... We have a real, a very close relationship, so it matters what I say to her, but with him it doesn't.

Jess's description also illustrates "strategic" voicing; making informed and conscious choices about when, where, how, and with whom to express voice and share self, and for what purpose.

### *Using Voice Strategically*

When women claim their voices in important relationships and situations in their lives they become more strategic with their voices. All of the women described how they make more mindful choices about speaking and not speaking, about when and how to express themselves with their voices or use silence. They have become more aware of voice and silence as a resource or a tool to effect change in their lives or in the lives of others. They also realize that not all contexts or situations will honour their voices and they described how they evaluate the risks and opportunities of using their voices in these different contexts and decide what is best for them and for others. The women's experiences with the strategic use of voice and silence are described in the subsections below. "Protecting the Self" describes and interprets the choices women make about how to use their voices and still protect themselves and others. "Choosing What Matters" illustrates how women are selective with their use of voice and more focused on effecting positive change in the world and speaking to matters that are of greatest concern to them, that they are intimately connected to, or where they have a unique contribution to make to a wider dialogue.

## *Protecting the Self*

As the women become more attuned to the self and their voice they use voice to both express and protect the self. They described the difference between “outspokenness” and “voice”. The former is less mindful and strategic than voice. Outspokenness is about “speaking,” not necessarily “voicing.” Jess described how she has shifted from outspokenness to “voiced”:

Before I was just sort of angry and ... I was saying things because they needed to be said. Nobody else was saying them, so I was going to say them. Now I don't always speak and I choose when I want to be silent strategically ... I'm much more purposeful about it and that is because I think I can see the impact that speaking has, and to be a bit more cautious about it.... I think I've gone through being a bit more quiet to figure out how to use [voice] a bit more.

Jess has become more strategic in part because she recognizes that she will be drained if she doesn't. She chooses when to use her voice and when to be silent as a way to care for her self:

There are incidents all the time where I get really angry or something, and then I step back and realize that, ‘You know I can say something, or I can (P) recognize that, if someone's speaking out of ignorance, or lack of knowledge, do I want to educate that person? Is it worth it for me and for them and ... do I have an investment in it?’

... I think it's also recognizing that I don't have to speak up about everything (P) I more speak about what I know (P) I'm just becoming more focused or something.... I really have made a lot of changes in my life to

recognize that it can be draining to do the kind of work that I choose to do.... In order to do that, I need to make choices in my life about ... my relationship with my self and how I take care of my self. I think that's a big thing that I've gotten out of the last few years is the importance of that because it is me being drained and it is me that has to go back ... out into the world after I come home after a hard day....

Jess's experience was shared by Laura who noted that voicing can "take an incredible amount of energy" and there is always a risk of being silenced again. She described how "that partial silencing by taking my words and twisting them around, has opened my voice even more." She has learned to not just "speak out" but be mindful of her voice and the implications of using it. Both Jess and Laura described how they now set limits on their efforts to inform and educate others about the history and experience of Aboriginal people and their own experiences as a mixed blood person and a Native adoptee. They recognize that they need to make choices about where they expend their energy as some people are receptive and others are not. They also spoke about how important it was to them to use their voices carefully and strategically to influence, inform and educate while keeping themselves safe. In doing so they are defining their boundaries and being clear about the extent of their responsibility for others, as Laura describes:

... my life is very rich and busy and full... and some days I just don't want to describe everything to everybody, I don't want to have to lay it out. When somebody asks me my adoption reunion story I know that I generally need to talk with them for about 2 or 3 hours, and that it can't be told in 10 or 15 minutes,

really. And what they want is the 10-15 minute answer. And then sometimes they just take the 10-15 minutes and walk away. And then I'm thinking, 'Well they're walking away and they've got all these gaps, and they're probably just filling them in automatically and not even realizing it.' So then that's scary. What are they doing with my voice then?

Jennifer: Mmhmm. And what has been your experience around that, when that 10-15 minute perspective goes out there?

Laura: Well, my experience is it's either somebody who just, just can't hear it, doesn't want to hear it, because the content is too disturbing. And they're just like, 'Nope, that didn't happen.' ... I can't really force somebody to hear something. So then I might say something like, 'Well you know there's lots of stuff that goes on in Canada, between Canada and aboriginal relations. Maybe you should watch the documentary, *Kanhesatake - 270 years of Resistance*, or *Is the Crown at War with Us?* or read *Stolen from our Embrace*. Maybe you should see what the Indian voice is out there and get a different perspective, because what you read in the papers, that's not our voice. That's somebody else's voice.'

The women described how they evaluate the risks of speaking and voicing and at times make a conscious choice to be silent as the risks of speaking out are too great. However, the women described how the difference for them now is that they are making deliberate and informed choices about their voice and therefore their silence is not experienced by them as "being silenced" - they still have "voice" but they are choosing to exercise it by not speaking. One woman described the choice she makes to be silent about the childhood abuse that she experienced. Although the behaviour of "not telling" as an

adult is the same as the “not telling” in her childhood, there is a different intent and choice behind the behaviour now. As a child she felt that the abuse was her fault and she was silenced by fear, shame and a sense that she had to protect the abuser. However, as an adult who has a stronger sense of self, she sees clearly that she was not responsible for the abuse. She could speak about it (and has to certain people she trusts) but she chooses not to disclose to others as the risks to her self are great. She is choosing to protect the self, not the abuser as she did as a child.

Laura and I had a conversation about how she has to be careful with her voice and how she uses it because it can be interpreted in ways that cause harm to her and to the people she loves. Referring to the exposure of the adoption placement circumstances and the facts that her birth mother was told her baby was dead while her adoptive family was told the baby was legally given up for adoption, I asked Laura what was at stake for her in using her voice to tell the story:

My credibility, my reputation, my emotional and mental well-being, balance in my life. Reputation, credibility of those that I love and who have a part in my life, in the whole adoption reunion role. There're people... who question the motive of my parents who raise me, and there's people who question the motive of my birth mother. You know, and I don't have those questions, and then I'm defending them. And then if I'm defending my family, well that just puts me in the place of, I'm going to duke it out with you if you don't! I'm going to make you listen to my voice if you like it or not, I might have to use my fist! (laughter)

Not really, but I get very defensive and I get really aggressed when I have to defend my family, you know, because they love me and want what's best for me,

and I love them and don't want them hurt. And it bothers me that people would take my story and twist it around to suit their dirty laundry needs.

### *Choosing What Matters*

For many years Karen felt that "voice" could hurt. She remained silent to avoid the risks of hurting others through her words and to avoid the risk of having to reveal aspects of her life that she wanted to keep hidden and that could hurt others if exposed. She fulfilled a role of protecting others through her silence. When she had experiences of voice being helpful, first to her children and then to her self, she began to reorient herself to voice and the power that it had "to have a positive effect":

And so I have done some of the things, I think Jess you mentioned earlier, around just being aware when I think that I can say something that can make a difference in a person's life. I think that that's certainly something that I've done that I didn't think I had the ability to do before is to make any positive change. So I consciously try and do that sometimes.... Certainly people in my extended family at times ... I'm the [relative] that they'll come to, I'm the one that they'll talk to ... I also know that when I'm with them I have to be very conscious about how I am with them, and I have to give them 100% of my attention when I am with them, because they weigh that very heavily in their life....

...I didn't know that there was anything I could do or I could say that could have that kind of profound effect on somebody's life before I had any voice.... I realized there was something of value I could give to the world....

Karen's story was echoed by the other women's descriptions of how they have become aware of what their voice can achieve. They shared examples of how, in using their voices, others have felt permission and support to use their own voices and tell their own stories. This has led them to make strategic and thoughtful choices about when and how they use their voice. Several of the women have taken their voices into their community contexts with very specific intentions of raising awareness and effecting change. Laura described her intentions for using her voice as a Native adoptee:

Jennifer: What impact did you want to have with your voice? What did you want people to understand, and what did you want to create?

Laura: I didn't ever want any other Native adoptee to feel the way I did growing up, like they were alone, and that they couldn't ask questions, and like they were supposed to know all about their culture and everything and where they came from, and what it meant to be 'Indian', and too shy to ask...

... There's a really high incidence of us as a damaged demographic, like the alcoholism and drug abuse that goes on through Native adoptees. People on the streets that you see using and abusing, I don't know, maybe 50% of them are Native adoptees. The Native ones. It's just huge, just huge, because we don't have any sense of self, who we are, where we come from. And of course, if we don't know those two things, how do we know where we're going? You know, a fundamental part of human nature is lost in us.

Jess described how she has come to understand not only how her voice and her talents can make a difference in her community and on matters that she is passionate

about and intimately connected to, but she can use her voice strategically and discriminately to achieve her personal goals:

I have something unique about me, and that I actually have some kind of skill and ability (P) I think that I've been really afraid of my potential... Because then I'm not just a bridge, and I'm not just a tool, I'm actually this person who can write.... (P) I'm sort of learning to be, or I've made a decision to be more strategic.... (P) Where before I just wanted to do good ... for the community ... I didn't have this end goal for myself, and now I think I've started to set more goals for my self, and just have more of a vision of what my life can look like and not necessarily just what I can do.

Jennifer: It's interesting to think of defining ourselves in certain ways and by external standards or whatever and it sounds like you're getting closer and closer to your self, as you've gone through this process and these experiences and what they mean and what you're supposed to learn from them. You're awakening to your own strengths and capacity, not just as a vehicle but as an individual? Is that how it feels? Moving from the out to the in?

Jess: Yeah. I think it's always a process of (P) sort of circling back ... sort of circling out and then coming back to your self....

### *Works in progress*

The process and moments of coming into voice were powerful and transformative. These moments fundamentally shifted how the women viewed themselves, their relationships, and their place and purpose, *and* the process continues.

The women clearly described how their voice and sense of self continues to evolve and shift. In this section two themes are described. “Voice in Context” describes how the women’s experiences of coming into voice in one context did not mean that they are now “fixed” or “forever voiced”. Sometimes they are afraid that they will lose their voice again or in other contexts when it will matter to them that they carry voice. However, they now carry a consciousness about voice and self that has allowed them to see the impact of context on voice. “Voice and Growth” describes how the women have created and embraced new opportunities and have a different view of and vision for themselves and their future.

### *Voice and Context*

The women described how their confidence and use of their voice is influenced by the contexts that they find themselves in. Joanne described how she did not have voice in her relationship, but at the same time she had a clear voice within her work context. At the time of the group interview, Laura had just returned from participating in and chairing meetings with others who held similar jobs around B.C. She shared with the group how she had noticed how contextually influenced her voice was through the days and events and this lead us into a conversation about contexts and about whether there is a “voice switch” that gets flipped:

... my voice continues to be in a state of flux and change, given every different scenario I’m in. For example, this week I was sitting on council for the first time ... and chairing my first meeting for the first time, and ... it kind of ripped a piece out of me (laughter). It was kind of like baptism by fire. And I thought,

‘Okay, I have a voice, I can use it,’ and I really struggled to use it. Whereas the night before I was meeting somebody new and talking about my biological family and the return to those roots, and I really felt, at that point, that my voice was loud and strong and clear. And it’s just different every day and in every different scenario, in lots of different ways, depending. So I think I recognize that, okay, there’s lots of parts of me where I have a newly developed voice that is tending to be loud and strong, but now I’m realizing there’s lots of other parts of me that the voice is still struggling to come up.

