

Spiritual Pathfinders

Identity and Transformation in Contemporary Alternatives to
Institutionalised Religion

Ellis H Linders

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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction	6
Literature Review	10
1: Socio-cultural context: The new spiritual paradigm	10
From religion to spirituality	10
Secularization, religion, and spirituality.....	14
Spiritual but not religious.....	19
The role of the teacher on the contemporary path.....	20
The spiritual imperative	21
Recovering the Feminine	23
Spirituality in children	25
Embodiment	26
2: Theoretical Context: A psychological approach to spirituality:	28
A spiritual psychology.....	28
The transpersonal Self.....	31
Spirituality as developmental and transformational process	32
Self-transformation, Individuation and Self-realisation	34
The role of intuition in spirituality.....	36
Inner directive and self-agency	38
3: Research Context: New Spiritual Expressions	40
Profile of the Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR).	40
Critiques of new spiritual expressions	43
Evaluation of critiques.....	49
Spirituality as transformative interconnection between self and world.....	53
Ethics	55
Central aims and questions	55
Sampling	57
Methodology	61
A qualitative approach	61
The transformational nature of transpersonal research	62
Heuristic inquiry.....	62
Validation.....	66
Individual Depictions.	70
Composite Depiction	143

1: Profile and Overview	143
1.1: The Spiritual Pathfinder	143
1.2: The young pathfinder	144
1.3: The seeking pathfinder	147
1.4: Spiritual but not religious	148
2: Qualities and themes	149
2.1: Authenticity	149
2.2: Connectedness and alignment.....	150
2.3: Guidance	151
2.4: Intuition.....	152
2.5: Doubt and trust	152
2.6: Opening and openness	153
2.7: Challenge	155
3: Psycho-spiritual Process	156
3.1: Exploration.....	156
3.2: Embodiment	158
3.3: Healing and wholeness	159
3.4: Purpose	160
3.5: Shifting perspective.....	162
3.6: Identity and Transformation	163
3.7: Transforming the Collective	165
4: Pathfinders and the new Paradigm	166
4.1: The new spiritual paradigm.....	166
4.2: The Shadow in contemporary spirituality	168
4.3: Interconnectedness, crisis, and collective awakening	170
Self-reflection	173
Creative Synthesis	177
Medium and process	177
The figurines	179
Discussion	184
Comparative Profile SBNR and Spiritual Pathfinders	184
SP in transpersonal theoretical context - selfhood and self-transformation	196
Spiritual pathfinders in social context	204
Conclusion	216
Limitations and suggestions for further research	220

Transformational impact.....222
References.....224

Table 1 - Participants Overview: Page 60

Abstract

This doctoral research thesis aims to provide a comprehensive depiction of contemporary spiritual engagement outside of religious tradition. Existing research is primarily contextualized within the areas of sociology and religious studies, and an in-depth psychological evaluation of those who self-define as *spiritual but not religious (SBNR)* is underrepresented. Using the qualitative method of *heuristic research*, the experiences of twenty participants with long-term involvement in self-directed spirituality are explored. The core-activity of consistent psycho-spiritual engagement is referred to as “spiritual pathfinding”. Whilst the pathfinding journey is found to be a highly individual experience, the research uncovered themes across participants which are explicated in this report. The data reveals that spiritual pathfinding is characterized by the supplementation, hybridisation, and re-evaluation of both traditional and new spiritual pathways in synthesis with psychological inquiry and process. Further findings concern an emphasis on intuition and somatic signals to navigate the spiritual path. Choices are based on resonance with personal process with the aim of self-transformation, understood as an awakening to - and integration with - a multidimensional or transpersonal selfhood. This denotes the changing meaning of *transcendence* in contemporary spiritual engagement as an alignment with an inner spiritual core beyond the everyday self. The transpersonal selfhood is understood by participants to interconnect with a collective field of consciousness, experienced as a personal responsivity and responsibility towards the whole. More research would be required to determine if spiritual pathfinding is a consistent core-activity - or represents a subset in the *SBNR*. Results however indicate that contemporary spiritual engagement reflects a distinct psycho-spiritual orientation involving challenge, complexity, and commitment. The current report thereby supports findings from sociological research that *SBNR* constitutes a viable alternative to religion and atheism.

Keywords: Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR), secular spirituality, contemporary spirituality, transpersonal psychology, individuation, self-realisation, self-transformation, transpersonal Self.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Introduction

...the discovery or creation of a religion of your own, is not an option. It's a necessary step in your spiritual unfolding. Resist and hide, either in a religious institution or in a fully secular world, and your soul will be stuck. (Moore, 2015, p. 207)

...I have had mentors but never a guru either in psychoanalysis or spirituality. While following a guru can have its own benefits, I have never been able to follow that path of devotion to a person. I found that I must, however falteringly, find my own inner spirit. (Schermer, 2003, p.17)

For many in contemporary Western culture, spirituality operates within a secular context where the role of religion and the idea of a transcendent Godhead is greatly diminished. The human relationship to the sacred dimension no longer solely depends on organisational and doctrinal structures of beliefs, practices, and rituals in cohesive faith communities. The Sacred is formulated by Hill et al. (2000) as:

...a person, an object, a principle, or a concept that transcends the self. Though the Sacred may be found within the self, it has perceived value independent of the self. Perceptions of the Sacred invoke feelings of respect, reverence, devotion and may, ideally, serve an integrative function in human personality. (p.64)

In postmodern secular culture, the religious search for the sacred as a higher power beyond oneself or Godhead is substituted for an individualised spiritual search for the sacred within, away from religious affiliation toward a spirituality of self-realisation (Cooper, 2016; Fontana, 2003; Hanegraaff, 2013; Ponomareff & Bryson, 2006). This “new” approach to spirituality is both eclectically tailored *to* the individual and focussed *on* the individual, whereby personal experience and perceived efficacy in self-development form the basis of people's choices and faith (Sutcliffe & Bowman, 2000). This “spiritual turn”, popularly referred to as *New Age* and more recently as *Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR)*, brings new questions about identity and meaning to occupy the late modern and postmodern self (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Parsons, 2018).

The practice of religion has become a minority pursuit in Western secular society, aided in part by the popularity of what Sheldrake (2017) terms militant atheism, promoted by e.g., Dawkins (2006) and Hitchens (2007). Sheldrake however observes that, whilst people are increasingly rejecting their family's religion, many do not consider themselves as atheists. Instead, a renewed interest and exploration of a more personalised religiosity or spirituality is taking place. Spiritual practices are adopted without necessarily taking on accompanying doctrines, and spiritual meaning is primarily based on personal experience (Sheldrake, 2017). Spirituality, a term which will be discussed in more detail in further sections, has come to indicate an alternative "third choice" alongside religion and atheism as a new cultural category (Huss, 2014).

Contemporary forms of spirituality represent an ideology and pursuit of access to spiritual experience without intermediary (Houtman, Aupers & Heelas, 2009; Sutcliffe, 2003). This is founded on the philosophical idea that humanity's innermost core is original, pure, and sacred (Cooper, 2016; Fontana, 2003). The understanding of one's unique spiritual path arises from a personal search for one's inner sacred aspect and an accompanying "deeper truth" sourced from this inner core. The exploration of this territory is individually steered by what "works" for the individual over and above prescriptive routes (Hanegraaff, 1998; 1999; Heelas, 2006; Houtman & Aupers, 2007). The spiritual focus broadly involves a personal process of stripping away psychological and socio-cultural distortions to return to one's original "authentic" core. This stripping away of distortions is also applied to the religious sphere. Mystical teachings are reappraised to uncover their core-meaning which religious orthodoxies are perceived to either misunderstand or misrepresent (Cooper, 2016). Whilst often specializing in one main spiritual activity, people are typically involved in a variety of practices. New possibilities are believed to emerge through the exploration and synthesis of different perspectives to form a hybrid approach (Cooper, 2016; Fontana, 2003; Possamai, 2000; Taves & Kinsella, 2013).

In their comprehensive appraisal of *new age* spirituality, Sutcliffe and Gilhus (2013) observe that the complex boundaries of alternative spiritual expressions pose a challenge to those adhering to conventional models of what constitutes bona fide

religion. New age spirituality is deemed disagreeable to conventional theology and to academic taste overall. This then leaves the topic ripe for analysis and theorization. Furthermore, its cultural significance has predominantly been investigated within the disciplines of *Religious Studies* and *Sociology*. In contrast, ground-up empirical studies into the subjective experience of spirituality are underrepresented (Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2013). By the adoption of a psychological lens, the missing element of lived experience is captured in this thesis.

In their study of North American adults, Saucier and Skrzypińska (2006) sought to demonstrate that differences between what they termed as *tradition-oriented spirituality* (TS) and *subjective spirituality* (SS) are substantial enough to be classed as independent psychological dispositions. They emphasised that more research is needed to further define these divergent dispositions. Relevant to the current inquiry, their study concludes the prime indicators of conformism vs non-conformism are more substantially linked to commonly measured personality traits rather than religious or cultural denomination. They propose therefore for spirituality to be studied in the field of psychology as well as sociology. The research to be reported in this thesis aims to contribute to this area of study on behalf of subjective spirituality (SS).

The perspective that humanity has an innate potential to access an expanded reality beyond the everyday self and world forms the basis of the transpersonal paradigm (Lancaster & Linders, 2019). The field of transpersonal psychology is specifically focused on understanding the transformational mechanisms in the areas of spiritual practice and psychotherapy. The transformational potential of the human psyche is contextualized as a psycho-spiritual process of accessing the “gnosis” or inner knowing of a “self beyond ego” (Walsh & Vaughan 1993). Therefore, whilst acknowledging one’s personal spiritual choices are inevitably embedded in a larger cultural context, the aim of this project is to research contemporary spirituality as a developmental psychological experience, rather than measure its popularity as a cultural phenomenon.

In sum, the current research seeks to evaluate the longer-term process that people undergo to find their spiritual expression. It explores qualitatively the

experiences, developmental processes, aspirations, and perspectives of those who follow a self-directed spiritual path. It further asks whether the field of transpersonal psychology can provide complexity and scientific underpinning amidst accusations of superficiality, narcissism, and spiritual consumerism (e.g., Bruce, 2006; Carrette & King, 2004). The contrasting negative and positive perspectives on new spiritual expressions may in part be due to a disconnect between the fields of sociology, conventional psychology and religious studies, and transpersonal psychology. This highlights a need for bridges to be built through research in aid of a more comprehensive assessment and dialogue. This project is accordingly intended as a contribution to a more considered discourse on the nature of human spiritual identity which still too often resorts to stereotyping and polemics (Armstrong, 2009, Davis et al, 2015, Fontana, 2003; Hanegraaff, 2005; McEntee, 2017).

The term “spiritual pathfinder” was chosen by the author as an overarching characterization to reflect the pro-active and personalised quality of contemporary spiritual engagement in this inquiry. Thematic categories and accompanying interview questions were identified based on the following literature review.

Literature Review

1: Socio-cultural context: The new spiritual paradigm

It may be that the new epoch we are entering will see a birth of a very different image of God or Spirit, a new understanding of the instinctive intelligence within the processes and patterns of nature, and how the unseen or inner dimension of reality influences and interacts with this physical dimension. This new understanding may help us recover an authentic spirituality which take us beyond religious and secular beliefs into a new sense of relationship with a sacred Earth and an ensouled Cosmos. (Baring, 2013, p.223)

From religion to spirituality

Western culture is seeing an increase in alternative forms of spirituality, formulated by Russo-Netzer & Mayseless (2016) as: “. . . encompassing experiences, worldviews and practices that concern the transcendental, human relationship with the sacred and the self’s existential search for ultimate meaning and growth” (p. 1).

Walach (2015) identifies spirituality as the experiential core of every religion. Spirituality becomes religious when a subjective experience is placed within the context of existing doctrinal terminology and lens of interpretation of a certain tradition. Religion in that way serves as a vessel for the spiritual experience and provides formulae by way of rites, rituals, and teachings to encourage replication of such experience. The vessel, however, must not be confused with the experience itself. To provide a working distinction, Walach uses the term “religiosity” for the lived and expressed spiritual experience within an existing religious framework.

Westernised culture, argues Walach (2015), needs the vehicle of non-dogmatic spirituality to correct what he identifies as a “psychological dispersion” in contemporary consumerist society. Spiritual practices such as meditation and contemplation facilitate a personal and collective “psychological hygiene” to enable responsibility for one’s state of consciousness and facilitate the re-assessment of value judgements and interpretations. Furthermore, spiritual awareness is typified by the phenomenological

experience of “holism”, as a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. This awareness encourages greater discernment around issues of common good and respect for diverging perspectives to counteract fundamentalist tendencies (Walach, 2015).

For King (2009), modernity's one-dimensional culture and antipathy towards the transcendent has created a “homeless mind” of profound spiritual poverty and alienation. In response, contemporary expressions of spirituality represent a new paradigm of experimental and restorative search for a more open, dynamic, and transformational spirituality as a lived experience, where responsibility for personal relationship to the sacred can be enabled and realized (King, 2009). For Tacey (2004), this can be recognised as a resurgence of a spiritual impulse in Western culture, driven by a search for meaning in a fragmented and complex world.

Wisdom traditions are no longer limited to their place and culture of origin. The influence of globalization and the increasing technological possibilities for disseminating information, sacred teachings have become more available to the wider world, giving the individual unprecedented access to a diversity of spiritual materials. The reinterpretation and transformation of religious meaning through the encounter of different perspectives, cultures, values, and teachings continues to provide new opportunities for a sharing and mixing of spiritual ideas. Spirituality as a result has become an increasingly fluid and overlapping phenomenon (Ammerman, 2013; Houston, 2004).

A progressive vision in the field of comparative religion is the concept of *interspirituality* inspired by the work of Catholic monk Brother Wayne Teasdale (2001). Interspirituality draws on the universal mystical experiences reported through interfaith and ecumenical exchange. Communalities across the worlds wisdom traditions, such as unity consciousness and the common understanding of heart-based service and ethics arise regardless of doctrinal, cultural, or historical differences. Johnson and Ord (2012) propose this recognition of shared experience and spiritual wisdom as the religion- or ‘trans-traditional’ spirituality of the third millennium.

The contemporary pluralistic, and mutable understanding of spirituality allows for creative engagement with multiple epistemologies and platforms to include participatory expressions and use of new media in contemporary culture (Ceriello, 2018). It is now possible to identify as “spiritual and religious”, “spiritual but not religious”, and as “spiritual yet secular”, which present opportunities and challenges unique in our known history. Contemporary spirituality both confronts and seeks to bridge the traditional divide between the religious and the secular. As such, claims Huss (2014), it presents an alternative category of cultural significance with new practices, re-interpreted values, new institutions, alternative lifestyles, and social engagement.

It is important to reiterate that it is not the aim of this project to add to the polemical nature of much of the spirituality vs religion debate. This review aims to reflect the perspectives that are alive, which may or may not be polemical in their nature. Hill et al (2000) warn against the distorting effect of oversimplifying the complex constructs of religion and spirituality in current research. Both orientations represent a search for the sacred and share fundamental criteria. They emphasise that either can manifest in healthy and unhealthy ways when this search lacks integrity. To this end they provide a flexible working definition and core-criterion for both spirituality and religion which does not dilute the meaning of either construct:

The feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred. The term “search” refers to attempts to identify, articulate, maintain, or transform. The term “sacred” refers to a divine being, divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual. (p.66)

In addition, religion includes:

A search for non-sacred goals (such as identity, belongingness, meaning, health, or wellness) in a context that has as its primary goal the facilitation of [the above criteria]. . . . And: ‘The means and methods (e.g., rituals or prescribed behaviors) of the search that receive validation and support from within an identifiable group of people. (p.66)

The latter representing religion’s more formalized, prescriptive, and social characteristics (Fontana, 2003), which, as will become further apparent, contemporary spirituality is mostly rejecting.

Western Esotericism and New Age spirituality

Contemporary spiritual expressions may be considered a symptom of de-traditionalization, yet it is not without tradition. According to religious historian Hanegraaff (1999; 2013), the core-principles and focus on self-realisation and transformation are characteristic of the long-standing tradition of *Western Esotericism*. Western Esotericism as an academic subject is the area of scholarly research that looks at how esotericism has been understood, adopted, adapted, and integrated in Western culture. A common thread that runs through its eclectic history is the emphasis on personal religious/spiritual experience over and above doctrinal belief and the resulting transformation of consciousness (Hanegraaff, 2013).