Jennifer: Yeah. How’s that fit? (looking to others)

Meg: You know, that’s true. It’s not like one day ... in whatever situation you have that new strength, and from then on you have it. Darn it, it’s not! Depending on the situation. Just so many different things, situations, people, whether it’s a whole new situation or it’s a real growth experience, where you’re kind of stretching yourself, and it sounds like you were. (looking to Laura)

Laura: Mhmm. Yeah, I find that, and actually as I was reflecting about that last night, and I was thinking about other parts of my life where I really still feel that I don’t have voice. I thought, ‘Okay, so maybe voice is attached to an aspect of my life.’ So I have voice as an adoptee who’s going through reunion, I have a very loud, clear, strong voice. But a voice as a council member...? That’s just barely poking a little bud head out of the soil! (laughter) And then with my family of origin, there’s still very lack of voice there, *unless* we’re talking about adoption reunion, in which case it’s shut up and listen! (laughter)

While the women recognized how their voices shifted in different contexts, they also described how their voices and sense of self have shifted over time within the same context. Meg, Karen and Joanne all went through times when they were still very vulnerable to the critiques and judgments of their ex-partners but they have recreated these relationships and this has influenced how they see themselves and their capacity to forgive and bring about change. Joanne has noticed how she can now just be herself with her ex-husband and she is being affirmed and valued by him now:

... a new relationship has, like the phoenix out of the ashes, has emerged, and it's really quite interesting to see that I can handle it, and I'm in quite good shape, and you know emotionally I can now take care of myself and the relationship is fine. Obviously it's on different terms altogether.... I can be around him and deal with it, and things can be perfectly good. In fact, I can be supportive and kind and generous, and all those things that I like to be, but don't get consumed and it's on my terms.

Jennifer: ... And with him [ex-husband] having kind of shifted... your experience of him is different. How has that impacted your experience of your self? Has that made a difference? Is there something important there?

Joanne: Well, I think that now I feel ... that even though I am who I am, I've somehow managed to win his approval. Even though it's outside of the relationship.... Somehow (P) I can be myself, and he still values and appreciates, and I have that ... sense, that affirmation, that I'm okay. It's kind of weird. Not that I've been trying to achieve that, but it's sort of a byproduct of... just what I've noticed in the last little while.

The women all described ways in which they are more aware and conscious of these contextual challenges to their voices. They described how they are afraid of losing voice at times, and how they have doubt about their voice and its value, but they are aware of this, as Karen and Joanne illustrated in this conversation.

Karen: I feel like there's always a little voice and I know exactly where it comes from (chuckles), which is my dad, I'm afraid! It's constantly saying, 'Why do you think you have the right to be able speak about these things? What is it that you know that other people don't? And why do you think they would want to listen to you.' So that kind of little nagging voice that I have to work really hard to silence and ... to say, 'No, it's okay, I can do this.' And that's a constant battle.

Joanne: Yeah, yes like you never completely win the battle. It's always there, it's always there it seems [

Several: Yeah, yeah.

Joanne: You know it, you recognize it, you're still having to struggle against it. Does it get easier or do you just know it better, and recognize it more?

Karen: On an intellectual level I can deal with it better because, on an emotional level I still feel the exact same emotions. So I can still feel as completely scared and powerless and ineffectual emotionally, but on an intellectual level I can say, 'Just a minute, you know, look at the body of evidence (chuckles) ... You've got all this life experience, all this education, you've done all these good things in your life, and yes, you can speak with authority on this' (chuckles)

Joanne: But it's the intellect having to win over the emotions.

Karen: Yes, yes. To be the grownup. It's like the adult-child, almost, battle going on inside.

Although they may struggle, they still have a sense of their fundamental right to have voice, so they work with and through the struggles as Meg's description illustrates:

I agree, there're parts in my life where I have no voice or little voice, and other parts where I'm pretty loud, whether or not it's my voice - my physical voice. But there was a time when I didn't think I had any right to have any voice or any sense that there was a notion of 'voice' for me. It was very much a sense of I needed to do what I was told and I didn't have that right to have voice, so there was a point where I moved to 'I do have a right to have voice,' and then since then I agree with you, I've done a great deal of struggling. I continue to struggle about how to have voice, and when to have it and when not to, and be curious about when I'm okay with it and when I'm not. But there was a time where I really didn't think I had a right to it, whereas I know I have a right to it now, even though I might not exercise it all the time.

### *Voice and Growth*

The conversations with all of the women were uplifting and inspiring and it is fitting that this chapter ends with the descriptions that women shared about how they are growing and moving forward in meaningful ways in their lives.

Education and learning has been a significant part of the women's lives since coming into voice, not only because it has enabled them to gain credentials and enhance

careers but because it has given them an opportunity to enhance their sense of personal mastery. They described how education was an “investment” in themselves, a marker that they could make changes, an indicator of their abilities and their right to be more stimulated and alive. It gave them more capacity to think critically. It has given them a language and new ways to articulate and validate their experiences, and in some situations reach out and share that with others, as Laura describes:

I was getting language to express my experience for the first time, and validation of that...It gave me some authority. In a sense it gave me authority for my experience. Validation, I guess, is the word. Validation for my experience and it allowed me to speak about my experience where before, I couldn't.

The women are aware of how far they have come and this has given them confidence in their future. To illustrate, I have selected quotes from three of the women that convey consciousness, courage, strength, spirit, and continued growth:

It was ... years of a reclamation project but I feel like [my self is] what I got back as well. And I don't think I realized it with the same clarity as you did (referring to Karen). Like it was almost unrecognizable at that point (laughs). So yeah, getting that back, and self-knowledge and self awareness, and confidence that I won't have to go back there. That I'm safe now (laughs). I'm well-shored up. I won't ever get into that same situation.

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... now I'm comfortable in my own skin and able to hold my own and not apologize for my existence ...a real being able to move into my body and mind and ... fully engage in activities, and things that I want to, ways of thinking ...

doing what I like to do, or thinking the way I like to think, speaking how I like to speak.

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... if I'm being hard on myself and thinking I'm slipping back again and I'm not being vocal enough about my needs or wants here. Then it helps me to look back and see how far I've come... And that helps me keep going forward. If I'm looking back and knowing how hard it was for me then, somehow that gives me strength... That I've come a distance, okay, I can do this in this situation too.

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I got kind of tired of writing about pain, writing from a place of anger all the time, because I was always reacting to things when I was in school before.... [F]or eight years now I've wanted to write from a place that's more about my truth and what I know, and I'm just starting to find ways to do that and it's really (P) letting (P) my ideas come and then trusting that.... It's ... writing about things that I've seen and being creative with that... More (P) looking at things in my life ... just a little more intimate.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATIONS

As I was preparing to rewrite this final chapter, I became aware that my ex-husband was back in Canada and once again attempting to interfere in my life. We had not heard from him for over 4 years. He had fled the country shortly after court orders directed that he was not to have contact with the children until such time as he took personal action to restore the trust that he had violated, and could demonstrate that he accepted responsibility for his behaviour and was no longer abusive. For him, leaving the country was a way to escape his responsibilities both for rebuilding some type of relationship with his children and providing them with financial support.

When he left the country 4 years ago, I began to breathe again. Although my voicing moment was some years before this time, and I had worked with and expressed my voice through 3 years of legal trials, I was never fully confident that I could take a deep breathe and simply soak in the joys of my life as a mother and woman. When he left the country and embarked on yet another marriage I thought, "I am free, I can breathe now."

Fast forward 4 years and I see him in a car across from our house. Odd things are happening around our house and on our property. Anonymous e-mails are being sent to the University challenging my reputation and educational background, and raising doubts about my integrity. He is very angry, I learn, because the courts and authorities have taken action against him as he has repeatedly breached the terms of the court order and the agreements he had made with the authorities. His passport has been revoked and now he is back in Canada, and attempting to get back in our lives.

In the midst of my own coming to voice and writing up my inquiry into voice, I sense the risk to my own voice once again. How ironic. With the news of what he is doing I become afraid again, I cry frequently, I stop breathing deeply, I wake up at night worrying about our safety, and I relive episodes of abuse. I become even more vigilant with my daughters, restricting their movements without me and holding them closer. I crawl into a dark place of self-doubt and fear for several days. I feel as though my power has been snatched away from me again. I cannot understand how this can happen. I think, “I have been feeling so strong, so clear, so aware and capable – how can I lose it so quickly? What can I do to make it go away? Where is my voice? Am I a fraud to speak about voice? What is wrong with me?”

The purpose of this inquiry was to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of women’s experience of the transition from silence to voice. My intention was to understand so that I could be more mindful and supportive of women in my own practice and support other women in their processes of coming into and sustaining their voice and sense of self. I am coming to the end. I do have a much deeper understanding, and the first place I need to apply it is with my self.

So what do I understand now that I did not before? How might I apply this with my self and with others? The purpose of this chapter is to propose key insights into the essence of the voicing phenomenon. I begin by briefly describing what I have come to understand through working with the lived experience descriptions of the five women by means of connecting the stories with my own experience.<sup>9</sup> I have several selected

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<sup>9</sup> Through this process I am engaging in the “validating circle of inquiry” that characterizes phenomenological research, whereby I insert myself “in the traditions of [phenomenological] scholarship in such a way that [I] become a participating member of the tradition” (van Manen, 1997, p. 23).

passages from my journal writing over the past 7 years that provide a personal metaphor or interpretation<sup>10</sup> of the phenomenon. I then circle back into my present situation and interpret the process of recovering voice in the moment. The final section describes the essence of voice as a manifestation of self and consciousness and how, in coming to “know” our selves and our voices, we are better able to connect meaningfully with others.

### Story One<sup>11</sup>

I experienced the following visualization during a time in which I was immersed in a protracted custody action in the courts. The event that triggered this story was a court hearing in which the presiding judge, who had not read the 164-page custody and access report nor the recommendations of the child advocate, both of which had recommended no-contact between my children and their father, declared that if there was no evidence of physical or sexual abuse then the father should not be denied access. It was a powerful experience and one that brought me to a clearer understanding of the impact of institutional silencing on women, but also my own power to effect change. The story told in the visualization illustrates a process of redefining my self, reclaiming authority to

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<sup>10</sup> I have kept journals throughout the 7 years of my doctoral studies. In the early years I used journaling as a tool for recovery and I attended to the experiences of silencing and reclaiming my voice. I also used it to uncover the topics and questions that I was passionate about – thus the shift to voice from my more dispassionate topic of high performing child welfare organizations. More recently I have used my journals to consider and reflect upon the research process. I intentionally did not reread any of my early journal writing throughout the time that I was engaged in the research and writing process as I did not want to be recalling my stories as I was listening to those of the five women. It was only after I completed the chapter on findings that I reviewed my early journals for the purpose of seeing what else might come to light and be contributed to the conversation.