Esotericism, writes Walach (2015), can be used as a derisory term denoting something obscure and going against rationality, making it a subject of taboo in more mainstream discourse. In its true understanding, however, esotericism denotes mystical teachings and traditions kept hidden and underground in the face of doctrinal monopoly and persecution of the established church. It also denotes the experiential core of a spiritual teaching (Walach, 2015). The esoteric teachings of the great contemplative and meditative traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, Vedantic Hinduism, Islamic Sufism, Jewish Kabbalah and Christian Mysticism, provide psychotechnologies of consciousness-transformation which historically were considered secret and kept reserved for adepts (Fontana, 2003; Wilber, 2017). Consciousness can be defined as a quality of perception with which we experience and define our reality. Transformation in consciousness therefore represents a radical internal shift in perception and accompanying thought-processes which affects our understanding of, and relationship with, our internal and external reality: our cosmology. What makes this spiritual is the transcendent quality of such shifts: in that they take perception beyond the boundaries of material existence and ordinary awareness (Schlitz, Vieten & Amorok, 2007).

Western Esotericism has experienced a revival in contemporary culture as what is popularly referred to as *New Age* spirituality (Hanegraaff, 2013). The term *New Age* entered popular and academic idiom around the mid 1980's to describe a diverse

assortment of holistic or mind/body/spirit phenomena (Houtman & Aupers, 2007). It further encompasses the resurgence of teachings and practices which were previously associated with the mystical, shamanistic, or magical traditions of the pre-modern world (Heelas, 1996). New Age originated as a cultural criticism and spiritual alternative in secularised times (Hanegraaff, 2013). The 1960's saw a shift towards self-spirituality in the development of the so-called counterculture. The “turn on, tune in, drop out” ethos featured a radical rejection of mainstream religion and culture, combined with a search for expanded states of consciousness and self-exploration through hallucinogens, psychedelic art, and music (Heelas, 2008). New Age centres such as the Findhorn foundation in Scotland and the Esalen Institute in the US were established to create dedicated growth-environments where the experiment into new ways of being could take place (Heelas, 1996). Data from the *World Values Study* (Houtman & Aupers, 2007), which looked at the spread of post-Christian spirituality across 14 western countries, demonstrates that *New Age* spirituality became more widespread during the 1981-2000 period, particularly in the UK, France, Sweden, and the Netherlands. What started out as a counter-cultural alternative has become part of the mainstream contemporary landscape.

Secularization, religion, and spirituality

Secularization denotes the separation between church and state and a resulting decline of influence enjoyed by religious institutions in both the political and social sphere. The secular state allows the liberty to practice one's religion whilst protecting its citizens from adopting a faith and religious practices of others against their will. Habermas (2006) however argues the resulting pluralism paired with the emergence of modern science and secular moral code has caused a disproportionate cognitive dissonance within traditional faith communities. A polarization of worldviews exists between fundamentalist sensibilities which hold religious identity as intrinsic to their social and political existence, and secular factions who view religion as archaic relics of pre-modern societies (Habermas, 2006). As noted by Main (2008), secularization is generally understood as a move toward atheism, which makes modernity and religion incompatible.

However, the religious sensibility seems to have been revitalized in the post-modern mind, finding new sources of inspiration and spiritual autonomy (Tarnas, 1991). The notion of spirituality in religious terms represents an innate human impulse for a personal and intimate relationship with God or Godhead as a transcendent objective reality (Fontana, 2003; Kielkiewicz & Dalzell, 2014; Ponomareff & Bryson, 2006). From a theistic viewpoint, secular or “lay” spirituality with its emphasis on the sacred Self, is considered in terms of an *absence* of transcendent connection: “a human being has no ability to transcend within one's own self, the relation to the transcendent object is necessary” (Kielkiewicz & Dalzell, 2014, p.54). La Cour & Gôtke (2012) observe that contemporary forms of spirituality are generally regarded as the antithesis of religion and a negative attitude toward self-spirituality exists: as being a self-absorbed and meaningless vague striving (La Cour & Gôtke, 2012).

This view is challenged by those who consider the increase of new spiritual expressions as a bona-fide and credible alternative to religion. What Ammerman (2013) terms “extra-theistic” spirituality speaks of a different kind of transcendence which is not God-defined. Rather, it refers to transcendence as “bigger than the self”, “located in the core of the self” and “beyond the ordinary”. According to Moore (2015), new spirituality claims the freedom to take wisdom and knowledge in directions that have personal meaning. This personalised relationship represents a deepening of relationship to what existing spiritual teachings have to offer. Engagement is focussed on key ideas and practices that empower humanity’s search for insight, compassion and meaning in daily life (Moore, 2015). Secular spirituality can in that sense be understood as a profound *transformation of religion* and a continuation of a *reform and renewal* mechanism because of social and historical processes, where new and alternative forms of spirituality can emerge within the context of a pluralistic secular society (Hanegraaff, 1999, 2013; Thompson, 2013). Leopold and Jensen (2014), discuss how hybridization, or ‘syncretism’, as the mixing of new elements with an existing domain is the norm in our religious and socio-cultural history. Religions and wisdom traditions all have mixed origins. For example, the Romans absorbed the Greek Pantheon into their own religion, Sikhism emerged as a blend of Islam and Hinduism, and Christianity emerged from Judaism, drew on pagan traditions, and conformed to Roman authority to become the

Roman Catholic church. Therefore, there is a good argument for asserting that the essence of religion is syncretistic as opposed to pristine, as each new shift in civilization has seen religious changes (Leopold & Jensen, 2014).

Indigenous “vernacular” traditions have always existed alongside sanctioned religions, argues Bowman (2000). Pagan and orthodox expressions were commonly assimilated to create personal and cultural versions and more informal narratives. This, she claims, is comparable to the experiential “mix and match” approach of current alternative trends, where the search for sacred connection is not exclusive to any one construct but allows input from several sources. The popular understanding of alternative spiritual expressions as a new phenomenon therefore also stems from the neglect of vernacular religions in academic accounts (Bowman, 2000). According to Tacey (2004), spirituality, as the creative unitary relationship between spirit-and-life, is new only because of the loss of this understanding in religious institutional rigidity.

The picture that emerges is therefore more complex than an ad hoc “pick 'n mix bricolage” in a linearly secularizing culture. Spirituality more accurately represents a complex pattern of co-existence, hybridism, fragmentation, and reconnection because of both secularization *and* sacralisation of the immanent sphere (Jespers, 2013). Instead of being secondary in relation to the dominant monotheistic religions, new spiritual expressions are directly related to the oldest and most durable forms of folk tradition and non-native faiths (Gilhus, 2013). New spiritual expressions are both locally and globally embedded in broader socio-cultural processes as a continuum between the secular and the sacred. They are dynamically co-created and co-constructed through mutual association between peoples and cultures (Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2013).

Hanegraaff (2005) argues that a primary requirement for scholarly engagement on our current subject is therefore to challenge the underlying distorting effect of what he calls *the grand polemic narrative* and aim for a fairer formulation of contemporary spirituality in empirical study. The complex boundaries (or perceived lack thereof) of new spiritual expressions have posed a challenge to those adhering to existing formative models. The religious and sociological scholarly approach uses ritual, belief, doctrinal cohesion, and faithfulness to a single path as measuring factors. According to

these criteria, faithfulness to one's inner process outside organisational constructs is not counted as spiritual engagement. Spirituality, with its individualistic epistemology, pluralist outlook and lack of organized construct, is automatically excluded. McEntee (2017) identifies the current trends of *interspirituality*, *spiritual but not religious*, and *multi-religious belonging* as emergent forms of religiosity which challenge established notions of clear definition and therefore remain largely off the academic scholarship radar. Traditionally conceived theoretical definitions are therefore too narrow to reflect contemporary spirituality. Instead of faithfulness to, and identification with, a particular tradition as the main factor to measure commitment or "religious depth", McEntee offers an alternative concept of "the religious quest as transformative journey" (p. 613), which can be described as "experiments in transformations of consciousness" (p.618); in ways of knowing, feeling, sensing, thinking and interdependent sensitivity. This is an organic process and impulse that reflects a new religious consciousness, rather than a new religion (McEntee, 2017).

Research on non-religious or non-traditional spirituality is needed to represent and include its broader, more fluid and dynamic engagement (Sutcliffe & Gilhus, 2013; Fontana, 2003; Frisk, 2013; Main, 2008; Tacey, 2004). One such contribution is the *Sources of Spirituality (SOS)* scale (Davis et al, 2015), which reflects the multiple ways in which spirituality is experienced in current times. The SOS scale identifies five sources of spirituality which each reflect a different focus of relationship to the sacred, namely: *Theistic, Nature, Humanity, Transcendence* and *Self*. One's conceptual and relational focus may vary depending on individual frame of reference. The stability of the relationship to the sacred may also fluctuate over a person's lifespan. The category of Self-spirituality is described as involving:

. . .a deep sense of integrity and connection with one's deepest or authentic sense of self. This source of spirituality typically does not imply that the self is an object of worship, but rather it involves seeking a sense of deep authenticity, genuineness, congruence, and acceptance of the self. (Davis et al., 2015, p.505)

The human encounter with the sacred dimension is effectively relocating from the theistic and transcendent, to the within or immanent: from the "etic"; exoteric

mediation of the traditional church, to the “emic”; subjective, internal, and immanent realm of the autonomous self. Spiritual authority has thereby shifted to the individual and their conscience (Heelas, 2006; Sutcliffe & Bowman, 2000; Tacey, 2004). As a subjective experience, however, spirituality is not private because the inner spiritual process is aimed to lead to an expansion beyond the narrow confines of self in communion with the Universal. As such, the search for “spirit within” is intimately interconnected with “spirit everywhere” (Tacey, 2004). The inner experience of the sacred, formulated by Aupers and Houtman (2006) as “the sacralisation of the self”, means that the sacred goes where the self goes and, as a result, has moved into areas which were previously quite separate, such as the workplace, commerce, health, psychology, and therapy. A new culture of subjective wellbeing in a veritable *spiritual supermarket* has emerged. (Hanegraaff, 2013; Heelas, 2006; Aupers & Houtman, 2006). The postmodern era has seen a plethora of spiritual paths being re-discovered, some would say appropriated, as well as new and “neo” expressions being developed. Popular examples include mindfulness, neo-paganism and shamanism, yoga, eco-spirituality, channelling, and a renewed interest in entheogens and psychedelics (McIntosh, 2007).

The conglomerate term *New Age* can be contentious as it means different things to different people. It can also be used as a derogatory term by those who do not share or misunderstand its values or boundaries (Main, 2008). In contemporary culture, the term has become increasingly confused, diluted, and misused due to consumerist appropriation, an overly western-centric position, and shallow engagement. For many, the term *New Age* has connotations of being ungrounded and narcissistic and has now become too uncomfortable for use (King, 2009; Spangler & Thompson, 1991). According to Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000) the term merely depicts a host of similar modalities, perspectives, and discussions within the wider context of religious experimentation. Among other terms used are “secular religion”, or; “religion in a secular world” (Hanegraaff, 1999), “vernacular religion” (Sutcliffe & Bowman, 2000) “alternative spirituality” and “cultic milieu” (Bruce, 2006), “postmodern pluralism” (McIntosh, 2007), “new spirituality” (Cooper, 2016), “holistic spirituality” or the “holistic milieu” (Heelas, 2006), “subjective spirituality” (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006), “self-

spirituality” (Aupers & Houtman, 2006), “spiritualities of life” (Heelas, 2008) and “post-religious spirituality” (Thompson, 2013). More recently, the term “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) is increasingly used (Parsons, 2018). A key component to all is a mystical preference whereby subjective experience, which includes imagination and intuition, is primary (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006).

Spiritual but not religious

The term “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) refers to those who are not attached to any particular tradition yet may adopt and adapt religious practices or ideas. In the US, the number of people who identify as spiritual but not religious has increased significantly in the last 10 years. Now estimated to be around 27 percent of the population and cutting across racial and political boundaries (McEntee, 2017).

Engagement with traditions operates on a spectrum of allegiance whereby SBNR seek to draw on the spiritual wisdom held by traditions whilst not become embedded in their pre-determined conventions, beliefs, or religious context (Huss, 2014; Parsons, 2018). Spirituality involves personal effort to come into tangible relationship with the sacred and often has a pronounced mystical dimension. It is conducted primarily through private reflection and private experience rather than shared engagement through formalized ritual associated with religion as previously defined by Hill et al (2000). Many adherents are motivated by negative experience with church or church leaders which led to their choice. A further motivation is a critique of the hierarchal nature of historical religious traditions, which is deemed to perpetuate religious, socio-economic and gender inequality and injustice. SBNR in contrast is typified as progressive, egalitarian, diverse, and supportive of individual choice, as well as incorporating a psycho-therapeutic element to an individually tailored quest for individuation (Parsons, 2018; Pevateaux, 2018).

The reclaiming of self-agency in areas such as emotional authenticity, felt experience and meaning-making, provides a more fluid identity-narrative and a reconfiguration of what belongs within the spiritual arena. Mystical experience, understood as a realisation, encounter or vision which is life-transforming (Ceriello,

2018), is increasingly normalised. What Mercandante (2018) calls “metamodern mysticism” is grounded in ordinary lived reality rather than a search for salvation in a transcendent reality. The emphasis is on personal journey and process, validated through self-reflexivity and accountability. The understanding of immanence is expanded beyond the focus of self into a “horizontal transcendence” which holds the spiritual dimension as present and pervasive within the manifest universe (Mercandante, 2018). This reappraisal of nature as a manifestation of cosmic consciousness combined with the principles of shared humanity and ecological interrelationship, is deemed to provide a new spiritual narrative which encourages personal accountability and social engagement through which ground-up solutions are sought (Ceriello, 2018; Kelly, 2018; Pevateaux, 2018).

The role of the teacher on the contemporary path

The SBNR focus on self-determination, uniqueness, and the freedom not to be bound by any tradition to the exclusion of others, brings into question the role of spiritual guidance from external sources. Contemplative traditions have always insisted that the mystical journey into the depths of the mind requires expert guidance so that the novice does not get lost or exceed their limit of mental stability (Armstrong, 1999; Bogart, 1992). This traditional provision from a spiritual teacher or mentor continues to be considered an essential component on the contemporary spiritual path (Schlitz, Vieten & Amorok, 2007). However, new questions arise when the contemporary and the ancient converge and hybridise. One such question concerns whether the teacher’s vision and approach is sufficiently inclusive to meet the complexities of the modern mind and current world (King, 2009). In other words, the teacher’s mental, emotional, and spiritual lines of development may or may not be of equal maturity, and the cultural assumptions of the premodern tradition may influence the teachers’ ability to grow with the times (Wilber, 2006; 2017).

Extreme authoritarian behaviour among spiritual teachers is not uncommon, particularly in the Eastern guru-disciple relationship where the disciple is required to surrender unconditionally and can be severely tested. This can leave the process wide

open to abuse as the “enlightened” guru is accepted as infallible. Their behaviour remains unquestioned, supported in turn by a culture of collusion among devotees (Bogart, 1992; Humphrey, 2015; King, 2009). Recent examples of serious malpractice include testimonies of sexual abuse, fraud, and battery by students of Tibetan Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche (Tenpel, 2017), and accusations of physical, emotional and financial abuse by ex-students of *EnlightenNext* guru Andrew Cohen (Sand, 2015; Yenner, 2009).

Spiritual practices from various mystical traditions are designed to enable access to internal wisdom or *gnosis*. This represents an inner authority of awareness without intermediary (Schlitz, Vieten & Amorok, 2007). In this developmental process, the rightful role of the spiritual teacher is to provide input from outside the student’s egoic mechanism, until such time that they can access the “self beyond ego” independently (Caplan, 2009). The spiritual path therefore involves psychological growth alongside spiritual development. In a healthy discipleship, the external input of guidance is balanced by inner discernment and, ultimately, the student must reach the psychological and spiritual maturity to leave the teacher behind. The teacher cannot be given final authority and the teacher-disciple relationship cannot be considered an end-in-itself (Caplan, 2009; Bogart, 1992). Experimentation and research in transformative practice conducted by pioneers of the human potential movement, George Leonard and Michael Murphy at the *Esalen Institute* during the sixties and seventies found that a creative approach, learning from a combination of mentors where final authority remains with the individual at all times, were key principles in positive and lasting transformation (Leonard & Murphy, 1995).