<sup>11</sup> Several of the stories are visualizations that I had in the early years of struggling to reclaim voice. I have provided some contextual information to situate the stories in time and place on my journey, but the factual details of the story are not important and should not distract the reader from the experience of voice. This is not meant to be an indulgent telling of my story, but rather present another way of looking at and connecting with our story as women who wonder about their voice, self and what they know.

speaking from others who are presumed or entrusted to speak for me, doing whatever it takes to use voice on matters of great importance (the no turning back point), and the significance of allies.

### *Choosing What Matters*

“Order in the Court, all rise,” said the court attendant. We did as we were told and, rising from our seats, bowed our heads as the judge entered the courtroom. His long black robes flowing behind him, he glided up the stairs to his leather-bound seat. He was an immense man, two or three times larger than the lawyers that bowed before him, and at least fifty times larger than me. It was as if my perspective was askew; instead of the subjects in my distance being smaller, they grew larger. I sat in the back of the courtroom, the size of a rabbit. The wooden bench was hard and uncomfortable and my tiny legs could not reach the floor when I sat down. The lawyers stood before me, backs towards me, faces turned to the judge. They were the size of normal men, however, it was clear to me that they were small and insignificant in relation to the judge.

The judge was huge, ruddy-faced and stern-looking. He cast his eyes about the courtroom. I tried to catch his eye as if to tell him “I am here, please pay attention.” He looked through me as if I did not exist. His eyes settled on the lawyers before him and he asked them what they were there to do. His voice was strong and clear. The recorder took down every word. The lawyers spoke. The judge looked away and moved the huge stack of papers and documents that presumed to tell the story of our lives. I wondered, “Is he listening, does he hear?” I grew smaller and smaller. The lawyers carried on. Their voices were similar, monotonous and ineffectual. The judge cut them off harshly and,

with a broad sweep of his arm, dismissed their statements and pleadings and told us all what he thought. The lawyers were confused, they looked at each other anxiously, they scuttled from side to side, they sat down, they rose up, then they started talking again. This time there was a sense of urgency in their voices; they were higher pitched and fast-paced. I listened but could not understand. Again the judge dismissed their statements with a broad sweep of his robed arm. He was the percussion section of a dramatic, but discordant symphony and he boomed.

I sat, now as small as a mouse, on my hard wooden seat. The few sounds I could make were lost in the cacophony of sounds in that courtroom. Eventually the stern judge rose up from his seat, slammed his fist on the polished desk and yelled, "Silence!" The lawyers froze. They could not move or speak.

I rose up with the intent to go forward to see my lawyer and urge him out of his frozen state. I was terrified of what was happening in that moment and even more terrified of what could happen if no one spoke up again. As I walked quietly and slowly forward I began to grow; from mouse size to rabbit size to sheep size to my normal size. As I stood beside my petrified lawyer, I was his size. I was also now very aware that he could no longer speak for me. I began to tell my story to the scowling judge. I expected that he would have me thrown out of the room. He did not, although it was clear to me that he was not listening and had little interest in the story I had to tell. This did not dissuade me. My voice grew slightly stronger and clearer and I tilted my head up to look him in the eye. I told my story honestly but without malice and blame. I spoke for my children and shared their hopes and wishes.

As I spoke, my former husband also came forward. He stood beside me and began hitting me repeatedly. He tried to pull me away from my space. His face twisted with hatred, he choked me and then covered my mouth with his large hands. He yelled and screamed to drown out my words. For some reason, his blows did not hurt. I swayed from the thrusts, but did not lose my focus. Eyes forward, I kept telling my story in a calm and clear voice. The beating, and my story, continued. For moments I wondered why no one else in that courtroom did anything to stem the beating. I wondered if they saw it or experienced as I did. If they did, why did they not act?

Part way through telling my story, a procession of my friends and family began solemnly and quietly filing into the back of the courtroom. It was similar to the way in which large choirs move onto the stage and take their places before the music begins. While continuing to tell my story, I was aware of the individuals who came through the doors. I was delighted to see people that I cared about. I pressed on with the telling of my story, the beatings continued and yet I was buoyed up by the presence of the silent support.

Eventually I finished speaking. There was no reaction from the judge, no “aha” or change of heart. However, I had not expected this so I was not disappointed. Do I have “voice” if no one hears what I have to say? At that moment I realized that, while my voice and story could not be acknowledged by some people in that courtroom, it was being acknowledged by many others. The silent army standing behind me was testimony to that. It also occurred to me that they did not have to say any words in order to express themselves in that moment.

For a moment I panicked as I wondered how to leave that courtroom without being harmed by my ex-husband. For a moment I too was frozen, and then I slid back into the midst of the silent army behind me and they folded around me as a shield. We all quietly filed out of the courtroom, down the long grey corridor, down the flights of cold marble stairs and out into the sun.

### Story Two

The process of regaining self and voice has been a journey over much difficult terrain as is metaphorically illustrated in the following visualization. My story speaks to the process of being numb and unaware, awakening to the reality of my circumstances, questioning and struggling as I come to understand what is happening, reconnecting with my inner authentic voice and realizing its power, recognizing my personal responsibility, taking action (even when it is not particularly clear in which direction to move and when it is hard and long work), connecting with allies along the way, and honouring our collective achievements. It is the story of a process of recovery and reclamation of self and of voice, and it shares glimmers of what is possible to create with others.

### *Singing*

I wake up and the sun is shining down on me. It is warm in this early morning. The light bouncing off the white walls makes me squint hard and wish that I had brought something to shade my eyes and body. I begin to uncurl from sleep and stretch out my arms and legs to greet the day.

Then it hits me. My arms and legs are shackled. Their chain linked tethers stretch into the whiteness. Now awake, I panic. I pull against the tethers: firm. I twist my wrists and ankles: shackles hold tight. I will my self to be stronger and pull the tethers away from their holding force: I am no match. I will my wrists and ankles to become smaller so that I can slip out of the shackles: I am now bound tighter.

I look around for my captor and can see no one and no thing. I am in the middle of a huge and deep bowl with rounded white plaster sides reaching up to a blue desert sky. I can see nothing but the white and blue, the silver of the shackles and chains, and the vulnerable pinkness of my own skin.

Panicked thoughts and questions run through my head: where am I; how did I get here; why am I here; who knows that I am here; can anyone hear me as I call out; how can I get out; can I survive the heat of the rising sun? I pull harder against the chains. I try desperately to bring my hands together to join the strengths of the two arms, but the shackles and chains hold them mere inches apart. Each part of my body feels alone and unsupported. I scream in frustration and fear but the sounds of my own voice simply echo back to me.

I fight and fight against the shackles and tethers until, finally, I am exhausted. I try to slump down to rest but the tethers pull tight. I am suspended and unable to relax into the sides and bottom of the bowl. I curl down into myself as best I can. I desire sleep, to close out the pain, exhaustion, whiteness and heat. Eventually I become numb and fall into sleep and darkness.

When I awaken the night has fallen around me. I shiver with the gentle but chill breeze and, with the realization that I am still shackled, I weep. I cannot find the strength

to struggle, I cannot think, I cannot speak within myself or in the world of my bowl. I don't dare speak or make a sound. I fall again into the darkness.

As the morning arrives again, I am instantly aware of my surroundings and my place within them. I hear a small voice, beside me and in me. A child...my child... moves in and out of me, urging me to attend to her. I move with our shared and interconnected vulnerability and I grow smaller to be both beside her and of her. The shackles slip off of my small frame now and my arms encircle the child and hold her close. As I do I grow again and reach up to the top of the bowl, with the child in my arms. Pausing for a moment at the top, I survey my landscape. It is both beautiful and terrifying. The colours, sage, rust, silver and blue, are a welcome contrast to the harsh whiteness of the bowl, as is the openness of space. There is no sign of animal life out there and I wonder which direction to move in. How did this bowl come to be here, in this place? What are the dangers outside? We slip over the edge and drop down into the desert brush.

We begin to travel, with both uncertainty and purpose. At times the child walks beside me, hand in my hand, and at times she must be carried and held close. She too is tired and afraid. I know this somehow, although she does not speak to me with words. Instead her voice moves up through me. I too do not speak and yet she seems to understand what we are trying to do as we move slowly towards the distant hills. I understand that the journey will be a very long one and yet, at this moment I accept this. I need to put great distance between where I was and where I am going.

In time, we come across some other travelers threading their way through the sage-coloured brush and silver cactus. Without ceremony, we join together and quietly

move on. Without words again, their voices merge with my voice and my child's voice, and I understand that their journey is our journey. Food and water is found and shared. Despite the incessant heat and the difficulty of the journey, I grow stronger each day. I nurture my child, I hear her voice and I hold her close. In time, we travelers begin to hum. It is soft and tentative at first but it grows. Eventually we sing.

### In the Present

I turn back now to my present situation and the threat that I feel to my own voice as a result of the actions of my ex-husband. What do I understand now about my self and my voice and how does this take me forward as a woman and mother and in the many other roles that I have within my world? What can I learn about voice through my own experience?

To see him and to learn of his actions is yet another triggering event and it throws me back into a time when I felt that I could not breath and I was silenced. I feel the terror and the threat of his unpredictable destructiveness. I know this experience well now and for a day or so I go back there and I have a sense of "no control."

But I also know of a different experience – the one in which I crossed the line and separated myself from that terror, reclaimed my voice and self, and became healthy again. In my consciousness I now hold both of these experiences. With the recognition of an alternative experience I move out of my paralysis.

I have developed a repertoire of skills and recognize that I can take action. In the women's words, I have built a "scaffold" that helps me climb out of the darkness and silence. One of my first acts is to answer my early question to my self, "What is wrong

with *me*?” There is nothing wrong with *me*; this is not about *me*, who I am, and what I bring into the world. This is about him, who he is, and what he creates in his life. He creates destructiveness. The act of relocating him and his actions outside of me and my identity is freeing. He is not inside me now with the old messages; he is off to the side, doing what he does. I am aware of his presence and recognize the situation for what it is; it is crazy, frightening, and risky and I do need to pay attention. However, in seeing the situation and him for what they are (which is differently than how I used to see) I can act differently. Drawing on my repertoire, I create and enact a plan. At times, I feel the fear in my body, and it arises in my emotional state, but I am clear in mind and intent and I see the opportunities for action.

As I write this, the threat to my voice and self is still out there, but I am a different person now and I see both the threats and a transformed self; I am conscious of the whole, not just the parts. I recognize my capacity to triumph over this new situation and continue the never-ending process of discovery. I am not alone in my experience of this process or in having gained this capacity, as the words of the participants illustrate:

I can build my self up again to be resilient.

I’ve come a million miles from where I was.

I am well shored up.

It makes you stronger within your self...this is who I am, and this is the way that it is, and this is what I want.

I think our voices strengthen each other’s voices.