The spiritual imperative

In contrast to premodern religion which deliberately humanised the sacred, “the domineering god of modern ‘scientific religion’ over-externalised the divine and pushed it away from humanity”, writes Armstrong (2009, p.314). Concurrently, modern science was founded on the belief that it was possible to achieve objective certainty about all aspects of existence. According to Moore (2015), materialist science replaced religion as

the provider of knowledge in secular culture but has not engendered wisdom or morality. Each in their own way, he argues, religion and science have contributed to the separation between the sacred and the profane which underlies much of current day ecological destruction and human suffering (Moore, 2015). From a transpersonal perspective, the ecological urgency of healing the relationships between human and non-human realms requires the embodiment of spirit in the world (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Matthews, 2001; Wright, 1995). This reflects a critical need to shift away from detachment toward involvement. The *spiritual imperative* (King, 2009; Kumar, 2005) is a call for a more socially engaged and embodied spirituality.

Historically, organized religion has been more authoritarian as opposed to democratic and linked with the political power-structures of the day as agents of social control (Fontana, 2003). Heron (2006) argues there is a direct relationship between spiritual freedom and societal freedom throughout our history and in present day. What Heron terms “disembodied and dissociated authoritarian spiritualities”, legitimize equally oppressive socio-political regimes. According to Eisler’s (1988) *Cultural Transformation Theory*, all societies function on a continuum between *dominator* and *partnership* models. In our known history, the dynamic between them is reflected by social and spiritual fundamentalism countered by drives toward social and spiritual reform. Eisler proposes that new spiritual expressions such as the *new age* movement can be considered as a response to hierarchal religious traditions in this context (Eisler, 1988; Eisler & Fry, 2019). To undertake restorative action in the world has now become a sacred responsibility for many who see themselves as universal citizens. Pertinent examples are the *Occupy* movement and the more recent *Extinction Rebellion*. These movements have no specific spiritual or religious affiliation, yet religious and spiritual talks, rituals and ceremonies form a prominent aspect of protest. This is because climate change and social injustice is increasingly seen as a spiritual crisis that requires a spiritual response (Fox in Bucko & Fox, 2013; Skrimshire, 2019).

Welwood (2003) insists that for spirituality to be transformative, it must equally embrace both immanent and transcendent realities. In the transformation process, human consciousness represents a third reality, as the bridge linking the experience of

separateness to the experience of non-separateness. Ferrer (2015) describes *participatory spirituality* in a similar way: as encompassing “spirit within”, “spirit in between”, and “spirit beyond”: “embodied”, “relational” and “enactive” respectively.

Recovering the Feminine

Hanegraaff (2005) argues that a change in religious status-quo necessitates the recognition that what counts as valid knowledge or experience is culturally determined. This concerns questions around who owns the spiritual narrative and who or what is excluded from the conversation (Hanegraaff, 2005). Classical conceptualisation of spirituality in Western culture is predominantly informed by Eastern and Western patriarchal traditions. Although deeper mystical components are deemed to transcend gender, the scholarly writing on which spiritual doctrines and maps are based largely reflect the male biases, values, and language of ascetic and monastic traditions (Brooks, Ford & Huffman, 2013; Fontana, 2003; Wright, 1995).

In Western culture, patriarchy was firmly instated through the adoption of Christianity as the dominant religion of the Roman empire, merging church and state in the process. The church gained a virtual monopoly of scholarship and literacy (Fontana, 2003). Power was further consolidated through the strict censorship of non-conforming scriptures and spiritual expressions, particularly those recognising the *Sacred Feminine* principle (Matthews, 2001). Women and children were excluded from meaningful participation and Christian history was largely rewritten from an androcentric male perspective, applied through the ministry of an exclusively male priesthood (Cox, 2018; Pagels, 1990; Starbird, 1993). Religion underpins, reflects, and perpetuates social organisation, and psychology internalises the dominant archetypes of the culture (Eisler, 1988; Fontana, 2003). As a result, traditional models do not adequately reflect diversity where factors such as cultural lens, gender-specific experience and social context have largely been disregarded in relation to spiritual identity (Brooks, Ford & Huffman, 2013; Wright, 1995).

Ferrer (2008a) notes that Western-led epistemology is favoured above non-Western and feminine-oriented truth claims of indigenous and earth-based

cosmologies. The dominance of the male archetype in the Western mind has caused a prevalent focus on rationality and stifled the maturation of the (archetypally feminine) instinctive, intuitive, emotional, and somatic potentials. This imbalance has caused the denial of vital parts of human experience and has distorted the immediacy of the Divine (Ferrer, 2002; Heron, 2006). The hegemony of orthodox approaches, argues Ferrer, actively hinders new expressions to gain recognition and do not take us into areas that are intuitively felt and spiritually emergent. Moreover, they do not represent or provide understanding of oral traditions, or the lived experience of those who have historically been marginalized (Ferrer, 2002, 2015, 2017; Hartelius, 2016).

Matthews (2001) discusses the many guises of the *Sacred Feminine* in gnostic literature. In her Mother aspect, she represents divinity in created matter. In her bridal aspect, she symbolises the marriage of humanity to the Divine and the companion to every soul leading to wisdom (Matthews, 2001). The *Sacred Feminine* is as such the key to the inner realms, both mother and bride: “birthing” the illumination of human consciousness through meaningful relationship with the Divine. The recovery of the *Sacred Feminine* then represents a recovery of the soul, regeneration of the manifest realm, and the nurturing of conscious relationship with the sanctity of life (Baring, 2013; Cox, 2018; Eisler, 1988; Matthews, 2001).

Masculine and feminine archetypal forces are active in the human psyche regardless of gender. Yet, it is important to consider that women’s experience of spirituality is qualitatively different than that of men (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991). The historical focus of most Eastern traditions has been on the liberation of consciousness as the overcoming of the ego-structure and transcendence of selfhood. This traditional understanding of enlightenment as transcendence, argues Ferrer (2009), has been to the detriment of the immanent and “inner realm” aspect of existence attributed to the archetypal feminine. The spiritual aim of transcendence can therefore be recognised as an archetypally masculine orientation (Ferrer, 2009; Matthews, 2001; Wright, 1995). A feminine orientation is characterized by permeable boundaries which allow for an empathetic experience of non-separateness in the immanent realm. This makes for a more relational, interdependent, ecologically sensitive, nonlinear, and non-hierarchal

spirituality, where spiritual identity is experienced as a fullness of self, rather than a self-transcendence or emptiness of self (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Wright, 1995).

Spirituality in children

As mentioned, a further marginalized area of representation is spirituality in childhood. This omission is largely attributed to children lacking the linguistic, rational, or conceptual capabilities to describe spiritual experiences (Hart, 2005; Mercer, 2006). Some transpersonal theory too questions the validity of spiritual experience in early life. Notably, the developmental theory advocated by Wilber (2000), argues for a differentiation between the pre-egoic prepersonal stage and the trans-egoic transpersonal stage in transpersonal theory. Both are non-egoic yet are not the same, he maintains, and children's spirituality is limited to pre-personal magical thinking and momentary peak-experiences. However, a recognition of spirituality as an innate capacity in children is gaining in scientific and scholarly literature (Cervantes & Arczynski, 2015; King, 2013). According to Taylor (2017), the intensity of perception, spontaneity, curiosity, and openness associated with the wakeful state comes naturally to children. Young children's underdeveloped self-system and lack of ego-development allows their connection to the original radiance of their entire being to stay intact (Taylor, 2017). Their capacities of perception and being in the world can be recognized as distinctly spiritual: reflecting a relational consciousness interacting with mystery, world, others, and self at a profound level (Hart, 2005).

Hart (2005) reports children are found to be capable of having genuine and sustained spiritual experiences such as a sense of one-ness, a feeling of continuity between life and death, and a sense of identity beyond the physical self. They can be natural philosophers, questioning life, meaning and their own identity in the world with openness and originality. Children also experience deep feelings of empathy and interconnectedness and can display profound and intuitive insight. Their disarming simplicity and enhanced capacity for wonder is aligned with what is essential, rather than born of ignorance. Mercer (2006) describes children's spiritual expressions in archetypal terms as *mystics* "in touch with the numinous", *sages* "wise beyond their

years”, truth-telling *holy fools*, and *activists* wanting to do good in the world. They display a level of vitality and embodied presence which wanes in adulthood, yet affectionately lingers in memory (King, 2013). Children, and adults retrospectively, can describe intense childhood experiences which can be considered as mystical. Carl Jung (1995) vividly portrayed his own numinous childhood experiences on which he based his child archetype in later theory. Whilst Jung might be considered an extraordinary human being, mystical experiences in early life are not uncommon (Mercer, 2006). The child’s original radiance of being, claims Taylor (2017) is the natural state of presence that adults return to in awakening experiences: “the place we return to in a deeper and more integrated way (p. 221)”.

Embodiment

When the somatic and vital worlds are invited to participate in spiritual life, one's sense of identity becomes permeable to not only transcendent but also immanent spiritual sources, turning body and world into sacred realities that can be appreciated as fundamental for human and perhaps even cosmic spiritual evolution. (Ferrer, 2017, p. 92)

An additional aspect relevant to the discussion of the new spiritual paradigm is the relationship between spirituality and embodiment. The traditional association of knowledge and wisdom with the thinking mind has caused a chronic desensitisation to emotional and physical awareness in spirituality and psychology argue Caldwell (2014) and Masters (2010). Schermer (2003, p. 28) considers the separation of body and mind as the spiritual malaise which afflicts our world that has estranged humanity from itself and its origin.

The issue around embodiment in spirituality is not necessarily that the body has been ignored, but rather that the bodily wisdom and awareness has not been recognised as a legitimate source of spiritual insight, argues Ferrer (2008b; 2017). The transformational journey of embodiment in depth psychology is understood as the coming *towards* the self and the integration of transpersonal forces into consciousness as the process of *Individuation* (Welwood, 2002; 2003; 2016). Depth psychology

acknowledges the impact of transpersonal forces on physical reality. Washburn (1995; 2003) for instance, correlates the “updwelling” source of life in the deep psyche: what he terms the *Dynamic Ground*, with the Tantric notion of dormant kundalini energy. Yet the inclusion of the psychological aspect does not explicitly recognise the role of the body in spiritual process and development, which makes a solely psychological understanding of embodiment incomplete (Linders & Lancaster, 2013).

The liberation of consciousness in orthodoxy happens at the expense of the body and its needs, argues Ferrer (2008b; 2017). The somatic self has predominantly been considered as a hindrance to spiritual development, with ascetic spiritual practices aimed at the negation of instinctual drives and passions (Ferrer, 2008b; Fontana, 2003), which Ferrer aptly calls “heart-chakra up” spirituality. Ferrer (2008b) identifies an embodied spirituality as creating the space for the body to develop and realise its inherent but lost capacities, encompassing a “bodyfulness” alongside mindfulness. Caldwell (2014) describes the practice of bodyfulness as the cultivation of a deep engagement with body processes which lead to a fully realized physical nature.

Linders and Lancaster (2013) discuss embodiment from a transpersonal perspective, by representing the body as “receiver and transformer of transpersonal energies in the process of increasing integration of body, mind, soul and spirit (p.16)”. The body can be symbolised as the receptive vessel where the alchemical process between spiritual and human consciousness takes place, and the transformational process becomes tangible. They further propose that the body can be experienced as a purifying filter for personal or collective energetic disturbance or unconscious “shadow” which permeates the body in order to be made conscious and healed, removing blockages to spiritual connection as part of the process. In this way, conscious embodiment of transpersonal influences is inextricably linked to healing and wholeness in the process of *Self-realisation* and *Individuation* whereby the body as well as the psyche are subject to a process of alchemical transmutation (Ferrer, 2008b; Linders & Lancaster, 2013). It is in this capacity that the body can be a source of spiritual insight (Caldwell, 2014; Ferrer, 2008b). An embodied approach does not view the body as an object but rather, as a vital and sacred expression of our fundamental nature: an

incarnated soul. This represents a shift from “*having* a body” to “*being* a body”, which enables a deepening relationship with the manifest realm (Masters, 2010). Such a relational, intuitive, and bodily approach to spirituality is more in line with indigenous awareness and is reflected in contemporary expressions such as deep ecology, feminist, and Goddess spirituality (Abrams, 1996; Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Ferrer, 2002; Matthews, 2001). The fullness of human experience involving all dimensions must be embraced in the process of transformation, argues Ferrer (2000). Only then does spirituality nurture the human potential to become the embodied reflection of the sacred and fulfil the wholeness of spiritual relationship (Ferrer, 2009).

2: Theoretical Context: A psychological approach to spirituality:

A spiritual psychology

Psychologist and philosopher William James (1902/1985) believed religious experience to be a legitimate subject for the newly emerging science of psychology. He was also the first to coin the term ‘transpersonal’. James’ ‘radical empiricism’ involved investigations of direct experience of both his personal experimentation with nitrous oxide and his research on psychical phenomena. Through his inquiries he concluded that conventional consciousness exists within a wider ‘transmarginal’ field of consciousness. James reformulated religious experience as “an encounter with this wider ‘unseen’ realm which elicits in us an, often powerful, reaction” (p. 53): a “psychological form of event” (p.176) which can be empirically explored. James conducted the first analysis of religious experience as a psychological- rather than a theological- process (Hastings, 1999).

Nine years after James’ (1902) *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Evelyn Underhill (1911/1999) published her seminal study on mysticism and the development of spiritual consciousness. Like James, she set out to define her examination of the mystical path in psychological language. Drawing on the accounts of mystics across traditions, Underhill traces the mystical journey as beginning with a stage of, sometimes abrupt, *awakening* to the existence of a spiritual reality and a desire to experience this reality more fully.

Further stages involve *purgation*, the desire to remove what is in the way of spiritual experience; *illumination*, a deepening of mystical experience and widening detachment from worldly desires, and a *dark night*; a profound suffering associated with a sense of separation from divine reality and the realisation that the small self must be surrendered. Underhill identifies the final stage of *Union* as the removal of any separation between the self and Divine reality, where life becomes a purely spiritual experience. Relevant to the current inquiry, Fontana (2003) notes that by 'union' Underhill appears to indicate that the culmination of the spiritual life involves an experience of immanence, rather than a transcendence as a surrender to the Divine.

Spirituality is much more than a social behaviour, writes Fontana (2003). It rests on inner experience and introspection, which brings it into the realm of psychology. Spirituality is typified by a belief in a spiritual dimension which, when connected to, can have a profound effect upon human behaviour and thought (Fontana, 2003). Human spirituality is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Accordingly, models of spiritual development vary depending on the various traditions from whence they originate. Generally, the nature of the psycho-spiritual path represents the inner process of connectedness to the sacred as a quality of living, of being, of relationship to, and awareness of, a sacred reality (Friedman, Krippner, Riebel & Johnson, 2010; Schermer, 2003). Walach (2015) formulates spiritual experience as a holistic type of knowing operating out of a connectedness to a whole or unified reality. This "spiritual" reality beyond the experiencing self transcends the limited interpretation of the ego-mind. Vaughan (1986) conveys the ego as a limited identification with the thinking mind which reflects a psychodynamic pattern of inner separation. The sense of self becomes more authentic by breaking through the restrictive conceptualisation of who we think ourselves to be. This in turn supports an increasing validation of one's inner experience of being over and above culturally imposed interpretations (Vaughan, 1986). The ego is not lost but rather, deposed from its central position in our overall identity to enable a self-identification with a wider "ego-transcendent" awareness of being (Laughlin, 2013; Welwood, 2002). To this end, spiritual practices and transpersonal therapies concern the myriad ways in which a separation between the egoic self and the non-egoic core

self may be dissolved, so that the selfhood can function as a unified whole (Welwood, 2002).

Both psychological and spiritual practices of self-exploration aim to understand and facilitate the symbolic experience of internal death and transformation (Grof & Grof, 1990). The symbiotic relationship between psychology and spirituality through the self-transformation they pursue is a core investigation of *transpersonal psychology* as a “fourth force” in empirical and theoretical psychology research.

Humanistic psychology founded by Maslow (1971) and Sutich (1976) provided a “third force” alongside behaviourism and Freudian psychoanalysis in the mid twentieth century. Maslow was critical of behaviourism’s exclusive emphasis on stimulus / response to environmental factors in animal studies as a base for human psychological theory. This to him ignored human qualities such as introspection, love, morality, and creativity, but also negative human traits, such as greed and cruelty. Freud’s emphasis on psychopathology and representation of psychological processes in terms of base instincts was, according to Maslow, also too limited as a representation of the human psyche. The humanistic approach instead placed emphasis on psychological health, choice, values, and needs. Maslow set out to study “supernormal” functioning as the growing tip of human potential on which he based his concept of *self-actualisation*. The self-actualized person, according to Maslow, has sufficiently resolved psychological and survival needs to enable a fully alive and responsive functioning (Grof, 2008). Influenced by a resurgence of interest in Eastern spiritual philosophies, meditation, mysticism, indigenous traditions, and non-ordinary states of consciousness during the sixties, Sutich and Maslow increasingly realised they had left out the spiritual dimension as a vital element of the psyche. In response, a small working group established the foundations for a new transpersonal psychology to honour the full spectrum of human experience (Grof, 2008; Puttick, 2000).

In the US, the *human potential movement*, as the psycho-spiritual wing of the 1960's counterculture, was instrumental in advocating an experiential approach of psychotherapy as a dynamic synthesis between imported forms of eastern spirituality and western psychology (Puttick 2000). Schermer (2003) describes what he terms a

psychospiritual paradigm as the integration of spiritual principles with psychological models of the mind. Spirituality from this psychological perspective represents “a capacity and a motivation for living fully within the context of being and faith (p. 29)” driven by a core aspect of the psyche which is forever reaching for union with the infinite and mysterious. From this perspective, spirituality defines both our essence and our existence (Schermer, 2003).

The transpersonal Self

Main (2008) observes much of the criticism around contemporary spirituality is caused by a misunderstanding of the difference between the concepts of self and Self: as a personal and transpersonal selfhood, respectively. The Jungian notion of *Individuation*, which will be discussed in more detail in later sections, becomes confused with *individualism* in critical discourse. The self-focus of contemporary spirituality, argues Main, cannot be understood, or legitimized without understanding the meaning of the transpersonal Self.

The transpersonal “Self”, which in written theory is differentiated from the personal self by using a capital “S”, is not a homogenous concept within transpersonal theory, depending on the cultural and metaphysical frameworks and the rich diversity of human experience from which they arise (Daniels, 2005; Fontana, 2003). The Self is the instrument which brings the individual into a sacred state of unity with a universal energy permeating the whole of creation. It is understood in numerous guises, such as the Christian *Soul*, the Theosophical *Higher Self*, the Gnostic *Divine Spark*, the *Supreme Identity* of Sufism, the *Inner Child* of Psychology, or the Buddhist *True Nature* or *Buddha Nature* where the dissolving of the individual self with an ultimate *Ground of Being* is formulated in non-dual terms as *no-Self* (Daniels, 2005; Wilber, 2017).

The various non-dual approaches overall adopt a metaphysical rather than psychological emphasis. Here the focus and language concerns levels of consciousness toward the ultimate attainment of “emptiness”, “pure awareness” or “ultimate non-dual consciousness” (Daniels, 2005; Fontana, 2003; Wilber, 2000). The experience of

transcendence or “enlightenment” constitutes the liberation from the conditioned dualistic perspective of the egoic mind into the ego-less awareness of our essential nature or “being-ness”. In this state of “pure awareness”, the duality or separation between the perceiver and what is perceived falls away (Welwood, 2003). Another interpretation is that the inner and the outer: subject and object, are recognised as two interdependent sides of one reality and as such experienced as unified presence. The transpersonal Self is a state of witnessing, dis-identified from the content of thought and transcendent of all identifications (Vaughan, 1986).

In sum, the Self can be understood as a metaphor, a symbol, a developmental process, or a psychic structure, or all of the above. These in turn translate into the diversity of contemporary paths that the individual can choose to walk (Daniels, 2005). Nevertheless, certain characteristics are held in agreement, namely that a transpersonal or spiritual identity transcends the isolated personal identity operating in the here and now, to encompass an expanded, timeless, even boundless self-sense in relation to the whole of existence. The awakening to, and identification with, an expanded reality further involves a higher developmental functionality and sense of purpose associated with “spiritual” qualities such as compassion, wisdom, interconnectedness, and receptivity (Daniels, 2005; Friedman, 2013; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). This perspective is embedded in an expanded vision of reality itself whereby consciousness, rather than matter, is primary, which represents the new frontier explored in the areas of quantum physics and consciousness studies (Lancaster, 2004).

Spirituality as developmental and transformational process

Spirituality in a secular world has come to represent a pro-active journey of self-empowerment, self-realisation, or a fulfilling of human potential. This turn to the subjective, places human consciousness at the forefront of spiritual evolution and brings about a re-evaluation of spiritual identity (Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Heelas, 2006). Saucier & Skrzypińska, (2006) argue that the subjective nature and experience of spirituality warrants a more in-depth psychological exploration and analysis. Differences in spiritual orientation have hitherto been assumed to stem from

environmental and cultural factors. This has assigned spirituality to the field of sociology and rendered it of marginal concern to psychology (Fontana, 2003; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006). Conventional psychology largely considers spirituality as a component of personality. The individual ego as a primary generator of a personal sense of self, adopts and incorporates spirituality as an optional addition to an overall structure of behavioural consistency. From this perspective, the religious or spiritual self-identity is an orientation of choice (Crossley, 2011; MacDonald, 2009).

As discussed, transpersonal psychology understands the egoic self as a conceptual orientation born from socialisation and adaptation to an external reality. The meaning and focus of deeper internal identity, however, is related to connectedness to one's spiritual core (Laughlin, 2013; Welwood, 2002). Three notable pioneers in psycho-spiritual investigation: psychologist William James (1902/2003), psycho-analyst Carl G Jung and psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli, founder of *Psychosynthesis*, published works in the early and mid-twentieth century which began the development of a "spiritual' psychology" (Hastings, 1999). Jungian depth psychology in particular initiated the *sacralisation of psychology* by placing the sacred dimension within and fundamental to the realm of psyche, formulated as the Soul or *Transpersonal Self* (Daniels 2005; Lahood, 2008; Main, 2006; Parfitt, 2003; Porter in Schermer, 2003). Jung and Assagioli shared an interest in Esotericism, Gnosticism, and the comparative study of religion. As well as drawing on their clinical practice, they were deeply immersed in their personal psychospiritual process which provided an experiential foundation to their respective theories (Fontana, 2003; Main, 2006, 2008; Parfitt, 2003). Both pioneers sought to establish a creative integration of spirituality with the then relatively new science of psychology in the early 20th century.

Schermer (2003) attributes the delay of including spirituality into mainstream psychology to the rift between Freud and Jung in the early days of Psychoanalysis. Freud's Darwinian naturalistic appreciation of the human psyche was more attuned with the secularized mind of modernism (Tarnas, 1991/2010). Jung explicitly broke away from the Freudian theory of the unconscious underlying conscious activity as a solely personal construct driven by biological instincts (Assagioli, 1967; Main, 2006;

Parfitt, 2003). He proposed that human beings have an innate religious function: an unconscious and autonomous inner directive toward the sacred, which places consciousness as a spiritual principle and counterpart to the instinctual drives (Edinger, 1992; Main, 2008; Von Franz, 1995). The Jungian ego is a point of reference in the field of consciousness embedded in the total field of the psyche. The Jungian model of the psyche depicts three layers of psychic process: the *personal consciousness*; the empirical psyche as the realm of ego and personas, the *personal unconscious* as the realm of repressed or forgotten content, and a *Collective Unconscious* which comprises an a-priori “ground of being” containing Archetypal and Numinous forces (Jung, 1976a; Stein, 1998). He formulates the Collective Unconscious as:

. . . a second psychic system of a collective, universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents. (Jung, 1976a. p. 60)

Self-transformation, Individuation and Self-realisation

Jung and Assagioli considered *Individuation* and *Self-realisation* respectively, as a process of increasingly conscious dialogue and alignment between the subordinate ego and the supraordinate Self, resulting in the development of hitherto dormant higher functions, and receptivity to higher guidance (Edinger, 1992; Washburn, 2003).

The Jungian Self is both the totality of the psyche and the central archetype of the *Collective Unconscious*. It is this transpersonal Self that is seeking its own realisation and integration, which is experienced by the personal self as a deep psychological directive for Individuation (Edinger, 1992, Jung, 1976 b; Stein, 1998). Individuation represents a developmental journey of the ego to experience its connection to the Self by way of increasing dialogue between inner and outer experience. This begins with personal stages of psychological development and continues to transcend the purely subjective sphere into transpersonal layers of the Collective Unconscious. Jung (in Campbell, 1976) perceived no reality beyond the psyche. What he termed the *transcendent function* is the psychological process or psychic link arising from the union between conscious and unconscious contents in the individuation process. The

integration of unconscious content into consciousness is guided by the archetype of Self by way of intuitions, dreams, and synchronous events. Through this process, an awareness of the transpersonal dimension is expanded into overall consciousness (Edinger, 1992; Main, 2006; 2008; Stein, 1998).

Assagioli (1967) considered Jungian depth-psychology and psychosynthesis to be close in conceptualization and practice but highlighted differences, particularly in relation to the structure of the psyche. The psychosynthesis model also represents the psyche as a wider field of conscious and unconscious processes and agrees with Jung on the nature of the unconscious as a potential transpersonal domain. However, Assagioli felt Jung's model lacked differentiation between inherited "archaic" human experience and a purely spiritual sphere in the transpersonal unconscious. Assagioli's *egg-diagram* of the psyche instead depicts a lower "archaic" unconscious, a middle - more readily available - "personal" unconscious, and a higher "spiritual" unconscious which he termed the *Superconscious*. The locus of conscious awareness or "I" oscillates, or has the potential to oscillate, between these fields. These psychic layers are in turn permeable to influences from a collective unconscious field beyond the psyche. Accordingly, Assagioli (1965/1975, 1967) differentiated between psychic experiences arising from the encounter with the lower unconscious and collective unconscious, and spiritual or mystical experience as the encounter of the "I" with (an aspect of) the *Superconscious* field. Whilst Jung remained agnostic on the possibility of a transcendent God as an objective reality and regarded the unconscious as an exclusively psychological concept, The Self in psychosynthesis is synonymous with the "Absolute" or "Divine": it is omnipresent, permeating all fields. The Self is "that" out of which every "thing" arises and is both immanent and transcendent through this symbiotic relationship. Self-realisation in psychosynthesis terms represents the ongoing relationship and incremental alignment of the personal self with the transpersonal Self as the spiritual marriage between the reflection and its source (Assagioli, 1967; Firman, 1996).

Jung was an important founding influence on new age thought and transpersonal psychology with his conceptualisation of the Self as a hybrid of Eastern philosophy and Western psychology (Lahood, 2008). Assagioli (2007) proposed the

spiritual synthesis between East and West would be the key to an inner unification of humanity. Each in their own way, Jung and Assagioli considered the human psyche as inherently spiritual. They sought to resolve the distinction between the dual and non-dual by creating models in which a lower expression of self is mediated by a higher “sacred” expression of Self (Firman & Gila, 1997). Self-transformation can as such be understood as the unification of spiritual experience with one's concept of self, whereby a core identity can emerge and a sense flow between dimensions is taking place (MacDonald, 2009; Masters, 2010).

In his discussion on whether the West is undergoing an irreversible process of secularization as a decline of religion, Main (2008) proposes that the processes of secularization and sacralization are not opposites but are instead interconnected. The individuation or self-realisation process resolves the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred by reframing followers of new age spirituality as a diverse community of individuals on a sacred quest (Main, 2008). Relevant to the current project is the contextualization of spirituality as a developmental and transformational psychospiritual journey (Mc Entee, 2017; Schermer, 2003), which Assagioli (1965/1975) illustrates as follows:

Man's spiritual development is a long and arduous journey, an adventure through strange lands full of surprises, difficulties and even dangers. It involves a drastic transmutation of the 'normal' elements of the personality, an awakening of potentialities hitherto dormant, a raising of consciousness to new realms, and a functioning along a new inner dimension. (p.39)

The role of intuition in spirituality

Jung (in Campbell, 1976) emphasised that, to study the complexity of the psyche, one needs to differentiate between its functioning components. In his model, he considered there to be three involuntary functions: *impulses*, *instincts*, and *dreams*, and four voluntary functions: *sensing* (physicality); *thinking* (rationality); *feeling* (emotionality); and *intuition*, on which he based his typology-theory. It is noteworthy that Jung gave intuition equal status to the three functions recognised by the contemporaneous psychologies of Freudian psychoanalysis and behaviourism.

The term intuition is etymologically related to vision: “in-tuiri”, meaning “to see within” (Assagioli, 2002). Jung explicitly recognised intuition as a potential conduit for gnosis (Vaughan, 1979). It is through intuition, rather than thought, that one perceives the existence of a spiritual reality (Fontana, 2003). According to Jung (in Campbell, 1976), the intuitive function provides a “perception inherent in a situation” (p.26), sourced in collective and inborn psychic apprehensions and archetypal mythic sensibility. Intuition is as such largely an unconscious and pre-cognitive process free from the adaptations and interpretations of the conscious mind and the duality of the egoic structure (Jung in Campbell, 1976). Intuitions are not constructed by cognitive or reflective processes, but instead occur as a *gestalt*: an immediate grasp of the wholeness and meaning of a subject, object, or situation (Hillman, 1996). Assagioli (1975; 2002), stresses that the quality of intuitive insight depends on the clarity of access to the unconscious source and discernment must be applied. Intuition functions on a gradient ranging between everyday intuition arising from the personal and collective unconscious to spiritual intuitions or “illuminations” arising from the *Superconscious* which reflect the *gnosis* of the great mystics (Assagioli, 1975; 2002).

According to Jung’s typology, the *intuitive* type, particularly if introverted, receives and accepts sensory input like any other but, unlike the *thinking*, *feeling* or *sensory* type, will not use it as primary guidance. Their world exists not just as an external reality but also as an impression and constellation in relationship with the deeper layers of the psyche. External stimuli are perceived as ultimately intrusive to the symbolically formulated perceptions arising from the collective unconscious (Jung in Campbell, 1976). For the intuitive type, the world is essentially perceived as more psychic than physical. It must therefore be understood that they inhabit a profoundly different reality from other function types (Assagioli, 2002). With this reliance on the perceptive inner vision, intuition inherently carries its own morality (Jung in Campbell, 1976). Intuition is irrational, wrote Jung, in the sense that it is not based on rational judgement. But it is not unreasonable because the unmediated perception experience is actively recognised by the experiencer as superior to any subsequent constructed analysis, and so true validity can only be derived from this wider reality that is

perceived. “We should therefore consider intuition as highly empirical” (Jung in Campbell, 1976, p. 226).

Aron (2003) identifies introversion combined with intuitive “speciality” as the most common combination of factors in what she terms *highly sensitive persons* (HSP’s). Aron characterises HSP’s as having a nervous system which is more easily aroused than that of the average person. Their amplified sensitivity to more subtle dynamics and stimulation is triggered by both conscious and unconscious processes. This in turn can stimulate intuitive knowing and empathic capabilities. The intensity of feelings, intuitive knowing and permeable self-boundaries can also give rise to overwhelm and anxiety. Particularly those with highly empathic capabilities are prone to distress when they are unable to shut out their perceptions or fail to distinguish between what feelings are theirs and which belongs to others, or simply do not have a suitable framework for interpretation. In her research Aron (2003) found that orientation towards unorganized religion, and identification with a soul and spiritual dimension were particularly strong in highly sensitive people. Moreover, when HSP’s were able to understand and support their psychic mechanism as a deepened attunement to unconscious impulses, they could use their sensitivity positively in their search for spiritual understanding and wholeness.

Inner directive and self-agency

The power to self-determine one’s actions in relation to morality and self-improvement is central to both religious and spiritual engagement (Fontana, 2003). Assagioli (2002) considered *Will* [capital intended] as the primary function of the transpersonal Self, experienced by the self as an awareness of higher purpose. This transpersonal Will serves as counterpart to the lower will of drives, impulses, and desires of the personal self. Assagioli considered the essence of psycho-spiritual work to be about freeing the personal will from inner division and unveil the core-Will of the transpersonal “I”, which reflects a shift from unconscious motivation to conscious intent (Assagioli, 2002; Ferucci, 1995; Firman, 1996). Higher Will and lower will can be brought into increasing alignment through intentional acts of “good will” to bring about change

in self and world. Assagioli (2002) symbolised the highest level of Will as the fusion with *Universal Will* and the apex of self-realization. Further to the psycho-spiritual theme of journey, this represents transpersonal development as a pro-active and Self-empowered endeavour enabled by an extended array of voluntary psychic functions.