## Insights on the Voicing Phenomenon

When I began this inquiry I was most interested in the moment or point in time when women made the transition from silence to voice, in order to bring about significant change in their own lives or those of others. I understood from my own experience that this moment is not disconnected from other moments and experiences and most likely reflects an accumulation of moments that results in the capacity to act. This process and the interconnection of moments and experiences are illustrated through the descriptions provided in Chapter Four and in the stories and interpretations above. What this has taught me is the extent to which voice, self and consciousness are intertwined.

The accumulation of moments and experiences alters our relationship to our selves as well as our voices. Authentic voice is a manifestation of a healthy self, and by that I mean the voice that rises out of and expresses a very deep sense of knowing what is necessary for the survival, growth and future of the self in relation to others. This deep sense of knowing is consciousness. It is beyond noticing and beyond awareness of what is going on outside of the self. This consciousness is integrative: we are aware of what is important to the self, what is external to the self, and what is significant about the self's connections to and responsibility for others. This consciousness is also emergent: it is always evolving. The heightened awareness, ability to see freshly and experience at a different and deeper level ensures that the self is not static. It is energized.

With this awareness, energy and consciousness we are able to form intent and to see our purpose in relation both to our selves and to others. We understand that we are not disconnected from others (in fact we have emerged through our relationships to others) but we are also not defined or subsumed by others. Having developed a

relationship with the self and a conscious awareness of ourselves in relation to others we can make choices on how we connect with others. The process of coming to voice is transformative; we are not the same people. The transformative process opens us up to new possibilities and opportunities.

Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers (2004) collaborated on *Presence-Human Purpose and The Field of the Future* and proposed a new theory about change and learning. They are driven by the question “would the world change if we learned to access, individually and collectively, our deepest capacity to sense and shape the future?” They are very troubled by the pervasiveness of the subject-object duality and the fragmentation of wholes into parts in our societies and believe that we are on a path to destruction if we do not re-orient and re-connect our selves and our relationships. They describe a process whereby people shift from being disengaged to engaged, from observers to participators and creators. They speak about learning to see ourselves and the world differently, of coming to understand both parts and the whole, of developing “crystallizing intent” (p. 137), becoming intentional and purposeful in the way in which we live our lives, of creating and adjusting new ways of being, and of “staying connected” (p. 162).

The process of coming into voice, which is a process of coming into awareness about the self and a deeper level of understanding and consciousness about the self and the self in relation to others, is very similar to the process that they describe. It occurs to me that the transformative process of coming into voice as individuals enables us to participate more mindfully in the relationships with others and thus enhances the collective capacity to be transformative in families, communities and nations.

## Creating the Future

As noted at the outset of this inquiry, my intention was to enhance my understanding about women's processes of moving from silence to voice. I believed that this understanding would enable me to be more conscious, creative and effective in my life as a mother of daughters and community practitioner working with girls and women. I believed that it would change the way in which I constructed meaning of experience and it would change my behaviour. I was looking to bring the research into practice, which is a fundamental quality and intention of feminist research. I also hoped that my inquiry process and discoveries would be of interest and value to others who share a desire to honour and encourage the voices of girls and women. All of this mattered to me because I believe that girls' and women's voices are resources for personal, familial, and community health and well-being. They contribute to the collective capacity to sense and create the future that Peter Senge and his colleagues (2004) speak about. In these times we cannot afford to subvert, extinguish or ignore this resource.

I have been fundamentally affected by this inquiry. In this section I will share the lessons I have learned and describe how I intend to take this forward into practice and research.

### *What Makes a Difference?*

#### *Phenomenological Orientation to Lived Experience*

When I decided to work with a feminist-inspired hermeneutic phenomenological methodology I felt confident that it would serve the purpose of the inquiry and I was intrigued by the possibilities of using an emergent methodology. What I did not expect was how invaluable the methodology itself would be to my practice and to achieving an

intersection between and complementarity of research and practice. The methodology's attentiveness to lived experience, personal interpretation and meaning making, and reflexive processes can be brought into personal and professional relationships with girls and women in a manner that encourages the emergence of voice and self.

The inquiry approach in phenomenology is humanizing. It does not objectify the individual or seek to codify or categorize experience into pre-determined units, but rather it encourages mutual engagement in a process of coming to understand the individual's experience of the world and the meaning she attributes to it. The process conveys the message, "You have a mind and what you have to say is important and valid." This is a powerful message for girls and women who are disconnected from their voices and selves or concerned about expressing themselves out of fear of being ignored, diminished or invalidated. All of the participants in this study described the significance of having their experiences, perspectives and voices acknowledged and validated by others. What this suggests to me is that the philosophical orientation and methodological approaches of phenomenology are relevant to daily practice where the aim shifts from diagnosing and treating (i.e., codifying, categorizing and intervening) to caring, engaging, understanding, and facilitating the emergence of voice and self.

### *Framework for Understanding Processes*

It was not my intention to build dogmatic theory as that would be in conflict with the intentions of both phenomenological and feminist inquiry and would not advance my understanding of the phenomenon. However, as I worked with the women's experience, I came to believe that there was value in developing a framework that reminded us of the

ever-shifting relationship that girls and women have with their silences, voices and selves, and of the capacity for voice to be integrative, emergent and connected. I have worked with the notion of “scaffolding” that the women introduced in the group conversation and created a framework of essential themes for consideration (see Figure 1).

Frameworks are representations of the fundamental elements of an experience, process or phenomenon and they may assist us to develop a shared language for and construction of an experience, illustrate the interrelationship of elements, make meaning of experience, focus attention on some elements, and guide practice and make it more intentional (Ricks & Charlesworth, 2003, pp. 13-14). Frameworks do have limitations, the most fundamental being that they suggest that it is possible to reduce a phenomenon or experience down into a simplistic framework. A framework is a temporary construction that may serve to help us understand more about an experience, phenomenon, or process but it will never represent the fullness, depth, complexity and diversity of it. Despite these limitations, I believe that there is value in working with a framework that illustrates the scaffolding that supports the transition from silence to voice and that can sustain and support voice over time. The scaffold suggests ways in which we can be intentional in our practice and construct, rather than dismantle or abandon, the scaffolds for voice. For example, I have learned about the importance of allies and have come to understand that there are many different types of allies (e.g., human and not human, short term and long term) and different contexts in which allies may be found. What this suggests to me in my community practice is to mindfully create physical and emotional environments and opportunities in which girls and women can

find allies, such as the “public homeplaces” that Mary Belenky, Lynne Bond and Jacqueline Weinstock (1997) describe and that we are collectively creating in the Western Communities Project (Queen Alexandra Foundation for Children, 2003).

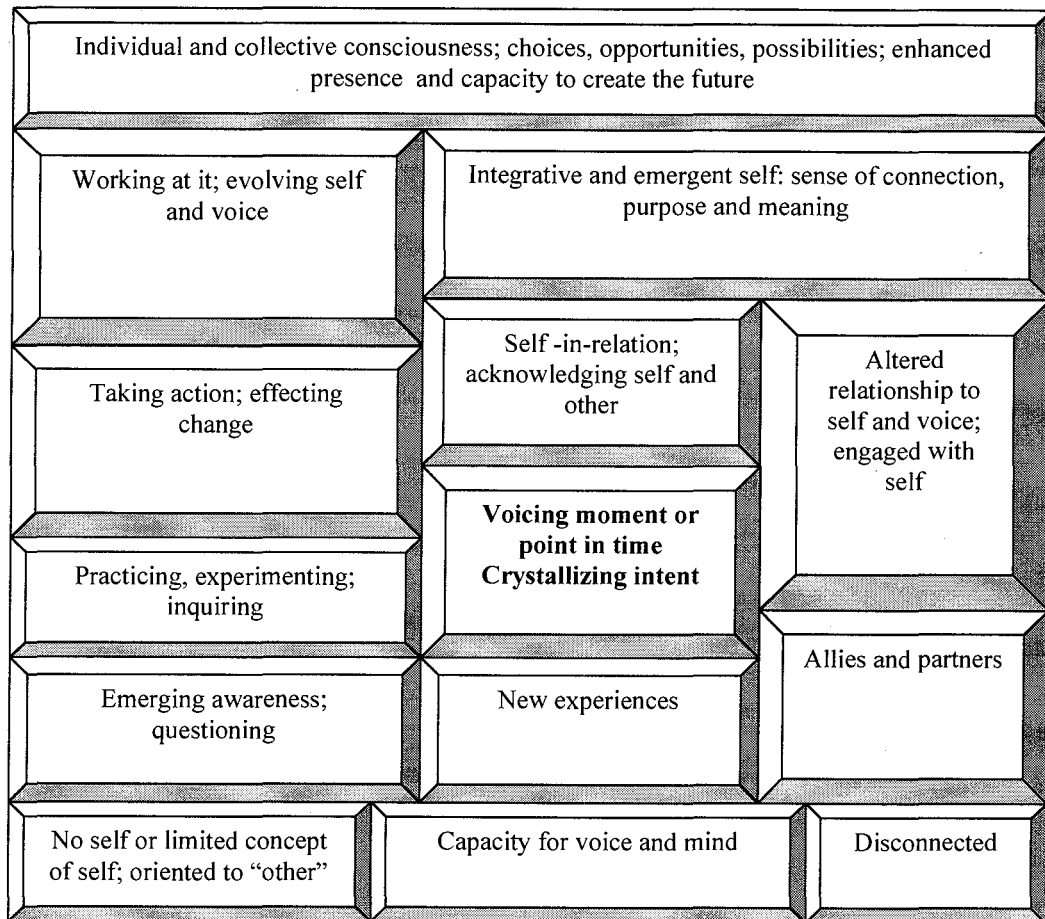


Figure 1: Scaffolds for Women’s Voices

*Opportunities and Engagement*

New and different experiences, alliances and relationships enabled the women in this study to see and experience the world differently. This began a process of shifting awareness and emerging consciousness that suggests a shift in their personal paradigms. Thomas Kuhn (1996) suggests that paradigms are “entire constellations of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by members of a given community” (p. 175). Paradigm

transitions come about when two things happen. First, anomalies become noticed and defined and experiences no longer fit, contradict with, or cannot be explained by the current dominant paradigm. Second, an alternative paradigm is available that works to both explain the experiences more satisfactorily and reconcile or explain some of the emerging anomalies. If we take these notions into a personal context we can see how, for the women involved in this study, their experiences, alliances, and relationships collected together to make more evident the flaws or anomalies in the beliefs, values, and perspectives held within themselves, their families or their communities about them, their roles, and the capacities - and which had held them voiceless. By having new opportunities for different experiences and relationships space was created for them to accept alternative paradigms inclusive of new beliefs, values, and perspectives that enabled them to claim self and voice.