According to Frankl (1952/2004), a loss of meaning and fear of self-accountability in the modern mind reflects a soul-sickness of existential neurosis. True self-agency represents the ability to take responsibility for one's life according to one's conscience. He understood conscience as the primary expression of the transpersonal dimension which is transcendent but has an immanent aspect in psychological consciousness through which its authentic voice is expressed. Fundamental to self-agency is the skill to self-reflect and to learn to direct attention and intention toward the goal of self-expansion (Schlitz, Vieten & Amorok, 2007). "The traditional aim of religion is to save the soul", writes Frankl (1952/2004, p. 14) by providing a spiritual anchor. To claim self-agency and freedom, however, humanity must heal the soul and re-establish the unique meaning to their own existence; a task for which a soul-searching psychotherapy is required.

Hillman's *Acorn Theory* (1996) depicts the human soul as pre-coded to live their unique and destined personal myth. Intuition, by functioning outside of the construct of time, "sees the whole of the destiny path at once" (p. 225) and is conjoined with an inner directive or *daimon* to drive this 'acorn' of potential towards the 'oak' of self-realisation. Consistent with Hillman's *daimon* as inner directive and Assagioli's *Will*, Piechowsky, (2001) found experiences of entelechy, such as a sense of life-purpose or destiny, divine guidance or feeling of a vital force directing ones' life, to be common in children. Such direct experiences instil a certainty of truth perceived as different from that which is imagined and can instigate a strong inner self-determination to fulfil ones' fullest potential. Hart (2005) argues that vivid childhood memories and qualities of wonder, wisdom and deep questioning is not outgrown. Rather, it can fundamentally define a person's spirituality and inform their worldview throughout adult life. It can also provide emotional resilience and support for ever deepening psychological

exploration and emphasise unique abilities (Cervantes & Arczynski, 2015; Hart, 2005; Piechowsky, 2001).

To summarize this section on a psychological approach to spirituality, the picture of the psycho-spiritual path that emerges is of a pro-active journey and process toward self-determination and realization guided by intuition and powered by a deeper inner directive.

3: Research Context: New Spiritual Expressions

...the future of religion will be shaped by spiritually individuated persons engaged in processes of cosmological hybridization in the context of a common spiritual family that honors a global order of respect and civility. (Ferrer, 2009, p.146)

Profile of the Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR).

According to Fuller (2018), the *Spiritual but not Religious* have psychological traits which are empirically distinct from those who identify as either religious or non-religious. Compared to their religious counterparts, the SBNR score higher on openness to metaphysical experiences and ideas, place higher value on intuition and subjective experience, and have a relatively high level of intelligence. They score lower in terms of agreeableness and conscientiousness. Their personalised spiritual focus, however, is not found to indicate a dysfunctional narcissism. Rather, the nature of their identification is transpersonal, supported by subjective experiences such as altered states, magic-mythical thinking, and intuitive insight. The spiritual emphasis is on journey as opposed to destination, sustained by a sense of wonder about life which encourages receptivity, empathy, interconnectedness, and selflessness (Fuller, 2018).

Saucier & Skrzypińska (2006) hypothesised that *Tradition-oriented Spirituality* (TS) signified a reliance on trusted sources of authority and a shared reference point (such as scripture and practice) resulting in greater conformism. In contrast, *Subjective Spirituality* (SS) is typified by greater reliance on subjective imagination and intuition,

egalitarianism, and non-conformism. Their results suggest TS and SS to be highly independent psychometric orientations with significantly different correlates. Tradition-oriented spirituality scored high on association with authoritarian directives for behaviour, scored more moderately on collectivism and shared beliefs, and scored relatively low on openness to subjective experience. Subjective spirituality scored high on openness, eccentricity, proneness to magical thinking and self-absorption. SS further scored high on a preference for mysticism based on subjective experience, placing high importance on personal intuition, and showing little implication of collective organisation.

In two large-scale quantitative studies of predominantly Euro-American adults, Johnson et al. (2018) explored the characteristics of those who self-identify as spiritual but not religious, and the factors involved in the development of their non-traditional beliefs. Comparative analysis of perspectives held by the religious, the nonreligious, and the SBNR, revealed that SBNR were significantly more likely to consider the nature of “God” to be a naturalistic cosmic force rather than a personalised being. Findings showed that between 30-40% of SBNR retained some level of religious identity yet developed a more personalised idiosyncratic faith-perspective. This was predominantly due to a feeling of “not fitting in” and the religious perspective was therefore deemed irrelevant. The authors proposed exposure to religious diversity could account for SBNR’s idiosyncratic approach to spirituality. The second study however did not find significant differences in exposure to religious diversity between cohorts. Rather, Johnson et al. (2018) found it was the correlation between predisposed characteristics: of belief in a cosmic force, an individualistic outlook on spirituality, and exposure to religious diversity, that were significant to the formation of non-traditional ideas. In contrast to the nonreligious, SBNR were not found to have a strong negative attitude to religion. Damaging experience with religion, such as being emotionally hurt by members of a religious group were not found to be significant predictors of SBNR. Approximately 18% of the sample were not raised within a religious setting, which suggested to the authors that SBNR can involve a development of spiritual identity in adulthood, rather than a rejection of religion. Johnson et al. (2018) concluded that identification with

SBNR is therefore predominantly associated with individualistic spirituality rather than a non-religious attitude.

In a phenomenological study of 27 Jewish adults, Russo-Netzer & Mayselless (2016; Russo-Netzer, 2018) portray spirituality outside religious context as a non-linear and ongoing process of both personal self-expansion and transpersonal self-transcendence or “expansion of the self in an upward direction . . . and a heightened view of reality” (p.6). This is experienced as a complex and multi-layered self-led search for authentic inner autonomy which combines both the personal and transpersonal as essential dimensions in human growth. In contrast to the non-committal “pick and mix” stereotype, spiritual practice is understood as dedicated internal “work” with transformative intent, marked by struggle, doubt and personal sacrifice. Psychological engagement involves self-confrontation, self-questioning, and self-discovery, combined with self-transcendence to enable a higher perspective and sense of interconnectedness with others and cosmos and world. Both aspects are considered necessary in the overall process of self-transformation, formulated as: “. . . a change in the meaning system that a person holds as a basis for self-definition, the interpretation of life, and overarching purposes and ultimate concerns (p. 2)”. The principle of self-autonomy and related themes of openness, critical questioning, and search for direct experience, was found by participants to be central in both individual engagement and in relation to spiritual teachers and teachings. Authenticity and validity of engagement is self-assessed through a continuous process involving critical self-reflection, an alertness to body sensations, and intuitive attention to signs. Signs include symbolic information and synchronicities believed to provide guidance and affirmation. Self-identity is based on a qualitative discernment of intrinsic values, inner truth and a deeper knowing with which to meet the postmodern challenge of pluralism (Russo-Metzer, 2018).

In the pluralist complexity of secular culture, the search for spirituality is driven by a human need for symbolic coherence and existential orientation. Buxant, Saroglou and Tesser (2010) conducted a quantitative questionnaire-based study of comparison in background, motivation, and expression between adherents of new religious

movements (NRMs) and what they term “free-lance (sic) spiritual seekers”. They define free-lance spiritual seekers as choosing to explore spirituality yet preserve individual autonomy by staying outside religious movements. Using measures of attachment to parents in childhood, adult attachment, need for closure, need for cognition, openness to experience, and religious orientation, their findings show that both groups share the need for answers to spiritual questions and search for belonging or attachment. These “compensatory” motives are commonly understood as classic functions of religion. Free-lance spiritual seekers, however, showed a higher tolerance of uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity in relation to spiritual questions. They also reflected an openness to experience and a willingness to change beliefs to encourage self-growth. Authors conclude this independent mindedness is likely to be the main factor why free-lance spiritual seekers decline to join any religious group.

Critiques of new spiritual expressions

Modern Western consumers think rather highly of themselves: they choose their microwaves, they choose their government, and they choose which God to believe in and in what manner. (Bruce, 2006, p. 37)

The spiritual supermarket

What started out as an idealistic counterculture with deep concerns about our world-situation, the identity of spirituality in the 21st century has increasingly become appropriated by the language, culture, and laws of the marketplace, argues Hanegraaff (2013). Carrette and King (2004) critique the individualist and corporatist monopoly of the term spirituality and describe how modern spirituality is steeped in the neo-liberal values of consumer choice and individualism. The postmodern mix of spirituality with globalization, secularization, individualism, multiculturalism, consumerism, and pluralism, has in effect created a free market of religious competition. New or “neo” spiritual modalities stand accused of a *capitalistic imperialism* whereby indigenous expressions are customized to suit a western audience amounting to exploitation, bastardization and cultural appropriation of native heritage which can profoundly simplify or misrepresent their original meaning, practice, and worldview (Morgain,

2016; York, 2001). Hyland (2017), for instance, discusses the exploitation of the Buddhist practice of mindfulness in the commercial and corporate sphere as a “McDonaldizing” of spirituality. Marketisation and commodification has created a pseudo-spirituality of “McMindfulness”.

With the sacralisation of the self, the settings, and situations in which the self is occupied, such as home, places of work and leisure, also become part of the self-growth environment. Heelas (1996; 2008) sums up critiques as depicting a constant diet of self-help and inflated expectations breeding a climate of discomfort and neurotic searching which is subsequently exploited to provide answers to self-made problems. Aupers and Houtman (2006) argue that, with the steady rise of free market capitalism, the spiritual seeker is considered to have become a spiritual consumer in a spiritual supermarket providing consumer choice. Bruce (2000) observes practices and beliefs are selected from a “cafeteria” of cultural products, which are abandoned once the desired benefits are either acquired or fail to materialize. The ultimate measurement of success is based on personal advantage: as the creation of wealth and wellbeing for the consuming individual and their willing providers. Rindfleish (2005) describes spirituality as having become a social product where complex religious traditions and practices, mixed with selective scientific and psychological theory, are appropriated, deconstructed, and reformulated into a simplified “homogenized” product often advertised as “meta-theory”. The spiritual seeker is turned into a consumer who is addressed from the perspective that their current self-identity is incomplete or undesirable. Proclaimed new and unique approaches are then presented with the promise to transform life for the better. Artificially created existential insecurity is fuelled by the rhetorical stick of “needing to work on oneself” and the carrot of self-empowerment which keep the consumer addicted to self-help assurance and instruction. To keep market demand buoyant, the dream of self-actualisation must however remain ever one step away. Therefore, a continuous re-branding and re-invention of self-development processes and theory is produced to keep the consumer fantasy alive (Rindfleish, 2005).

Spiritual narcissism

Carrette and King (2004) hold the field of transpersonal psychology responsible for the psychologisation of human religious experience in the West. Transpersonal psychology, they argue, has promoted the privatisation of religion and religious meaning, amounting to a narrowing down of religious experience to personal development and altered states of consciousness, which does little to change actual behaviour. It created an individualised self who exists in a subjective reality focussed on self-care, insulated from wider political and social issues (Carrette & King, 2004). The elevation of the self in individualised spiritual engagement is a recipe for spiritual narcissism, claims Lahood (2010). Detached from the rules of doctrinal and organisational conformity, people can take elements from one tradition and combine with elements from another without the need to either exclude or commit. During the twentieth and twenty-first century, the individual, rather than society, increasingly decides what to believe and becomes the arbiter of personal accountability and morality (Hanegraaff, 2013; York, 2001; Bruce, 2006).

Non-ordinary experiences, often pathologized in orthodox religious and psychological frameworks, are in this new context re-considered and legitimized as spiritual and serving self-growth (Aupers & Houtman, 2006). Participation is deemed by Bruce (2000; 2006) to be shallow, where the rules on what constitutes "spiritual" can be made up as one goes along, exacerbated by the perceived legitimization of what hardened sceptics consider to be pseudo-science and the postmodern viewpoint that all knowledge is relative. Instead of resulting in genuine transformation, argues Bruce, new spirituality merely provides a new and better vocabulary by which to reframe pre-existing attitudes (Bruce, 2000). The secularized psyche has lost its religious reference and is therefore likely to underestimate the level of sacrifice, deeper accountability and genuine practice involved in self-transformation and spiritual attainment (Caplan, 2009; Hollis, 2001). Participants are ultimately not held to account by the clearly demarcated values and disciplines which religious traditions would otherwise provide (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Houtman, Aupers & Heelas, 2009; Heelas, 1996). The substance and efficacy of subjective spirituality to facilitate genuine self-development, self-

responsibility, and self-transformation, and how that subsequently reflects in relation to others and the wider world therefore comes under question.

Spiritual bypassing.

Spiritual bypassing concerns spiritually rationalised avoidance of psychological processes and issues and the construction of a false spiritual identity as an attempt to either fast-track or feign spiritual progress (Masters, 2010; Humphrys, 2015). This “shadow” of disowning aspects of self or process manifests in many subtle forms and, according to Humphreys (2015), reflects a common distortion in contemporary understanding of what spirituality is about. The spiritual cosmology is considered too polarized towards “love and light” and fails to recognise personal and collective shadow, thereby either lacking or discouraging whole-person integration. The promise of enlightenment, bliss, abundance, and a fed belief that spirituality provides immunity from suffering, can have serious consequences to mental health and sabotages preparedness for crisis, uncertainty, or limitation (Caplan, 2009; Firman & Gila, 1997; Humphreys, 2015; Masters, 2010; Welwood, 2002). Welwood (2016), discusses how spiritual bypassing conflates the absolute state of *being* with the relative state of *becoming* expressed in our developmental embodied humanity. This becomes detrimental when the principles of one are applied to disparage and bypass the other. According to Masters (2010) this (mis)use of spirituality as “metaphysical valium” (p. 5), reflects a confusion between transcendence and de-personalisation, whereby essential parts of the self and the psycho-spiritual process are disowned. This reinforces inner fragmentation: *deforming*, rather than *transforming* the self.

Masters (2010) observes that spiritual bypassing is particularly common in spiritual approaches where the ego is treated as something to eradicate. The issue arises when the non-dual concept of *no-self* is associated with the idea that there is no psychological reality at all. The ego is equated with the personality, which in turn negates the relative reality of - and engagement with - human worldly existence (Welwood, 2016). As Wilber (2006, p. 132) puts it: “dis-identifying with an owned self is transcendence; dis-identifying with a disowned self is double dissociation”. Ferrer

(2015) emphasises that, without the foundation of embodiment to enable self-understanding, there can be no self-agency to engage in relationship to nurture interpersonal understanding. Without the embodied and relational principles in place, any pursuit of transcendence becomes an empty act of spiritual bypassing: as an avoidance of fundamental human needs, responsibilities, and developmental concerns (Welwood, 2016). Masters (2010) concludes that for contemporary spirituality to be authentic, spiritual bypassing must be recognised and outgrown.

Lack of social impact or cohesion.

According to Bruce (2000; 2006), the departure from traditional sources of authority and low level of spiritual consensus makes new age spiritual expressions ineffectual. The absence of a shared faith and lack of recognisable organisation result in a weakness of community and lack of cohesion overall. Lasting social impact or significance are therefore deemed to be unlikely (Bruce, 2000; 2006). Moreover, the individualistic emphasis on self-development is considered as directly opposed to the Christian idea of self-sacrifice and service, which leads to accusations that new age expressions are lacking in social conscience. In sum, to the religiously oriented critic, new age spirituality is infirm, trivial, and unsustainable as a bona fide spiritual movement and therefore does not represent a credible alternative to religion in a secular world (Heelas, 2006; Main, 2008; Puttick, 2000). Furthermore, as Hyland (2017) argues, when spiritual practice is standardized, simplified, and divorced from its spiritual and ethical origins in the spiritual marketplace, it no longer supports individual and social transformation. Instead, it becomes a self-help gimmick that is unlikely to be of any lasting individual or social benefit (Hyland, 2017). What is marketed as a transformative spirituality represents nothing more than a new cultural addiction to ease the existential angst of the affluent in capitalist society (Carrette & King, 2004).