A practical application of this learning is The Listening Partners Project (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997). The Project has illustrated the interactive power of relationships, social supports and guided dialogue to contribute to growth of voice and mind, including confidence, motivation, reflective thinking and collaborative problem solving (p. 74). A fundamental assumption of the model is,

... that individuals' epistemologies or ways of knowing provide a framework for imagining the nature of relationships with others, including friends and children. A person's vision of the nature, role, and function of her relationships will simultaneously shape and be shaped by her own epistemological outlook and the interactions themselves.... The Listening Partners Project was designed with the premise that these connections evolve in a dynamic and bi-directional way; that

is, a woman's emerging epistemological outlooks encourage her to consider her relationships in more generative ways while her experiences relating with others in contexts of greater reciprocity and mutuality contribute to nurturing new epistemological perspectives. (pp. 74-75)

The learning in the Listening Partners Project and this study also challenges the typical efforts of "giving people voice," such as inviting people to "speak out" and "be heard" in meetings, focus groups and other gatherings on selected topics. These approaches might create time for women's voices to be heard, but not necessarily opportunity. Carol Gilligan noted that women involved in her research often spoke in terms suggesting that what they said was dissociated from who they were, e.g., "if I were to speak for myself...." In the context of her research where confidentiality was assured and the,

structure of authority was reversed in that I had come to learn from them, many women in fact did know what they wanted to do and also what they thought would be the best thing to do in what often were painful and difficult situations. But many women feared that others would condemn or hurt them if they spoke, that others would not listen or understand, that speaking would only lead to further confusion, that it was better to appear 'selfless' to give up their voices and keep the peace." (p. x)

What this suggests is that forums in which women are expected to "speak out" may be experienced as intimidating and risky and whatever emerges in these contexts may be more attuned to "keeping the peace" than "telling the truth." Therefore, if we are to tap into and connect with the power that girls and women have to effect change not

only in their personal and familial contexts, but also in their community contexts, we need to consider alternative ways in which we can support and create opportunities that allow for the emergence of self and authentic voice.

### *Knowledge, Skill, and Authenticity in Practice*

Paulo Freire (1982) suggests that our ontological mission as human beings “is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively” (p. 12). Although attracted to the notion that each of us has a transformative mission, I am aware of the complex and multi-faceted nature of voice, self, consciousness and action. The women who participated in this study are all engaged in living a life of purpose and meaning. They are connected to others and actively engaged in supporting or encouraging the well-being of others within their families, networks and communities. They illustrate the generative process that Mary Belenky and her colleagues (1997) describe. While I do not doubt the capacity of each of us to make a difference in the world (see Ricks, Charlesworth, Bellefeuille and Field, 1999), what I want to know is how is the space created in which people can manifest their ontological mission? When the stakes are high, when the risk of harm or loss is huge, then what? What role does “voice” have in this equation and what can “having voice” look like?” What can I as practitioner do to create opportunity for the expression of voice? What are the strategies and tools for creating the dialogical encounter that facilitates peoples’ reflection, acquisition of understanding and ultimately genuine expression of voice? I am curious

about what knowledge, skills and attributes I can bring into my practice that will support the conditions in which each of us can manifest our “ontological mission.”

### *Family Talk*

The findings in this study echo findings in other studies that consider the impact of the messages that children receive within their families about themselves, their capacities and roles, and the rules to live by (Belenky, Clinchy et al., 1986, 1997; Ungar, 2004). The messages received within the family are carried into adulthood and influence how individuals construct themselves, their relationships and their perspectives on authority and expertise. One-way talk, inequality in parental communications, and discouraged questioning all contribute to the silencing of children's sense of mind and voice. Mutuality in communication, listening and dialogue, and respect even for emerging ideas all contribute to a growing sense of self and voice. It is these lessons, learned in families, neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces, that impact upon the development of self-confidence and sense of intellectual capacity (Belenky, Clinchy et al 1986, 1997).

The cyclical nature of family talk is also an important consideration for practice. Mothers who have a limited sense of self and voice are not in a position to create environments for their children in which self and voice can emerge, thus a perpetuating cycle of silencing occurs (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997). The influence of the early years is of particular significance to me as a practitioner in the field of child and youth care. I question the effectiveness of programs and services that aim to tell marginally functioning parents how to be better parents, or protective care systems that engage in processes that perpetuate silencing both of parental and child voices. These reaffirm the

voices of authority and do not serve to engage people in coming to know, inquire and become connected to self and others in healthier ways.

In my own practice I have shifted my orientation from residual areas of practice (e.g., child protection services) to “wellness practices” (Bellefeuille & Charlesworth, 2004) including working within community contexts to introduce the notions of asset building to parents, neighbours, coaches, educators, police officers, and others who are or could be in relationships with young people (Benson, 1997). The attractiveness of this approach is that it validates what most people know at some level about what makes a difference (i.e., it draws on lived experience and there is no expert telling them how they should think and be) and it aims to create meaningful relationships between adults and children such that young people receive the messages of being valued.

### *Dialogue*

Every human being, no matter how ‘ignorant’ or submerged in the ‘culture of silence’ he may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools for such encounter, he can gradually perceive his personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his own perception of that reality and deal critically with it. (Freire, 1982, p. 13)

...the way we can change our perspective happens through dialogue ... if someone says something to me and they say something that’s different a few days later, it might not be contradictory ... through conversation they’ve changed their perspective or whatever.... That process happens for my self, having a

conversation with my self ... that's how my voice changes and how I understand my self. (Jess)

Both Paulo Freire and Jess recognize what an increasing number of leaders and social thinkers are coming to understand: the power of conversation and dialogue to create opportunities for individual and collective understanding and growth (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Kofman & Senge, 1995; Tarule, 1996; Wheatley, 1999). For women in particular, it is through conversation and dialogue that “the roots of their thinking are nourished ... and how they apprehend new understanding and reinterpret their thinking and their ideas” (Tarule, 1996, p. 285). In my own practice I have become acutely aware of what I do and what I am a part of that either encourages or discourages conversation and dialogue. My aim is to do more of the former than the latter. Dialogue happens in the context of relationships and a certain measure of trust is necessary in order for people to participate fully in a dialogic encounter. In my practice as a community facilitator I ask myself what am I doing with others that create safer places within which conversation and dialogue may occur? This requires attentiveness to a myriad of details including physical environments, the ways in which we acknowledge and connect with each individual, group sizes, and so on, but while it is intentional, it is not manipulative. Underlying the efforts is an authentic belief in the power of relationship and dialogue as a means through which people are able to achieve ever higher levels of connectedness, purpose and capacity for contributing.

Dialogue implies a reciprocity and mutuality whereby there is both speaking and listening. In my practice I ask myself what am I doing to model this reciprocity? Mary Belenky and her colleagues (1997) observed that,

... the practice that most sets homeplace founders apart from traditional leaders has to do with the balance the homeplace women establish between speaking and listening... The homeplace women are all highly articulate leaders – indeed most are extraordinarily gifted storytellers and spokespersons. Even so, when [they] talk about their own leadership styles they invariably emphasize listening at least as much as speaking.... [They] see themselves as the kind of leader who draws out the voices of people so that they might speak for themselves. (p. 266)

This speaks to the need for a different form or approach to leadership than is typical in Western society: one that “draws out” rather than tells. It speaks to the need for more “discourse or interpretive communities” as described by Jill Tarule (1996, p. 286) and more courage to “invite disruption, disturbance or dissolution of the status quo [by supporting] the strengths, intelligence, resilience and knowledge” of girls and women (Taylor et al., 1995, p. 203).

### *New Directions for Research*

This research represents just the beginning of many different research based “conversations” that I intend and expect to have with girls and women about their voices, silences, and selves. I am particularly intrigued about the role of education in the process of coming into voice. Education was an important experience for all of the women in this study and has been instrumental in my own process of coming to voice. However, the silencing tendencies of educational institutions, especially for girls and women, have been described by a number of authors (Belenky, Clinchy et al, 1986, 1997; Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Lewis, 1993; Taylor et al., 1995). Several of the women

shared experiences that they had in which their voices and selves were not honoured or were actively discouraged or invalidated within formal educational settings. Nonetheless, something happened for the six of us that made the post-secondary educational experience, on the whole, uplifting and empowering. What is the “something” that makes a difference? Mary Belenky, Lynne Bond and Jacqueline Weinstock (1997) speak to the qualities of the “invisible colleges” that exist within communities and among networks of women. What can this teach us about teaching girls and women? How can we intentionally create learning environments that encourage emergent voices and selves?

I am also intrigued by the notion of community leadership and mentoring and how we can encourage a new style of leadership that “draws out” the voices of girls and women and engages them in co-creating healthier environments within which they may raise their children and grandchildren. My experiences within communities suggest that, while people are receptive to participatory leadership it is difficult to sustain within the broader contexts of the dominant hierarchical models and leadership practices. This brings me to a place of inquiry about boys and men’s experiences with silence and voice. How do they experience silence and voice? In developing a greater understanding about how they experience the phenomenon, can we more strategically use our voices as women to inform and engage men? Can we more successfully sustain the new style of leadership that will “draw out” the more authentic and connected voices of boys and girls, men and women, such that we can collectively create the “presence” that Peter Senge and his colleagues describe? The responsibility and opportunity for enhancing the well-being of individuals, families and communities should not rest on the shoulders of

girls and women and we will be more successful in creating caring communities through mutual, reciprocal and collaborative means.

Much of the existing research on women's voice which has been a reliance upon women's "talk" as the means through which to develop understanding and create interpretations. I am curious about what can be learned about "voice" through alternative forms of expression such as writing, art and drama (Habermas, 1987; Schweickart, 1996). Perhaps these are both alternative forms for expressing "voice" as well as means through which women's experience of and relationship to voice and silence can be better understood.

### Conclusion

Maurice Merleau Ponty (1973) wrote:

when you listen to a presentation of a phenomenological nature, you will listen in vain for the punch-line, the latest information, or the big news. As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study...[P]henomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetizing project; it tries an incantive, evocative speaking, a primal telling wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world. (p. 13)

So as I bring to a close this section in my ongoing inquiry into women's experience of voice, there is no "big news," no "latest information." These insights and interpretive stories are just one possible interpretation of human experience. As Max van Manen (1997) suggests "no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially *richer* or *deeper*

description” (p. 31). My interpretations are offered in the spirit of encouraging reflection and even deeper and richer interpretation so that we may build understanding about women, their voices, selves and connections.

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## APPENDIX A: CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF METHODOLOGY

The following summarizes the criteria that I used and the questions I asked when reviewing methodological options and selecting a suitable methodology for my topic.

### Expectations

#### *Getting to Voice*

The research on girls and women's voice illustrates the challenge faced by any researcher seeking to explore voice; given that many women are separated from their voices and sense of self as a result of conditioning and disenfranchisement, how can we tap into women's experience of voice? How will the participants know what they know? (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997). Despite the challenge, there appears to be some agreement within the literature on three points. The first is that we must focus on the lived experiences of women. As Carol Gilligan (1993) suggests "the way people talk about their lives is of significance, that the language they use and the connections they make reveals the world that they see and in which they act" (p. 2). The second point of congruence is that voice emerges out of trusting relationships within which women feel able to explore, uncover and express their own voices. The third point is that there is great diversity and we must create space for and allow this diversity to be expressed not only in those we learn from but also in ourselves as researchers. Drawing on Carol Gilligan's comments again, she notes that her interest now lies "in the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others and in the stories we tell about our lives" (p. 2).