Hidden socialization

New age spiritual seekers are characterised as counter-cultural due to their choice to reject inherited socio-cultural and religious pathways. However, a possible

hidden influence from peer and social programming in adult life warrants exploration to determine the authenticity of personal choice. This concerns the question whether participants possess enough discernment to know if they experience genuine insight in their spiritual engagement or are instead unknowingly conforming to an established order by another name (Heelas, 2006; Possamai, 2000). Aupers and Houtman (2006) propose that self-spirituality too can be considered as a doctrine, albeit constructed, transmitted, and reinforced by popular culture instead of a religious institution. The new age rhetoric about the primacy of personal authenticity is sociologically naïve because it ignores the fact that individuals operate within social constructs. The individualism of new spiritual expressions is likely to be more complex and less unambiguously privatized than suggested. Drawing on data from a variety of sources including new age literature, interviews at Dutch *new age* centres and in-depth interviews with new age teachers, Aupers and Houtman explored the existence of socialised compliance in self-spirituality. Their analysis revealed participants undergo a process of socialisation leading to standardized legitimization of the doctrinal ideal to reinforce compliance. To illustrate: one case-study cited participants in a workplace environment who were expected to “find themselves” in their job, “grow” and be “authentic”. This “socially sanctioned obligation to be authentic” (p. 218) was in turn reinforced by a negative appraisal of those who were perceived to be failing in this quest. The social judgement hidden within new age philosophy, they write, must be acknowledged as being as divisive and covertly hierarchical as any other system of belief. From this perspective, new age spirituality is more socially driven and the path less self-determined or unique than the spiritual seeker may claim. It also would make new age spirituality more socially significant than it is given credit for (Aupers & Houtman, 2006). The research conducted for this doctoral thesis aims to evaluate Aupers and Houtman’s conclusion from a psychological perspective: to explore the process people undergo to find authenticity within themselves beyond, or perhaps despite, these sociological factors.

Evaluation of critiques.

A question of perspective?

Some of the controversies around new spiritual expressions could be attributed to matters of perspective. Puttick (2000) proposes that part of the argument around spiritual narcissism is likely to be down to terminological misinterpretation and contextual variation. The term self-empowerment, for instance, has a different meaning in a business environment than in a therapeutic setting. York (2001) in turn argues that the current move of spirituality into new areas such as the workplace and commerce can promote spiritual values such as ethics and meaning in these arenas. The increasingly entwined relationship between the spiritual and the commercial spheres can therefore be viewed as a positive cultural trend. In other words, what is currently considered as a wholly negative appropriation can also work as a progressive and positive exchange of ideas and practices to bring about a more mature and responsible world (York, 2001). McEntee (2017) argues that, despite the “‘cooky-jar’ spirituality of the experience junkie” (p. 617), emergent forms of spirituality are synergistic fusions characterized by the rigor of committed practice and learning. This commitment leads to transformation in the individual and the world by way of expanded capacity for love, compassion, wisdom, and social justice. In line with William James’ conclusion that theories and belief systems are secondary to the qualitative changes in conduct toward the world, it is the work toward discernment and maturity that the malnourished experience junkie needs, rather than be told to join a religious tradition (McEntee, 2017).

Heelas (2008) maintains that, regardless of whether spiritual values are instilled through socialisation, such principles must resonate internally through one’s heart and conscience. Participants can therefore still own such ideals as arising from within. Researchers, argues Heelas, can neither prove nor judge the ontological truth of people’s spiritual claims. Instead, the focus of research needs to be on the values and ethics which stem from the interior experience and how these are subsequently expressed. In response to negative assessments of self-spirituality, King (2009) argues that these tend to be directed from the “outside in”, without acknowledging any deeper

significance in new spiritual trends, such as the possibility that the search for new perspectives, meaning and frameworks arises from a genuine psycho-spiritual need which is currently not met by more orthodox paths.

The rejection of traditional frameworks paired with a pluralistic ethos can leave people lost for spiritual direction and definition. In academic circles, the question of spiritual identity is rarely explored beyond the traditional cultural, philosophical, and religious comparative categorizations, argues Kripal (2018). The academic study of the *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR) provides an exciting area of exploration that must not be prematurely judged by comparison. Instead, this experimental movement needs to be evaluated on its own terms. It is in the didactic environment of classrooms and scholarship that an articulate language for new spiritual intuitions and experiences can be developed and shared (Kripal, 2018). Whether the phenomenon has sufficient structure, core-values, and common vision to warrant recognition as a cohesive movement remains to be seen, suggests Mercadante (2018). Perhaps it can serve to revitalize religion or represent the beginnings of a new form of spirituality altogether.

[Redefining social engagement and cohesion for the “spiritually mobile”.](#)

New spiritual expressions both challenge and redefine the meaning of social engagement and cohesion. Possamai (2000) observes that spiritual and social engagement traditionally occurred through vehicles of affiliation such as local membership to a religious institution. This, he claims, has inadvertently influenced the criteria for measurement in sociological research. Berghuijs, Bakker and Pieper (2013) suggest that evidence to support a low social engagement hypothesis in secular countries largely ignores quantitative verification and comparison between social groups. In secular culture, demographic factors of age and education have a stronger indicative value than institutional affiliation when it comes to spiritual engagement. Social relevance and engagement, propose Berghuijs, Bakker and Pieper (2013) can be evaluated by distinguishing between what is and is not driven by egocentric motivation, rather than affiliation to a fixed framework.

Humans are both settlers *and* explorers, argues Kripal (2018). New age spiritual engagement is typified by an ongoing exploration of a variety of metaphysical

movements and philosophies. It is this “seekership” shared by likeminded others that constitutes social identity. Social engagement by what Possamai (2000) terms the “spiritually mobile”, is more likely to be expressed through worldly and informal organisations, such as those focussed on peace, environmental protection, or social justice. The definition of commitment is less on group-membership and more on a wider attitude of solidarity and responsibility to society and world. Social interconnection rests on shared values such as the spiritual purpose of increasing self-authenticity which embed participants in their shared spirituality (Heelas, 2006). Horie (2013) considers that the unique strength of new spiritual expressions lies in their flexibility to interconnect the religious and non-religious, the global and the local. This reflects a responsiveness to the changing and evolving needs of people and society and provides a genuinely new resource.

King (2009) regards any sharp separation between religious and spiritual orientations as unhelpful and diminutive. Such divisions primarily arise when religion is solely equated with external institutional aspects and spirituality as an exclusively inner experience. From a wider historical and comparative perspective, spirituality and religion are closely related and mutually embedded. King proposes we appreciate their dialectic relationship and shift the focus of argument to be less on matters of definition and more on what spirituality means and does.

A Participatory Approach to Spirituality

In similar vein, Ferrer’s (2002; 2009) *participatory* model aims to reflect the diversity of spiritual perspectives on their own terms, and proposes that human consciousness plays a co-creative role in an unlimited possibility of spiritual universes. Different traditions seek to access different realities and individuals co-create spiritual encounters in inter-relational ways, which allows for a plurality of spiritual truths and realities to be revealed (Ferrer, 2002, 2008a; Hartelius, 2016).

Ferrer symbolises the spiritual realm as an *ocean of emancipation*. Rather than a spiritual ultimate, the ocean of emancipation is presented as a dynamic catalyst whereby self-transformation occurs through engagement or “participation” (Ferrer,

2002 & 2008a; Heron, 2006). Consequently, spiritual paths or traditions represent enabling vehicles for participation. Each have their unique goals and methods to take us to different spiritual shores in a sea of unknowable mystery. The model is participatory in the sense that the participant is not considered separate from the experience but rather, co-creates the experience by informing it with their subjective awareness such as of place, gender, culture, and psycho-spiritual sensitivities. The emphasis is less on the achievement of spiritual states and perceived developmental stages, and more on the openness to meaningfully participate and the willingness to be transformed through this encounter. Authenticity of participation can be discerned by the qualitative diminishment of two criterial aspects: that of *egocentrism*: by which is meant how effective any approach is in liberating the personhood from self-centeredness and narcissism, and that of *dissociation* (such as spiritual bypassing): in how effective any spiritual approach is in the integration of all human senses and dimensions (Ferrer, 2009). Ferrer (2002; 2008a) observes that most traditions consider the liberation from ego-centeredness to be a pivotal factor in self-transformation and so he identifies this as the unifying element between traditions and approaches. The participatory approach marks a shift in perspective from a plurality of spiritual paths to a plurality of spiritual engagement, which reflects and honours the rich diversity of ways in which the sacred can be encountered, embodied, and lived (Ferrer, 2002 & 2008a; Heron, 2006).

Traditional teachings can act as a precursor to spiritual inquiry in acknowledgement of both the wisdom they provide and their contextual limitations, claims Heron (2006). The primary resource, however, is the intrinsically innovative co-creative engagement which transcends any pre-determined limits. From a participatory perspective, spiritual guidance can equally arise from the *intrapersonal/inner*, the *interpersonal/relational*, and the *transpersonal/transcendent* dimension (Ferrer, 2015; 2017). *Intrapersonal* guidance is an intuitive and creative experience which can come in symbolism, dreams, altered states, synchronous events, art, places, people, and events. *Interpersonal* guidance can come in conscious relationship to others, and to 'spirit guides', such as power animals, subtle entities, or angels (Schlitz, Vieten, Amorok, 2007). This, claims Ferrer, avoids the inherent anthropocentrism of Eastern and Western traditions, to include Northern and Southern indigenous sensibilities whose

aims include the accessing of coexisting spiritual realms and associated principles. It further allows for new expressions to be born and for previously under-represented expressions to be included, promoting egalitarian interreligious dialogue in turn (Ferrer, 2008a, 2009; Wright, 1995).

Spirituality as transformative interconnection between self and world

In response to deepening world-conflict, environmental crisis and social inequality, the need to consciously expand the spiritual parameter beyond the interior life is, according to King (2009), increasingly recognised. The current global situation calls for a spirituality that will lead to creative thinking, transformative ways of living and a reorganisation of structures such as economics, education, and politics. Spirituality must be reframed as an existential engagement and attitude with life itself which concerns all levels of personal, social, and planetary complexity (King, 2009).

Spiritualities of life, as Heelas (2008) calls them, are certainly experiential and focussed on the qualitative transformation of the subjective life. Yet, they are concerned with human wellbeing in all aspects, including how the sacred is expressed within society. New spirituality, Heelas argues, could be the symptom of a much deeper “archetypal” shift away from traditional certainties and external authority towards inner agency and responsibility. In a world where human and non-human rights, values and freedoms are systematically eroded, the notion of the *Sacred Self* represents a potent symbol for the primary sanctity of life as a founding principle for change (Heelas, 2008).

In relation to transpersonal theory, Main (2008) observes that, whilst the path towards self-realisation is indeed focussed on the unique individual, the values and insights of the transpersonal Self are considered archetypal and universal. It is from this widened perspective that non-religious spiritual expressions can be in cohesive relationship to fellow beings in the world and be of actual social significance as a result (Main, 2008; Puttick, 2000). Maslow (1971) stressed the social need for what he termed *self-actualized* people, who would have the level of creative originality to arrive at new solutions which are not a repeat of the old mistakes. Maslow’s study of self-actualizing

people, and the transpersonal theories of Assagioli and Jung reveal that the overriding identifier of increasing self-realisation and individuation is a sense of interconnectedness. One's own development is not achieved at the expense of others but is rather *enhanced* by the development of others, through which social change in the collective can be co-created (Eisler, 1988). This, claims Heelas (2006), represents a path of growing coherence where participants find meaning and value in their uniqueness whilst including a profound relational element of "growing by way of other people".

Main (2006) suggests that the impact of the individual on the wider collective can be supported by Jung's *theory of synchronicity*, which proposes the existence of an interconnecting field or unity of consciousness that transcends both psyche and matter. Similarly, Sheldrake's (2011) theory of *morphic resonance* proposes a collective hereditary memory which spans cultural, biological, psychological, and cosmic evolution. This enables a fundamental relationship of meaningful coincidence to exist between seemingly unrelated fields, such as the inner psyche and the outer physical, or between one psyche and another. According to this principle of interconnectivity, a person advanced in psycho-spiritual development can have a profound influence as a catalyst on the wider collective field (Assagioli, 2007; Main, 2006 & 2008; Stein, 1998). As Parfitt (2003) describes more poetically, when the fragmentation between the earthly and spiritual nature within the self is resolved, soul-energy is embodied, through which the world is ensouled. Schlitz, Vieten and Amorok, (2007) stress that individual commitment to authenticity as a consistent practice is fundamental to self-transformation. Transformation is actualized as a radical shift in perspective leading into a new sense of identity, relationship with other and world, change in values, meaning and priorities. The current research explores "from the inside out" what spirituality means and does for the individual pathfinder. Through the identification of shared themes and understandings, the project further aims to build a profile and evaluation of SBNR on their own terms.

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from LJMU's Research Ethics Committee on January 3, 2017 (appendices folder 1). Participants were given a pseudonym of their own choosing to protect their identity. Any information that could identify participants, such as exact location, was not included in the recorded information. Any organisations were also given pseudonyms to prevent indirect identification of participants. In discussion with participants, certain materials in the original transcripts were removed to further safeguard anonymity. All personal information is kept confidential in accordance with the *Data Protection Act*. Interview recordings were used for transcribing only and will be deleted after five years following the report. Recordings, other digital materials, and hard copies were stored securely according to LJMU guidelines.

Central aims and questions

As someone who is fully immersed in both non-religious spirituality and transpersonal psychology, I set out to look more deeply into the many questions that continue to arise as I critically engage with my chosen path. By researching the pathways, perspectives, and choices of others on a similar trajectory, I sought an expanded understanding of my own journey as well as a creative, qualitative portrayal of the psychological process, nature, and challenges of the contemporary spiritual pathfinder overall. Whilst the transpersonal philosophy acknowledges a spiritual core in human nature which may steer our direction in life, each of us is further shaped by our experiences and responses to those experiences. It is this shaping as psychological process that is the focus of this inquiry.

The project aimed to:

- Research what a spiritual path outside religious tradition looks like in practice.
- Explore the psychological process the participants underwent in relation to meaning, identity and transformation.

- Evaluate how participants discern the authenticity of their engagement and how they relate to criticisms of *spiritual but not religious* engagement.
- Reflect the plurality of expressions that exist in SBNR.

The extent to which the study contributes to general theory is determined by its relevance beyond the sample used (Robinson, 2014). Although generalizability is narrowed in heuristic research due to its focus on individual experience, the thematic portrait aims for a faithful representation of correspondences which apply to the wider trend. It is hoped that the study will aid self-reflection in the reader and encourage a more informed debate around the 'spiritual but not religious' as an alternative 'third way' alongside religion and secular humanism and/or atheism.

Based on the themes which arose in the literature review, categories for questioning were identified and indicative questions were formulated (appendices folder 2.1). During interviews, a thematic chart (appendices folder 2.1) was used as a reminder to ensure each area was covered.

Thematic categories:

- **Psychospiritual choices, aims and objectives:** concerning the 'what, how, why'; including biographical background, objectives, understandings, and issues in finding direction. Example question:
 - *You consider yourself to be on a spiritual journey in life, what does that mean to you?*
- **Intuition and authenticity:** concerning the areas of discernment, notions of truth, how participants balance intuitive knowing with intellect, the role of trust and experimentation. Example question:
 - *How do you discern what is true or authentic about your path and your experiences?*
- **The lived nature of the path – embodiment:** concerning purpose, relationships, challenge, shadow, social impact and the balance between transcendence and immanence. Example question:
 - *In what way(s) does your psycho-spiritual path affect / impact your relationship to the world and others?*

- **Identity and transformation:** concerning perceived changes in one's sense of self, aspirations, difficulties, and the relationship between personal, spiritual, and social development. Example question:
 - *What do you understand (self) transformation to mean - what transforms and how?*
- **Self-agency, free will, and spiritual freedom:** exploring surrender, responsiveness and responsibility, narcissism and the role of teachers and teachings. Example question:
 - *How do you understand spiritual freedom? Do you enjoy spiritual freedom at present? What is non-negotiable to you?*
- **Contemporary spiritual expressions:** exploring the stereotype vs reality, New Age, and what constitutes a meaningful spirituality that meets the needs of our time and world. Example question:
 - *Have your opinions, beliefs, and assumptions on what constitutes a meaningful spiritual path changed over the years?*

The preformulated questions were used as guidelines but not all questions were asked. A semi-structured approach allowed the interview to unfold more organically and be adaptive to the interviewee's perspective.

Sampling

Qualitative research involves in-depth study of small but specifically chosen research samples through which knowledge and essential principles can be revealed. Criteria of inclusion therefore depend on a high degree of representational factors related to the phenomenon under investigation (Braud & Anderson, 1998). The sampling process was as follows:

Sample definition: Each participant was well-established and consistent in their self-spirituality choices, having practiced in this context for 10-15 years or more. The unifying component between participants was a sense of self-direction in finding one's path as opposed to singular adherence to a pre-established pathway. A fundamental criterion was for participants to consider their spiritual trajectory, choices, and experiences as life-defining. This comprised those who left their inherited religious or

secular perspective behind to find their own spiritual path, as well as those who found a new or renewed relationship with an established tradition after or alongside exploring alternative modalities. Further considerations involved a fair gender and age balance, and a fair variety of perspectives to reflect the plurality of pathways which come under the umbrella of the *spiritual but not religious*. This included indigenous pathways, Eastern-based non-dual approaches, and those specifically focused on psycho-therapeutic process. Lastly, all participants were required to have reasonable self-reflection and self-evaluation ability. An introductory conversation via *Skype* took place prior to participation to mutually assess suitability for the project. In practice, women proved easier to recruit than men. This may in part have been due to the researcher being female but may also reflect the gender balance in contemporary spirituality overall. This would need to be explored further. The eventual sample consisted of 13 female and 7 male participants, with an age-range between 34 and 68. In terms of socio-cultural and religious background, one participant was raised within a Buddhist tradition, six in non-religious households, one in a Christian “born-again” environment, one in the Jewish tradition, one inherited a Theosophical background, three were raised within a Catholic family, and six participants were raised within the Church of England tradition. All with various degrees of observance. In addition, some had attended a religious school, whilst not being religious in the family. All had moved away from their original religious or non-religious environment in adulthood.

The determination of *sample size* involved finding a balance between acquiring a suitable variety of perspectives, whilst keeping the number small enough for each participant to have a defined identity within the study. It also ensured that the various stages of in-depth analysis were conducted sustainably (Robinson, 2014). The sample was eventually set at 20 participants as the practical realities of the project unfolded. Sample size was further determined on grounds of theoretical saturation. In discussion with my supervisor, it was evaluated that further data collection would not bring significant contribution to the development of theory.

Due to the relatively small sample size and the personal nature of the project, *sample sourcing* was primarily done by word of mouth and personal recommendations.

Two participants were recommended by other participants and three participants were approached through their professional website which in all cases contained a personal statement which resonated with the aims of the project.

All prospective participants received an initial e-mail with a brief introduction and outline of the aims of the project and requirements for participation (appendices folder 1 > 1.4). Subsequently, a Skype conversation of around 15-30 minutes was arranged to allow the participant to ask questions, and for the researcher to ensure that the study parameters were met, and relevant factors were sufficiently represented. Once participation was mutually agreed, a participant information sheet was sent out via e-mail (LJMU e-mail address was used for all correspondence), and a date for the interview was arranged. Interviews were conducted face to face where possible. Skype video-conferencing software was used when geographical distance prevented travel*1.

1 The researcher has M.E. and obtained LJMU permission to conduct interviews via Skype where necessary.

Table 1: The participants (for an expanded overview see appendices folder 3 > 3.2)

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation (as defined by participants)
Rhiannon	Female	44	Singer-songwriter, healer, workshop leader, priestess of the Goddess.
Jane	Female	61	Therapist, healer, group facilitator.
Dan	Male	46	Adolescent counselor
Bert	Male	59	Transpersonal counselor & breathwork facilitator
Florence	Female	44	Woman's health therapist, Shiatsu practitioner, Doula, <i>Red Tent</i> facilitator.
Qori	Female	46	Healer, artist, administrator
Rose	Female	52	Intuitive energy healer.
Gilbert	Male	43	Shamanistic practitioner & homeopath
Sarah	Female	41	Intimacy coach
Sharia	Female	68	Full trance medium & spiritual counselor.
Maggie	Female	55	Ordained pioneer minister in Church of England
Heather	Female	54	Holistic healing facilitator
Pablo	Male	38	Graphic designer, musician & choir leader
Niamh	Female	66	Transpersonal psychotherapist
Anoush	Female	58	Holistic psychotherapist
Edward	Male	49	Film maker
Mary	Female	55	Artist, retreat facilitator, celebrant.
Theo	Male	34	Psychologist and scientific researcher
Diama	Female	46	Artist
Jedi	Male	50	Shiatsu practitioner & custodian of place of pilgrimage.

Methodology

A qualitative approach

In choosing a method, a researcher decides what mode and development of knowledge best represents or explores a topic of research. The method should be chosen in relation to the specific aims of the research question and adapting the topic of inquiry to suit the method is inappropriate (Romanyshyn, 2013). A quantitative approach pursues knowledge by identifying highest common denominators through which general rules and predictive formulas are developed. Such a method is valuable when the subject of inquiry lends itself to external measurement, linear thinking, and reliable reporting (Creswell, 2013). The human psyche, argue Anderson and Braud (2011), however relies on subjective meaning, evolving consciousness, and variable expressions and cannot be reduced to a predictive set of behaviours. A qualitative method is therefore better placed to represent the more subtle, inward, and unique aspects of human experience (Anderson & Braud, 2011, Anderson, 2015, Romanyshyn, 2013). Qualitative research methods rely on subjective human judgement and informed experience in relation to the topic. The focus is on developing themes or patterns from data rather than numerical measurements. The orientation is exploratory and collaborative, which is useful when a topic is relatively untouched by previous research and the relevant variables to examine are not yet known (Creswell, 2013). The nature of 'method' is understood to go beyond the use of a certain procedure, but rather reflects an overarching attitude of openness in approach to the work. The independent yet complementary domains of the psychic functions serve as different epistemological sensitivities, each providing a unique perspective (Romanyshyn, 2013). Data is collated and interpreted through the filter of personal experience, openness of mind, and the different qualities of knowing provided by the multiple psychic functions. These aspects synthesise in explication, where the creative, somatic, intuited, and rational perceptions come together to provide a rounded appreciation of the topic (Anderson & Braud, 2011).

For this project, a qualitative approach was therefore chosen to allow for the level of detail and innovation to exemplify the complexity of self-directed spirituality.

The transformational nature of transpersonal research

In addition to the expansion of knowledge, the aim of transpersonal research is to support individual and collective transformation, as a qualitative change in self-understanding and expanded world perspective. For a project to be transformational, an intimate immersion with the subject of inquiry is necessary. The qualitative researcher is therefore encouraged to choose a project which is of personal meaning and has autobiographical connection, and to engage with the subject whole-heartedly. Qualitative methods work with the notion of 'deep subjectivity', whereby the researchers' empathic relationship with the subject and the creative intuitive relationship between conscious and the unconscious processes enable additional layers of significance to be exposed which would otherwise remain hidden (Anderson & Braud 2011).

Romanyshyn (2013) writes that the deeper reason why the researcher is drawn to a subject of investigation is rooted in an unconscious relationship between the researcher and the topic, which surfaces in the process. The work demands something of the researcher: the 'soul of the work' wants to become known. The act of surrender into the soul of the inquiry represents the shift between the researcher's egoic intention for what s/he needs the work to be, and the intention that the work has for itself, which is in service to something larger. This makes the research vocational (Romanyshyn, 2013).

This doctoral study aims for a fair balance between personal transformation and increased academic understanding in service to the expansion of scientific theory (Braud & Anderson, 2011).

Heuristic inquiry

My choice of method for this research project is *heuristic inquiry* developed by Moustakas (1990; Sultan, 2019) combined with thematic analysis. The heuristic approach involves a thorough appreciation of the subject, immersive rigour, person-centred and participatory values, and creative expression, all of which resonate with the ethos of spiritual pathfinding. I consider this method to be compatible with the self-

focus of self-spirituality and therefore to provide congruency to the project. A further motivation for choosing a creative approach to research is a personal background in the arts. My first career path was as a theatre practitioner, both as a performer, and as a facilitator in community-arts settings. The Heuristic method suits my particular way of making sense of my experience: through creativity, intuitive knowing, entering resonance in the interpersonal field, and deep immersion. The accompanying thematic analysis answered to my need for rational order, being exact, specific, and meticulous. This combination represents to me the necessary balance between the organic unfolding of the feminine and the structured rigour of the masculine as a dialectic approach to inquiry.

Heuristic discovery is essentially a creative process resting on the power of revelation in tacit or subliminal knowing. Among the skills required are *indwelling* or turning inward, *focussing* or inner attention, and *self-dialogue*. Intuitive insight is encouraged as the bridge between the explicit and the implicit, which can lead the enquiry into original areas and ways of extracting meaning, as well as allowing one to sense the unity or wholeness of something from the understanding of the qualities in parts (Moustakas, 1990). Intuitive insight and meaning arises from an 'empathetic resonance' between the experience of the interviewee and that of the interviewer, co-creating an interpersonal ground where what needs to be known can emerge. The heuristic process involves six overlapping phases: *initial engagement*, *immersion*, *incubation*, *illumination*, *explication*, and *creative synthesis*, which reflect more general theories on the human creative process (Etherington, 2004).

Phase 1: *Initial Engagement* represents the identification of a passionate interest which holds personal and social meaning (Moustakas, 1990). The how's and why's of self-agency in spiritual expression is a subject close to my heart. Whilst my siblings left the Catholic church in adulthood to adopt a secular lifestyle, I felt a strong drive to find a deeper 'spiritual' meaning to my life from a young age. Why this might be has always fascinated me. A spiritual emergency twenty years ago set me on a challenging psycho-spiritual path without map or guide. In my social environment, I often met with misunderstanding and sometimes ridicule or rejection around my perspective and

choices. Although SBNR is now more accepted in the mainstream, I am often still reluctant to speak freely of what matters most to myself and likeminded others. I feel spiritual pathfinders, such as myself, would benefit from increased self-understanding and shared language to communicate effectively from an empowered place. The project represents a contribution to this process.

The second phase of *Immersion* involves the activation of both conscious and unconscious ways of knowing relating to the questions (Moustakas, 1990). Once my proposal was accepted, the project began in earnest by way of 'living the question' in ongoing research, participant recruitment, and nearly two years of interviewing and processing data. I settled into a rhythm of one interview, transcription, and the creation of a personal portrait per month. This enabled the required intensity of focus on each individual narrative and rounding off to portrait stage before moving on to the next interview.

At times I found myself overwhelmed and intimidated by the scope of the project, I lost the clarity of my motivation and purpose and felt adrift in a sea of information and perspectives. Braud and Anderson (1998) use the evocative term 'auspicious bewilderment' to describe the seemingly contradictory trickster-like confusion that can unsettle confidence and assumptions to lead us into new directions. The task and skill of the researcher is to stay with the process, explore the bewilderment and allow it to culminate into the critical mass of transformation. With this in mind, and the wisdom of hindsight, I recognise this period as a process of transition from my 'smaller' individual perspective, into surrender to the soul of the project.

Immersion was interwoven with the third heuristic phase of *Incubation*, described by Moustakas (1990) as a conscious retreat from the intense focussing to allow the tacit creative process in the unconscious to configure. This is a liminal, transitional space between identities from where new structures can emerge out of apparent chaos and uncertainty (Romanyshyn, 2013). Working with and through my layers of disorientation I kept a diary to jot down themes, thoughts, and insights with the intention to observe rather than interpret. This practice of intentional listening into

what the project was truly about and was asking of me, resulted in an increasingly open and creative relationship with the questions as the project progressed. The archetype of the *spiritual pathfinder* began to take shape for me to get to know, like a character in a story. My own developed framework provided an initial point of reference which necessitated a questioning of personal assumptions and generalisations. Theoretical research served to explore themes, and engagement with the participants' narratives demanded a widening of my perspective. Heuristic research involves going beyond the personal worldview of the researcher by meaningful dialogue with others to reveal the universal through the personal (Sultan, 2019). The inquiry increasingly ceased to be personal and started to assume its own identity: it became both interpersonal and transpersonal in nature.

Incrementally, the liminal quality of the inquiry lifted, and patterns started to emerge. Moustakas (1990) identifies this as the fourth heuristic stage of *Illumination* where a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, a modification of old understanding, or entirely new awareness regarding connections, themes, and qualities, breaks through into conscious awareness. Subsequently, a fuller examination and understanding is formed in the fifth heuristic stage of *Explication*. This phase was marked by several stages of thematic analysis. A *working transcript* was created from each interview, identifying the main themes that arose in the narrative. This became the basis for a personal portrait or *Individual Depiction* capturing the essence of the subjective narrative. Once the sampling was completed, the twenty individual depictions were combined into one *Composite Depiction* as a portrait of shared biographical and introspective qualities and core-themes. The process of explication further entailed a self-reflective analysis of awareness, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgements on part of the researcher, and a return to the question(s) for a more complete perspective (Moustakas, 1990).

The sixth and final stage in heuristic research is the *Creative Synthesis*. This combines all the research constituents: of depictions, scholarly research, the researcher's own process, tacit knowing and intuitive perceptions, to creatively integrate into a rounded picture and essence of the experience as a higher unified

structure (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). Art-based research (McNiff, 2008) validates creative expression as a complementary mode of inquiry alongside the traditional scientific analysis of a phenomenon. The making of art in response to a research question provides an expanded lens for further understanding which is non-verbal, spontaneous, and dynamic. This shift in methodology to include the wider spectrum of human senses can help transform our habitual ways of viewing the world and how meaning is derived (McNiff, 2008). As a symbolic expression of direct experience that goes beyond the rational mind, art communicates that which is 'beyond words' and difficult to verbalise or otherwise make sense of. Creative expression can therefore provide access to hitherto 'raw' and unresolved material in the psyche. It can facilitate subsequent integration with the wider spectrum of our beingness through allowing further potentials for knowing and meaning making to come to the fore. As such, creativity can be a vehicle for self-healing and self-transformation (Bella & Serlin, 2013).

The creative synthesis brings in a more intuition-led, and symbolic element to reflect the wholeness and universal quality of the project: the 'soul' of the work.

Validation

Transpersonal qualitative research considers other forms of value beyond the intellectual criteria, to become more inclusive and relevant to our understanding of human experience and to appreciate the transpersonal nature of consciousness (Anderson & Braud, 2011). The question of validation is one of meaning and depends on whether one's findings or conclusions are trustworthy and faithful to the inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Working with the principle of 'deep subjectivity', the evaluation process in heuristic inquiry is informed by personal experiences, thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs. By adopting a collaborative approach, where participants are co-researchers, a diversity of perspectives can be considered, evaluated, and explored in the spirit of open dialogue and shared learning. In resonance with the ethos of contemporary and participatory spirituality, heuristic inquiry does not seek to determine ultimate truth or reality. Rather, it aims to extract a shared meaning and essential nature of a specific phenomenon or human experience through the

exploration of multiple understandings (Sultan, 2019). Participants' construction of meaning is sought in the co-creative relationship rather than objective observation and, as such, allows for complexity as supposed to standardisation. Qualitative research seeks an expanded view of validity to include such 'sympathetic resonance' (Braud & Anderson, 1998).

In the dialogue between researcher, the research topic, and the research participant(s), new and creative insight can arise which allows for expanded multiple interpretations and unconventional expressions (Walach, 2015). "Any study is accurate only to its own intentions" write Anderson and Braud (2011, p. 157): incompleteness and imperfection are part of the inherent life of the work. Beyond the provision of information, validity is chiefly considered within the context of impact and transformational effect, by which is meant whether the researcher, the participants and ultimately the reader of the report, are in sympathetic resonance with the findings, and are in some ways changed in their perspective towards the subject. Considerations include whether the sample has been sufficiently inclusive, whether the questions have been comprehensively addressed, whether findings have been faithfully reported, and whether the report provides a reliable representation of the entire process.

The researcher, as the lens through which the work has come into being, is primarily responsible for attributing transformative value. They convey their analytical, somatic, intuitive, and creative process of increasingly informed relationship to the topic. Information is subjectively perceived, perspective is formed through personal referents, and transformation happens within the autonomy of one's personal process (Braud & Anderson, 2011). The question posed to participants: 'How do you discern what is true or authentic in your experience?' applies to the researcher and reader in turn. The emphasis is on how thoroughly, appropriately, and meaningfully the researcher's skills and approaches to knowing have been applied to best explore and represent the work. The reader is a critical receiver who co-creates value and meaning based on the integrity of this process.