These three points factored into my choice of methodology and methods. It was clear that I needed to have a means to focus on lived experience, build trusting relationships within which women will feel able to explore, uncover and express their own voices, and embrace diversity and plurality.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: How will the methodology/method serve to support participants in exploring, uncovering and expressing their own voices? Could the development of trust between research and participants and between participants be an explicit and congruent aspect of the methodology/method?

#### *Tackling the Subject/Object Dichotomy*

The subject/object duality or dichotomy is discussed in the feminist literature (Klein and Steinberg, 1989; Hekman, 1990; Lather, 1988) and was discussed in my candidacy paper on the voice literature. The key consideration for me in the selection of research methodology and methods was that this duality is suspended or negated. The research must be *for* the subject, not *about* the subject as an object.

Standard methods of research set up a hierarchy with the researcher being privileged. This sets up conditions whereby people may be less inclined to 'tell their truth'. In recognition of this risk, I aimed to select a methodology and methods that

allowed me to eliminate the distancing experience of the subject/object dichotomy and thus make contact with the women's 'underground' authentic or inner voice.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: How does the methodology/method address the topic of subjectivity and objectivity? Is it possible to use this methodology/method and ensure that the subject (participant) does not become an "object" during the research process, i.e., it supports subjectivity? How is the relationship between the researcher and the participant described or constructed and will it support the development of trusting relationships within the research process?

### *Embracing Plurality and Complexity*

I embrace the notion of truths rather than 'Truth.' I embrace plurality and complexity (Ricks & Charlesworth, 2003). My desire is to uncover not that which is essentially feminine in respect of voice, but rather, through discourse, uncover some of the range of possibilities and the contextual and relational variables that relate to voice. I am seeking a participatory science – a non-elitist approach in which community participation is both valued and promoted. Generalizations are not the aim, rather a real and honest expression of women's experience is the aim. Therefore, I needed to select a methodology and methods that helped me draw out the actual and lived experience of women, including thoughts, feelings, stories, histories, and perspectives.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Does the methodology/method allow for the expression of multiple and different voices both between, across and within women? How does it support and value authentic participation, and help to draw out the lived experiences of women, including thoughts, feelings, stories, history, and perspectives?

### *Research as Praxis*

The phenomenon of knowing cannot be taken as though there were 'facts' or objects out there that we grasp and store in our head. The experience of anything out there is validated in a special way by the human structure, which makes possible 'the thing' that arises in the description.

This circularity, this connection between action and experience, this inseparability between a particular way of being and how the world appears to us, tells us that every act of knowing brings forth a world....All doing is knowing and all knowing is doing. (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 25-26)

The feminist view is that the personal is political and that all acts of learning, understanding and developing consciousness are connected to bringing about fundamental change in the world and in the experience of women within the world. Shulamit Reinharz (1979) spoke of the aim of experiential analysis to deepen understanding and effect change at three levels simultaneously:

... the substantive issue, the research process and the self of the researcher – person, problem and method. [It] compels critical self-awareness in the context of engagement with others to whom the researcher is accountable, [it] is a form of praxis for the self and society. (p. 368)

The research methodologies and methods that I selected needed to support the elucidation of this intersection and integration of person, problem and method. As I am particularly interested in women's voices as resources for individual, familial and community wellness the intersection and integration of research and praxis had to be well-defined.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Does the methodology/method incorporate the notion of praxis, action or change as an underlying value and outcome of the research process of research? How might it support the learning and change in "person, problem and method" (Reinharz, 1979)? Will it enable me to better understand women's voices within a community context?

### *Reflexivity and Self Within the Research Process*

Reflexivity has been described as an approach where ... the researcher constantly aims to be self-aware of how his or her moves open as well as close interpretation possibilities..... It implies an interpretive, historical, language-sensitive, local, open and non-authoritative understanding of the subject matter. (Alvesson, 2000, p. 16)

Reflection is a process of knowing how we know. It is an act of turning back upon ourselves. It is the only chance we have to discover our blindness and to recognize that the certainties and knowledge of others are, respectively, as overwhelming and tenuous as our own:

This special situation of knowing how we know is traditionally elusive for our Western culture. We are keyed to action and not to reflection, so that our personal life is generally blind to itself. It is as though a taboo tells us: 'It is forbidden to know about knowing.' Actually not knowing what makes up our world of experience, which is the closest world to us, is a crying shame. There are many things in the world to be ashamed about in this world, but this ignorance is one of the worst. (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 24)

In my daily life and practice, I perceive myself as a research- or reflective-practitioner. In addition, the topic of voice is intensely personal for me, and I am curious about learning what I can about my own voice and silence. I therefore looked for a methodology and methods that embraced reflexivity and the integration of self into the research process.

Reflexivity also applies to the experience of the participants in the research process. It has been my experience that authentic voice is more likely to be expressed in situations when people are trusting, when expression is particularly important and urgent for the individual, i.e., it really matters, and when there is an opportunity to uncover, in the context of supportive relationships, the inner voice. All of these led me to believe that dialogue and collective inquiry would be an important method in my research.

Tied to the notion of reflexivity is the notion of mindfulness. The benefit of having a research framework to work within is that it provides some discipline to the research process. Being mindful in my research practice is important, e.g. what am I doing, why am I doing it, what does it mean to the participants, and how have they been affected, what does it mean to me and how have I been affected?

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Is the methodology/method congruent with the notions of reflective practice and the use of reflection both by the researcher and the participants? Are dialogic methods easily incorporated into the approach? Can I as researcher bring my self into the research process and how does the methodology/method explicitly construct this?

### *Honouring Relationships*

Voice is an intensely relational act; it cannot be understood outside of relationships between and within the self and other. Thus, the research methodology and methods that I selected needed to recognize, honor and support relationships. This includes the relationships that the women describe as part of their experience, as well as relationships that may develop between myself as researcher and the participants as well as amongst the participants. The relational quality of voice also necessitates that there be opportunities for dialogue and interaction between the researcher and participants so that trust can evolve in the support of accessing more authentic representations of voice. This ensured that the method was not, for example, interrogation-based, with set, prescribed questions and timeframes.

Although the intent of the research was to understand rather than to effect change within the participants, I recognized the possibility that the experience of engaging in dialogue about silence, voice, self, community and consciousness might bring about personal awareness and change. A persistent theme in the feminist literature is that women must come together for open, honest dialogue to bring about the necessary realization of the need for change and plan to bring it about. Through learning that the struggle is shared, it is felt that women can be supported to overcome self-blame and begin to create a new sense of self. The need for a “community” for discussion is necessary, for as issues are uncovered, personal lives and relationships are affected (Daly, 1973; Schneir, 1994).

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: How does the methodology/method recognize, honor and support relationships, including relationships that are described as being part of a woman’s experience as well as relationships that may develop between the researcher and participants and amongst the participants? Are group dialogues easily incorporated into the methodology? Will it enable the development of a safe environment (a community) within which women may explore, uncover and express voice? How will it assist me in making sure that the participants are not negatively impacted through their participation in the research process?

### *Understanding Contexts*

The importance of locating voice and silence within a context is particularly important to my research. Divorced from context, the voices and silences are divorced from meaning. Therefore, I looked for a methodology and methods that explicitly acknowledged and accounted for the multiple and overlapping contexts of researcher and participants.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Does the methodology/method explicitly acknowledge and account for the multiple and overlapping contexts of researcher and participants, and particularly how context is important to developing an understanding about the meaning of thoughts, feeling and actions?

### *Flexible and Emergent Approaches*

The methodologies and methods associated with the research on women's voices remain fluid and in a state of continuous development. As noted, I believe that there is value in developing a framework for the research and being clear about the methodology that I am working within, however, I recognized that I also needed to stay open and receptive to re-inventing the methodological approach and methods in the course of the research. Therefore I looked for a methodology that was fundamentally emergent.

An illustration of the possible need for flexible and emergent approaches is that voice is more than just the vocal expression of words and it may be important to develop processes for understanding different types of voicing. Voice may be a symbol, metaphor or reference for expression rather than simply a vocal act. Voice could then be expressed through various means of communication ranging from written and spoken word to development of new languages. Ellen Langer (1997) writes about the limitations of language in expressing emotions, complex and evolving patterns, and the inner experiences. I recognized that I may need to go beyond the words, to understand the voice and its many facets and manifestations.

The criteria of flexibility and emergence also relates to risk-taking. I intended to bring more to the research process than just my reasoning powers and logical constructs; I aimed to bring my self, my history, my passion and my future. To do this, I needed to eliminate arbitrary distinctions between researcher and researched, knower and known, knowing and the means of knowing and take risks in the process.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Does the methodology have or could it support and accommodate the use of a diverse array of research methods? How well will it accommodate an emergent approach to method?

### Research Challenges

The challenges of doing research on the silences and voices of women, and of endeavoring to enter into and understand women's lived experience, create a number of methodological challenges. Four key challenges are briefly described below. When I evaluated methodological prospects, I considered how well these challenges could be addressed.

#### *Wrestling with Dualities and Dichotomies*

The feminist literature denounces the prevailing patriarchal dualities of subject/object, researcher/researched, knower/known and rational/irrational (Klein and Steinberg, 1989; Hekman, 1990; Lather, 1988). The design of feminist research aims to eliminate the disparities and imbalances often associated with such hierarchical dualities.

However, there remains a risk of creating dichotomies that will relegate or reinforce the prevailing view of women's inferior capacity and status, The very process of inquiring about women's voice, framing women's voice as different than men's voice, and of inquiring about the relational quality of women's experience, runs the risk of reinforcing views about women's 'nature' as emotional and irrational and relationship-based, which has been traditionally defined as inferior.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: How well does the research methodology/method enable me to avoid unhelpful dualities and dichotomies, as in the dualities of researcher/researched and masculine/feminine?

### *The Challenge of Representation and Interpretation*

The notion of how the story is told and who tells it is also significant to me for a number of reasons. I think of the stories we are told as women about how it is to be a woman, many of which have served to name and define us without reference or relevance to our experience. I am aware that in representing and interpreting the words of women as I write my dissertation, I too, will be telling a story. This brings up questions of my ability to tell stories that are not my own.

While I am comfortable working within the complexity of people's lives, even the simple act of recording and reporting the story or stories may result in separating subject/object, researcher/researched and overlaying or placing my perspective on the stories of others. As a researcher coming from a feminist perspective, I need to be vigilant about the power of my own subjectivity and the way that this can construct the other. Understanding a woman's experience of silence, voice, self and consciousness is not accomplished by reducing her experience to my own. Therefore, I must challenge any tendency to believe that I have the answers, or that my understanding or critique is more valid or comprehensive. There are a number of factors that may influence the interpretation and representation of information. The challenge is to determine how to manage these factors so as to honor and reflect the voices of the participants in the research process.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Does the methodology/method explicitly confront the challenge of interpretation and representation and will it assist me in representing women and their voices and silences in the way that they would like?

### *The Ethics of Engagement*

In order to get at the inner or authentic voice, the research process is likely to be intensely personal and thought-provoking. What are the ethical implications of raising a person's consciousness or awareness about their circumstances, situation and options? What is the effect of being involved in the lives of the participants? How can I build trust and encourage openness but not create vulnerability?

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Does the methodology/method assist me to address the ethics of engaging people in a research process that they may experience as intense, personal, empowering or de-stabilizing?

*Locating the Self in Experiential Inquiry and the Role of the Researcher*

While the benefits of bringing the self into the research and of reflexivity as a researcher have been well-described (Alvesson, 2000, Reinharz, 1979, 1992), the challenges of self-revelation in research and writing have also been described (Reinharz, 1979, 1992). Not only is there an element of courage required to go to this level of commitment, but there is also a challenge to be thoughtfully and tastefully self-revealing and reflexive.

The products of qualitative, experiential research reflect the perspective of ...research-as-process...[in which] the self becomes the medium of acquiring knowledge...Instead of avoiding self-revelation...the reflexive stance exploits self-awareness as a source of insight and discovery. The self can be used in research not only as an observer...but also as a receiver and receptacle of experience that is to be explicated. (Reinharz, 1979, p. 241)

The debates on subjectivity and objectivity relate to the use of self in research. While some critics and their methodologies define the use of self in research as unscientific, arbitrary or journalistic and therefore not worthy of note, others believe that there are many different ways of knowing and resonate with Kierkegaard's words that "truth lies in subjectivity: true existence is achieved by intensity of feeling" (cited in Reinharz, 1979, p. 242). Subjectivity is not arbitrary. It is a means through which the vital connections between the individual and the social context of the world are understood; it allows us to better understand the roots of knowledge within the individual (Reinharz, 1979). As researcher, the process of participating in the discovery of knowledge supports the process of "becoming" or the development of self.

The questions I asked when evaluating the eight methodologies and when subsequently considering methods were: Does the methodology/method provide some guidance or direction for the way in which "self" may be brought into the research process? How well does it accommodate subjectivity and reflect a "methodology of commitment as an alternative to a methodology of detachment" (Reinharz, 1979, p. 247)?



University of Victoria

University of Victoria - Human Research Ethics Committee

Certificate of Approval

|  |                                   |                                    |                              |
|--|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <u>Principal Investigator</u><br>Jennifer Charlesworth<br>Graduate Student | <u>Department/School</u><br>CHIL  | <u>Supervisor</u><br>Frances Ricks |                              |
| <u>Co-Investigator(s):</u>   |                                   |                                    |                              |
| <u>Title:</u> Women's Voices - Resources for Community Wellness            |                                   |                                    |                              |
| <u>Project No.</u><br>391-03   | <u>Approval Date</u><br>08-Oct-03 | <u>Start Date</u><br>08-Oct-03     | <u>End Date</u><br>07-Oct-04 |

Certification

This is to certify that the University of Victoria Ethics Review Committee on Research and other Activities Involving Human Subjects has examined the research proposal and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects.

J. Howard Brunt  
Associate Vice-President, Research

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. Extensions/minor amendments may be granted upon receipt of "Request for Continuing Review or Amendment of an Approved Project" form.

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391-03 Charlesworth, Jennifer

**REQUEST FOR CONTINUING REVIEW OR AMENDMENT OF AN APPROVED PROJECT  
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA**

|                                  |        |
|----------------------------------|--------|
| CURRENT PROTOCOL APPROVAL NUMBER | 391-03 |
|----------------------------------|--------|

**Applicant Information**

|                        |                       |                   |                      |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR | Jennifer Charlesworth | DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL | Child and Youth Care |
| PHONE                  | 370-1500              | FAX               | 370-1599             |
| E-MAIL                 | jencharles@shaw.ca    |                   |                      |

|                                     |  |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| MAIL CORRESPONDANCE AND APPROVAL TO | DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL <input type="checkbox"/> | HOME <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|

|                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| HOME ADDRESS<br>(include postal code) | 1652 Richardson Street, Victoria, V8S 1R4 |
|---------------------------------------|---|

|         |                                  |                                |  |  |
|---------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| ARE YOU | FACULTY <input type="checkbox"/> | STAFF <input type="checkbox"/> | GRADUATE STUDENT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|

**Student Supervisor**

|      |                   |       |          |
|------|-------------------|-------|----------|
| NAME | Dr. Frances Ricks | PHONE | 721-8735 |
|------|-------------------|-------|----------|

**Co-Investigator(s) – Identify those collecting raw data. (Name, position [eg., Graduate Student] and department)**

|    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 1. |  | Others (eg., Grad supervisor, committee) |
| 2. |  | 1.                                       |
| 3. |  | 2.                                       |
| 4. |  | 3.                                       |
| 5. |  | 4.                                       |

**RECEIVED**  
OCT 21 2004

**Title of Project**

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Women's Voices – Resources for Community Wellness | OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES |
|---|-----------------------------|

**Request for Continuation or Approval of Revisions (Check all that apply)**

REQUEST FOR EXTENSION IN TIME

|           |      |  |
|-----------|------|--|
| NEW DATES | FROM | TO   |
|           |      | March 30, 2005<br><del>November 30, 2004</del> |

JUSTIFICATION: Additional time required to complete final group interviews as per original proposal

THERE HAVE BEEN NO CHANGES IN THE STUDY DESIGN

Attach a brief synopsis of progress to date with an emphasis on any problems encountered during the conduct of the research.

THERE WILL BE CHANGES

Attach details of the changes along with a brief synopsis of progress to date with an emphasis on any problems encountered during the conduct of the research. Submit this form with copies of revised forms, tests, tasks, or questionnaires.

**Signatures**

*Signature of Graduate Supervisors indicates that they undertake to respect and abide by the statements of protection of confidentiality of data and anonymity agreed to by subjects/participants in the Letter of Informed Consent. When Chair/Director is the Principal Investigator, signature of Dean is required.*

|                                     |                         |                                  |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
|                                     |                         |                                  |
| SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR | SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR | SIGNATURE OF CHAIR/DIRECTOR/DEAN |
| DATE: Sept 9/04                     | DATE: Sept. 9, 2004     | DATE: Oct 19/04                  |

**FOR OFFICE OF VICE PRESIDENT RESEARCH USE ONLY:**

|                           |                             |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                           | New Approval Number: 406-04 |
|                           |                             |
| COMMITTEE CHAIR SIGNATURE |                             |
| NOV 8/04                  | OCT 8/03                    |
| APPROVAL DATE:            | START DATE:                 |
|                           | NOV 7/05                    |
|                           | END DATE:                   |

## APPENDIX C: LETTER TO COLLEAGUES

Dear

As you may know, I am working on my PhD through the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. What you may *not* know is the focus of my research: women's voices as resources for individual, family and community wellness. I have come to this focus as a result of my personal and professional experience of the silencing of women, as well as of women finding and using their voices at critical points in their lives. I have observed that in finding and using their voices, many women achieve positive and remarkable change.

My research aims to learn more about the moments or points in time when women decide that they *must* use their voices; when the risk or cost of silence is greater than the risk or cost of speaking out. I am interested in learning about what leads up to those moments and what happens thereafter. Through this research, we will learn more about what our informal and formal caring systems do that supports or suppresses women's voices.

I would appreciate your help in letting women know about the study. I am looking for women who are:

- adults (aged 20 and over)
- have had an experience in which they went from silence to finding and using their voice to bring about positive change for themselves, their family or their community
- able to speak about and reflect upon the experience (it will help if some time has passed since the experience)
- willing to be interviewed by me and meet with a small group of other women to discuss women's voices and change.

It is not necessary for the women to have made dramatic changes by external standards, but rather that they identify a significant change for themselves in moving from silence to voice at some point or in at least one area of their lives.

I have enclosed a notice that I would appreciate you posting in a location where it will be seen by program participants, staff and community members or volunteers. I have also enclosed some pamphlets for you to make available or hand out to women whom you know may be interested. You need only make this information available and alert women to the study. As women contact me, I will share more information and provide a consent form so that they can come to an informed decision about participating. I will arrange for and/or cover the costs of transportation and child care for all participants.

I will be recruiting participants in the Spring. If you have any questions, please call me at 370-1500 or e-mail [jencharles@shaw.ca](mailto:jencharles@shaw.ca)

I appreciate your assistance.

Sincerely

## ***Call for Participants in a Study on Women's Voices and Wellness***

- *Are you a woman over the age of 20?*
- *Have you had an experience where you went from silence to finding and using your voice to bring about positive change?*
- *Are you willing to have discussions with other women about the experience of finding voice?*
- *Are you able to assist a woman doctoral student in learning more about how women use their voices as resources for positive change and wellness and what helps or hinders their voices?*

### ***Got your interest?***

*Please take a copy of the brochure to learn more  
and contact Jennifer Charlesworth,  
370-1500 or [jencharles@shaw.ca](mailto:jencharles@shaw.ca)*

## APPENDIX E: PAMPHLET

### **Are You Interested in Participating in A Study of Women's Voices and Wellness?**

My name is Jennifer Charlesworth and I work with children, youth and families in many different Victoria neighbourhoods and communities. As part of the required work for my doctorate at the University of Victoria, I am doing a study of women's voices and wellness. My work on the study is supervised by faculty from the University of Victoria.

The purpose of the study is to better understand the experiences of women who realize that they *must* use their voices to bring about positive change for themselves, their families or their community.

Through a personal interview and small group conversations with other women, we will learn more about:

- the moments or points in time when women move from silence to voice
- what helps women move from silence to voice
- what gets in the way of women moving from silence to voice, and
- what happens as a result of women using their voices.

#### **Why is this study important?**

Women's voices matter!

I have worked with hundreds of women who live and work in communities and who want to make themselves and their families stronger and their neighbourhoods and communities better places to live. However, I have observed that many women have been silenced, or their ideas, hopes and plans have not been listened to, valued or supported – even by the professionals who are supposed to be helping.

This research will help us learn more about women's silences and voices, what it takes for women to move from silence to voice, and how women do this when there is a lot at stake. All of this is important to understand in order to support and include women in bringing about positive change for themselves and their families and communities.

#### **Who will be involved?**

A small number of women will participate in this study, all of whom will have had some experience where they had been silent or silenced and then spoke out to bring about important change for themselves, their families or their communities.

I am looking for women who are:

- adults (aged 20 and over)
- have had an experience in which they went from silence to finding and using their voice to bring about positive change for themselves, their family or their community
- able to speak about and reflect upon the experience (it will help if some time has passed since the experience)

- willing to share their voice story with me and meet with a small group of other women to discuss women's voices and change.

**What will the participants be asked to do?**

Women who are interested in participating will first have a conversation with me, in which I will provide more information about the study and what it will look like so that they can make a decision about whether to participate.

The women who are selected for the study will be asked to complete a consent form and then will meet with me individually in order to talk about their experience with moving from silence to voice.

After each participant has met with me individually, all participants will come together for two or three group conversations about women, silence, voice and change. All of the discussions will be informal and will include no more than seven people. All discussions will also be audio-taped so that I can make sure that I am accurately representing the words of the participants.

I will protect the privacy of each woman when I write about the study. I will also provide each woman with a copy of what I have written so that they can make changes and ensure that their words and stories are accurately and appropriately represented.

**How long will it take?**

The individual interview with me will take between one and two hours. Each of the two or three small group discussions will take between two and three hours, with breaks. These gatherings will take place over a period of about three months – approximately one gathering per month. All transportation and child care will either be provided or will be reimbursed for each of the gatherings. Food and refreshments will also be provided for each gathering.

I will then contact each participant from time to time to check the accuracy of my understanding and writing until the study is done (in about 10 months).

**Is there any risk to participants?**

There is no apparent risk to the women who will participate in the study. Talking about silence, voice and change can be emotional, but this does not mean that it is risky or that people will feel vulnerable or unsafe.

This question will be addressed further when I first discuss the study with women who are interested.

If at any point in the study a participant does not want to continue, she will be free to leave and there will be no pressure to continue.

**How do I get involved?**

If you are interested in contributing to this study, please contact Jennifer Charlesworth by calling 370-1500 or e-mailing [jencharles@shaw.ca](mailto:jencharles@shaw.ca)

**Thank you for your interest!**

## APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

### **Consent Form for Participation in the Study “Women’s Voice and Change”**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Women’s Voices and Change that is being conducted by Jennifer Charlesworth who is a doctoral student at the University of Victoria in the School of Child and Youth Care. You may contact Jennifer if you have further questions by calling 370-1500 or e-mailing to jencharles@shaw.ca.

As a doctoral student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for my degree. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Frances Ricks, a professor and Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies You may contact my supervisor at 721-8735.

The purpose of the research project is to understand better the experiences of women who come to the realization that they must use their voices in order to bring about changes for the benefit of themselves, their families or their communities.

Research of this type is important because it helps people such as myself, who work with girls and women in the community, to better understand the way women are silenced in our society and what assists women to find and use their voice to bring about positive changes in their lives. This information can be used to create more helpful and supportive experiences for women in our communities.

By coming forward and meeting with me you have some awareness about voice and using your voice to bring about change. It is for this reason that you are being invited to participate. The women who will be involved in this study will be women who have experience with voice and change and who are willing and able to talk about their experiences and reflect on what happened before, during and after they used their voice.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, you will be invited to meet first with me to talk about the study and at that time you will be asked some questions about your own experiences with silence and voice. At a later time, you will be invited to join with a small group of other women who have had experience with this topic in order to have a conversation about voice and change. There will be 2 or 3 group meetings and each will last between 2 and 3 hours. During the first of these meetings, you will be asked to describe your experience of a time or times in which you realized that you had to use your voice in order to bring about some important changes for yourself, your family members or your community. During subsequent meetings you will be asked to describe how you made sense of that moment or time.

These sessions will be audiotaped to ensure that I can make an accurate transcript of the meetings. You will be provided with a copy of the transcripts of those tapes and asked to confirm or correct the information provided. I will meet with you as necessary in order to

ensure that these transcripts accurately reflect your voice and experience and ensure your confidentiality. The final confirmed transcripts will be used as data for my PhD dissertation and may be used to write an article or book for publication. Quotes from the transcripts may be used in the text, but no identifying information will be attached to these quotes or to any information included in my dissertations.

I do not anticipate any risks to you by participating in this research, although you may experience different emotions as you tell your stories or listen to the stories of other women. In the unlikely event that you are unable to participate in the discussions during a focus group and are unable to continue due to the feelings and reactions you are experiencing, the interview or focus group will be stopped and you will be provided with assistance. This will include an opportunity to discuss your experience in the interview and information about resources that you can access to assist you in dealing with any issues that have arisen during your participation in the study.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include contributing to the knowledge about women and their voices, including how best to support women who have been silenced so that they may find and use their voices as a resource for positive change.

The time that I will be asking you to commit to this study will range from 5 to 11 hours. I appreciate that this is a considerable commitment on your part, and I will do my best to support a positive experience through hosting the discussions in a convenient and welcoming place and providing food and refreshment. Also, to support your participation in this study, I will ensure that your transportation to and from the focus group meetings is either provided or you are compensated for your costs. I will also ensure that child care is either provided or you are compensated for your costs, whichever is most helpful to you.

As a participant in this study, it is important that you know and understand the following about your participation and confidentiality:

1. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any point in time. If you choose to withdraw any transcripts and tapes of individual discussions will be given to you. However, as the audiotapes and transcripts for the focus group sessions reflect a group discussion, I am not able to provide you with these original tapes and transcripts and it will not be possible to sever your contributions from the record.
2. Your confidentiality will be protected in the written document. No written document will include information that may be used to identify you. The transcripts and recordings will be labeled with codes known only to me as the researcher. The audiotapes will be stored in a secure location and any information included in the transcripts that could be used to identify you will be deleted and replaced with fictitious information. You will also have an opportunity to review all transcripts and can have any information that you think is identifying removed from the record.

3. Upon completion of the study, the information that I hold that allows me to contact you for the focus groups, my codes for the transcripts and the audiotapes themselves, will be destroyed. This will ensure that there is no way that you can be identified in any of my documents or writing.
4. I will keep the anonymous transcripts in my office for 2 years after the study and they may be used to prepare articles or books about women's voice. After the 2 years, these transcripts will also be destroyed.
5. Please understand that your privacy and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed within the focus groups, although focus group participants will be encouraged to be respectful of each person's privacy and confidentiality.

If there is any part of this letter of consent that you do not understand or which is unclear to you, it must be explained to your satisfaction before you are asked to sign it.

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

Your signatures below indicate 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.

I \_\_\_\_\_, understand and accept the terms as outlined above and agree voluntarily to participate in the study on "voice and Change"

I agree that the focus group sessions that I participate in may be audiotaped  
 \_\_\_\_\_ yes    \_\_\_\_\_ no

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|                            |                  |             |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------|
| <i>Name of Participant</i> | <i>Signature</i> | <i>Date</i> |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------|

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

APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS FORM

**Women and Voice Research Study  
Participant characteristics**

*In a section of my dissertation I will be expected to briefly describe the characteristics of the women that are involved in this study. The purpose of this is to give my examiners and other readers a sense of who is represented in the study, as this may influence the generalizability of what is learned about women and voice. It would be helpful to me if you completed the information below. Please note that I will be the only person who sees this information and it will be kept completely confidential. When I include descriptive information in the dissertation I will use a pseudonym of your choosing and will collectively describe the characteristics so that no one individual can be identified by a description. If there is any information below that you do not wish to provide, you are free to omit it.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym that you would like used in written records: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact information:

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

What is the best way for me to reach you? \_\_\_\_\_

Is there any method of contacting you that you would not like me to use?

\_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship status:

Single

Married

Common Law partnership or committed relationship

Separated

Divorced

Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have children?  No  Yes

If yes, please note for each of your children their age, gender and whether they live with you at this time

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Living with me: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Living with me: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Living with me: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Living with me: \_\_\_\_\_

Education (please tick all that apply)

- High school diploma
- College or technical school diploma or certificate
- Apprenticeship
- University undergraduate degree
- University graduate or professional degree (e.g. law or medicine)
- Continuing education
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Employment status:

- Currently employed
  - part time
  - full time
- Self-employed
- Not employed and looking for work
- Not employed by choice
- Retired

Income (please select one of the income ranges)

- less than \$20,000 per year
- \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year
- \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year
- \$40,000 to \$50,000 per year
- \$50,000 to \$60,000 per year
- \$60,000 to \$70,000 per year
- \$70,000 to \$80,000 per year
- \$80,000 to \$90,000 per year
- over \$90,000 per year

Do you identify yourself as a member of a particular race, cultural or ethnic group?  No  Yes

If yes, how do you define your identity? \_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything else you would like me to know about who you are and what influences your perspective as a woman? \_\_\_\_\_

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Thank you!

## APPENDIX H: QUESTIONS AS TEXT

### Questions:

- When I use the terms ‘silence’, ‘silencing’, ‘voice’ and ‘voicing’ what comes to mind for you? Do you use these words to describe anything about your experience? Do you use different words? What do these terms mean to you?
- Have you felt ‘silenced’ in your life?
- If you have, in what aspects of your life did you feel silenced, for example, in your family, school, work, amongst friends?
- If you have felt silenced, what contributed to you feeling silenced (e.g., people, situations, etc)?
- Please describe for me a point in your life when you decided you that you must use your voice to bring about significant change in your circumstances. When I use the term ‘significant’ I mean significant to you – it might look like a small change to an outsider, but that does not matter. What matters is what it meant and was like for you.
- What do you remember about this moment or point in time?
- What lead up to it? What was going on?
- Did you realize at the time that this was a significant point for you, or did you become aware of it afterwards?
- What happened after this point or moment? (both immediately after and over time)
- Why do you think this moment was able to happen? What or who assisted you to use your voice?
- How has having had this experience affected you? Do you make sense of or see or do things differently now than you did before?

### Areas for probing:

- Physical voice used or other ways of demonstrating voice, e.g. through intentional silence or actions?
- Impact in other areas of life?
- Process of regaining voice over time?
- Sensations?
- Would the course of events have been any different if there were/weren’t others involved, e.g. children, parents, friends?
- Relationships and connections that allowed voice to be regained? Importance of these connections?
- Learnings – how are things different now?

### Conclusion:

Is there anything else you would like me to know that will help me understand your experience with voice and silence?

Thanks you for spending this time with me. What will happen now is I will transcribe this conversation and give you the transcript to read and check for accuracy. I will be spending this kind of time with 5 other women and will pull out some topics for further discussion in the larger group.

## APPENDIX I: SUMMARY OF THEMES ON WOMEN AND VOICE FROM INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

### Leading up to the moment or point in time in which voice is used...

- Often described that, during childhood, they had no voice – it was not valued or validated
- A gradual process with many little shifts resulting in new ways of seeing things
- An awareness of self...either that the self was dying, suffocating, not breathing or that there was a loss of self-respect, principles or values, sense of purpose
- A coming to awareness of the risk if this loss or absence of self continued...ill-health, suicide, 'death' of the self, incapacity, substance misuse, nothingness, continuation of abuse
- Some experience of having one's voice, thoughts or value as a human being validated by another, of someone being present in their life even momentarily when they were validated; people who listened with care and without judgment – who were 'there'
- Triggering events – death, affair, moving, ill-health
- Moving in and out of awareness about their right to be happy, cared about, valued

### The moment or point in time...

- Absolute unwavering clarity – crossed over a threshold and that was it – no turning back
- Had a clear sense that they did have a voice and a responsibility or a right to use it to bring about awareness, understanding, or change
- Used voice to express their thoughts, feelings and rights
- Took action

### The impact of this clarity and of voicing...

- Experience of speaking out of using voice was reinforcing in itself – voice created more voice
- Gaining strength, confidence
- Recovery of health and well-being, including sense of purpose
- Choice-making, being strategic
- Pursuit of new knowledge through education; expanding horizons
- Relationships with others; more honesty and authenticity
- Sense of self – of being born
- Higher levels of consciousness – of seeing things more clearly

### Struggles

- Not all or nothing – need to exercise choice about when and how to speak and still feel some contexts are not safe or feel voiceless