The importance of personal relationship to the topic in heuristic research inevitably brings the activation of subjective unconscious processes, and a project can

easily become a kind of personal confession on the part of both participants and the researcher (Romanyshyn, 2013). The role of the researcher as arbiter of validity and meaning makes a continual revisiting of internal orientation crucial to the authenticity of the enquiry process (Smith, 2002). Bracketing, as “the process whereby the researcher draws awareness to presuppositions regarding the topic” (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 88) is vital to maintain the necessary openness to changing perspective, fluidity of approach, and leave space for ambiguity. By maintaining a disciplined exploration of inner frame of reference and outward projections, a level of objectivity in intersubjective inquiry is increased, and elements of self-importance are kept in check (Etherington, 2004). Consistent efforts were made to provide transparency at each stage of the research process: through clearly articulated and contextualised sampling, coherence between the research aims and questions, and data collection and analysis (Robinson, 2014). The relationship between personal perspective and analysis of results is further evaluated in the self-reflective segments of the report. It also brings into focus the importance of the supervisor role, as an additional eye to help identify presuppositions in the process and writing which are not based on the data.

Participant validation rests on the integrity with which the participants’ narratives and perspectives have been honoured and represented. Verification is enhanced by returning the work to the participants at several stages. All participants were given full access to their interview transcripts and personal depictions for approval. They were invited to comment or make amendments if they felt the conversation and/or portrait was inaccurate, misrepresented, or incomplete. Furthermore, participants were invited to comment on how the process had affected their relationship to the subject. All participants expressed that the interviewing process had been a positive experience for them. They enjoyed the dialogue and overall felt it helped them formulate their own thoughts on the subject. Some but not all further commented positively on their *individual depictions*, the *composite depiction*, and the *creative synthesis*. Some modifications to individual depictions were requested and implemented. No participants responded negatively to their involvement with the project.

In the interviews, participants are effectively self-assessing the validity of their self-process. Whilst this report does not set out to make direct value judgements on the achieved self-transformation as perceived by participants, it does hope to illustrate those experiences that participants claimed to be genuine in terms of genuine changing perspective and self-identity. Ultimate validation of such transformation lies with the participant, the researcher, and ultimately the reader of this report to whom the principle of 'sympathetic resonance' extends.

Individual Depictions.

Rhiannon - A healing journey from conditioning to intuition.

Rhiannon, aged 44, is a singer-songwriter, healer, workshop leader, and priestess in the Goddess tradition. She was raised in an atheist family who valued artistic and intellectual endeavours. In her early twenties, Rhiannon experienced what she describes as a sudden and extreme awakening to a subtle reality which constituted a spiritual emergency. This prompted a search for a new language and context to understand herself:

It felt like I was opening up to a world that I hadn't had any access to before or even any awareness of at all, because I actually was not interested at all in esoteric things, until basically something happened to me and I had to become interested...I had to understand what was happening to me...I wasn't seeking before that happened. [84-88].

...there was no spiritual language with which to understand ... what was happening to me...I couldn't understand intellectually...either merely in the context of psychotherapy... it was something else, and I realised that in order to understand that I had to make a journey away from where I'd come from [50-54].

As part of her process to manage her experience, Rhiannon felt that something fundamental to her true self had been shut down in childhood and this state of inner conflict was causing her to resist embodiment. She learned that at the root of her psychological and energetic instability was a sense of alienation from her intuitive and sexual nature:

...I think...something in me got very squashed...that part of me that had that wildness...that psychic priestess that was in touch with all those realms, that it was so not allowed...something so core to my being got shut down, got lost [286-290].

... being in a woman's body...feeling how much we've been shamed in our sexual natures, in our instinctive intuitive natures, how much of who are naturally has been made wrong [576-578]. ...you're in a state of constant conflict [583]. I was enjoying leaving my body and feeling a sense of connection to something else because in truth I was finding the everyday reality of my life very painful and very difficult. I didn't know how to cope [151-153].

Rhiannon had a breakdown and was sectioned. The psychotropic drug she was prescribed caused her to suffer terrifying psychosis. Realising that the psychiatric approach was not helping her, Rhiannon found a psychic healer to help her on an intensive process of coming into her body and off her medication:

...it was very extreme - I moved in with her, had healing every day...I threw all the drugs away. I came off everything. And I started to get better. ...I just knew that that is what I needed to do...that if I was going to make it, that was my next step [215-218].

...when you're very open psychically...I can be so overwhelmed sometimes by what I experience energetically that I need an outside compass at times. [390-392] ...you're just trying to stay steady, but you can't navigate...or get any understanding... I have always needed a teacher or someone who...can make some sense of what goes on when that gets a grip... [398-395].

Rhiannon describes the next phase of her healing journey involved resolving her co-dependent patterns and finding self-agency. After a period of psychotherapy, she met another pioneering healer in whom she found a role-model who embodied the qualities of radical self-authority, authenticity, and highly developed intuitive skills:

She was way out! ... I'd never met anybody so able to be themselves as this person... she stood there as herself in the face of a society that absolutely said 'no' to so much of who she was. [256-258].

...in order for me to be myself, I realised, I had to walk away from some paradigm of reality and that my family embodied...in order to be myself I risk being branded as almost heretic... [298-301]. ...it was a soul calling. ...what the culture sanctions as acceptable...yet feeling...you are radically different...in order to become yourself you're going to have to risk being ridiculed and outcast [306-310].

Rhiannon gradually learned to trust her own intuitive guidance and develop what she terms as her 'connection to Spirit'. She describes inner growth as recognising a self beyond her feelings, thoughts, and emotions, which profoundly transformed her sense of identity:

I went through a kind of rebirth...it was a transformation and I accepted myself as someone who was intuitive, psychically open, and I started to understand what that meant and how to be with that...to become comfortable in that new identity [341-344].

Rhiannon considers her own healing-journey as the growing embodiment of her authentic core-self, which in turn equips her to help others. She understands an

embodied spirituality as the practice of undoing distortive patterns and socio-cultural programming both within ourselves and in relationship to the outside world, which enables personal and collective transformation:

...when I don't feel that...my feelings, and my thoughts and my emotions are 'who I am' then it's much easier for me to expose...and enquire about those things... it does feel like a death almost - but it's not ... because you understand that you are not that, then something opens... And I feel that's where growth happens [548-552].

...to embody if possible, who I am beyond...all the patterns and imprints of the personality and ...I think increasingly it's more about expanding my awareness and understanding of what drives my behaviour and...to develop a really strong core which enables me to...stand steady in lots and lots of emotional and...energetic storms [6-9].

Rhiannon lives in a community of likeminded people. She works as a priestess, healer, and writer-performer of devotional music. She considers the importance of group-work to mirror her inner process:

I think that we're collectively trying to break out of these patterns that are like entities in as much as, we're driven by them [540-541]. ... I think that when you realise that these themes are not just personal then it is much easier...to explore them [546-547]. But somehow it has to happen within groups...it's very hard for that to happen on your own, because we need those reflections... [552-553].

Rhiannon understands the essence of New Age spirituality as the breaking down of patriarchal religious paradigm and cultural conditioning, whereby people are empowered to find their own pathways. The Goddess-focussed spirituality she aligns with, to her reflects a re-awakening of the divine feminine within the personal and collective psyche:

...patriarchy conditioning...is extremely destructive to how we feel about ourselves, to how we relate with each other...our communities, and...our environment [520-523]. ...we are in a time where there are...new understandings...people are finding new pathways. ...Women seem to be leading that...because...women are wanting to find something that is authentic to them - hence the rise of the Divine Feminine, the Goddess ...people needing archetypes that reflect them [590-595].

Rhiannon is critical of what she perceives as the individualism and lack of questioning in some New Age expressions. An authentic path requires self-examination and freedom from cultural conditioning:

...there are parts of the New Age...informed by the culture of individualism, where what's offered...is: 'Here is a prescription for you to get what you want'. ...you're not actually really examining that...to question this culture...to question the beliefs that I have... [626-630].

...for me a genuine spiritual path: you're actually questioning that conditioning...not just accepting that conditioning and then trying to apply... 'spiritual principles' to...achieve what you've been told you should be achieving [637-640] ...sometimes people when they begin on the New Age path they will start with all of that, and they'll keep failing ...And then will start questioning... [643-645].

Rhiannon feels her spirituality has brought stability, purpose, and meaning to her life. She believes in an energetic relationship between personal and collective patterns of consciousness. Therefore, that her inner work within a spiritually dedicated community has the potential to contribute to a wider collective awakening of consciousness:

... by looking within...perspective shifts inside, then that actually changes how we function on the outside [625-626].

I feel like I am part of a community...of people who are part of the new creation... we're exploring ways of living that are more loving to the planet... it's a conscious relating. ...we don't like the paradigm that exists...it's not working on so many levels, and we're trying to bring in something new...my purpose is to help a change... [512-516]. ...It feels like part of a collective purpose... [524-525]. ...they are collective patterns... [528].

I feel like a pioneer. ...I found community. I am living amongst people who are on similar journeys and...what they value is more inner growth than outer accumulation of things... [687-689] ...there's no way at this point in my life I could live in the mainstream, it doesn't resonate with me...it's not what I choose or where I want to be [692-694].

Jane - Living authentically in service to the sublime and the mundane.

Jane, 61, is a therapist, healer, and teacher who facilitates spiritual group-work. Born into the Judaic tradition, she felt herself on a different wavelength from her family from an early age. Yet she also feels a deep connection to the mystical aspects of her inherited tradition:

[I] did a lot of reviewing where I sat in terms of the religion and the spiritual... because I felt I was on such a different path to them [63-64]. ...clearing the ancestral pattern of what...I carry from the Jewish heritage. But my spirituality is

not Jewish...at the same time, I sometimes have echoes and beautiful senses of the Shekinah power... which is wonderful, because it then integrates and brings me back to the true root of who I am and allows me to embrace it all, because nothing is not valid... [69-73].

Jane experienced what she describes as a profound awakening at the age of 19. She considered this as an initiation to her unique path, for which she subsequently found frameworks to understand and integrate her experiences. She is both self-taught and trained in various forms of meditation, energy healing, transpersonal psychology, and shamanistic practices:

I had what I would call an initiation, this powerful life changing experience which I then *was*...completely on my own with for quite a long period... which I would call a...psychic, emotional, and mental, spiritual breakthrough... [130-133]. ...that ...was then put in the context of maps that helped me to understand what I'd experienced [152-153]....it was life changing and it definitely separated me from the tribe I had come from... and took me onto a completely new path, which was only my own path [179-180].

...it is really helpful to find a map, but at the same time the map isn't you...that's the thing I've learnt...doing lots of different groups, reaching out to many different teachers, most of whom teach me that I know more in myself than they can teach me, and that's been one of my biggest lessons [228-231]. ...All of religions have wisdom, but I can't ever hold myself in one and that involves never being able to follow a guru, a teacher or anything for that matter [26-28].

Jane's understanding of her spirituality is to live in embodied connection to both the human and transcendent aspects of her existence. She describes this as an earth-based spirituality which represents the reconnection to the inner feminine aspect, which involves living in accordance with the archetypal feminine qualities of responsiveness, flow, and sacred sexual energy. Jane's intention is to live consciously and authentically in service to both the sublime and the mundane, with love as her core principle:

It...means being true to myself...as much as I can...to be able to voice my truth ...to live my truth...in every moment...and that includes going into the supermarket and being mindful as well as...the deeper, wiser esoteric experiences I might have... All of those things intermingle into being who I am, but I know that I share, and I have to share - I can't feel isolated because I am connected. We're all connected [103-108].

...having been very much in denial about...my feminine self, and then very in tune with my feminine self...then bringing the two together. ...key for me...is ...recognising that the core of sexuality and spirituality being equal... [324-327].

Intuition, open-heartedness, and inner guidance are key-themes which steer the direction of Jane's life-path. She understands herself as a channel who is receptive to psychic insight and energetic fluctuation. Jane describes feeling in a state of continual flow with what arises and that she is always learning. Accordingly, she considers her role as a teacher is to help people open into their heart and find their own inner agency and truth:

...I learn what I teach...as a channel I'm finding myself teaching what I sometimes don't know consciously, but I know inside [468-470]. That's the surrender, because I have to be in the moment...to respond to what others need and what I have coming through me...to allow it... the more I become that vessel to the greater wisdom of what I- and those I am with- need, the more it flows, or I flow. And the more I can trust that with heart and with embodied flow, the more it works [515-518].

I'm going wherever I am called...I have such strong guidance and...strong inner knowing and intuition... I am flawed, I have a psychological pattern...of some self-sabotage, and I'm alert and aware of that... [619-622]. ...I'm not a fixed being because I am open...I have lived my life like that...I am learning and...finding that joy in life [629-631].

According to Jane, an embodied spirituality is intrinsically relational. The interpersonal connection arises from, what she terms, the 'soul' authenticity of the heart which is always sourced in love:

...for me, the path is about knowing myself and knowing my knowledge is unique to me. But it is really important to belong as well...tribes that I connect and share with...both the uniqueness of me and the fact that I share some of those parts of me with others are both really important. But...I can't be anything else but authentic [97-101]. ...I have my truth but it's not in isolation...I cannot live in isolation to others, and do not wish to. [123-124].

Since her awakening experience, Jane perceives herself as being in a state of surrender to a greater wisdom and subject to continual learning and growth. She therefore understands her identity as non-egoic and malleable rather than fixed. Jane feels her sense of self has strengthened the more she has opened to truly know herself in a deeper and more meaningful way, which she describes as being 'attuned to her radar of inner guidance':

I surrender to a greater wisdom than myself always... [489]. I know that I just have to go inward, or resonate, or hear, or be alert to [493-494]. ... it...comes back to intuition and knowing myself... And learning that I have a radar out more

than I used to have [496-497]. ...I have a much stronger sense of self now...but it is malleable, it's not fixed. Because if it was fixed, then that would be rigid, and that would be egotistical, and that just wouldn't sit with me.. [529-532].

Jane considers herself to be a maverick and a pioneer of the New Age movement and has closely witnessed its development over the past 45 years. She understands the spirit of *new age* as an individual and a collective transformation towards increasing harmony within self, others, and world. She describes this as a movement of continual growth, non-dogmatic perspectives, experimentation, the balancing of masculine and feminine aspects, and bringing spirituality into the human sphere:

...it means thinking outside of the box, not going for...the set religions...It means integrating particularly the masculine and the feminine aspects of my being and connecting to the world, and the earth...I can't ever be allowing... a priest or a rabbi or an imam dictate to me what practice I follow, because I follow my own... to me that is...significantly important, that there is no dogma attached [15-20].

...there's a lot going on that needs to change for us to feel back in harmony with ourselves...the world and...each other...I think as a collective we are doing that ...this movement...spiritually *is* connected to that bigger growth of: 'What are we doing in this world?'. ...it's not just about being spiritual because it's deeply about being human [285-289].

Jane considers new age spirituality to be moving beyond earlier naive and narcissistic tendencies towards gradual maturation. She largely attributes this trend to an increased understanding of the psychological aspect in the spiritual growth process. Overall, she recognises a growing momentum of new age ideas influencing the mainstream:

Now it's all opened up thankfully...people aren't saying: 'I know everything, and you can just do a journey and change your life'. There's a recognition of the psychological...a recognition of the spiritual growth path...of the paths of initiation or alchemy that Jung would call it. But then there wasn't. There was a lot of delusion in those who were teaching [256-260]. The language is changing, the numbers...are growing...there is a definite level of maturity, but definitely not to adulthood yet [386-387].

...I can see...the movement that I am a part of having more influence, and maybe effecting change in the world...for people to be better...psychological growth has...done that [411-414]. ... The language wasn't there, and slowly...the language is there...there's a momentum... [423].

Jane feels a responsibility to honour her awareness of the spiritual dimension and use it to do good. She recognises more people are becoming sensitive in the way that she is and that, together, they are meant to use their psychic gifts to bring in positive change:

...there's no distinction between spirit and matter for me...no distinction between psychic and normal...that's the way I live... [265-266]. ...Huge responsibility. An awareness that not everybody has...There are more and more of us... there's that sense of 'how do I use that gift?' 'What's the most important way to honour it'[341-343]? ...we have a duty to look after ourselves but also to recognise that it's an incredibly important skill. And that's what I'm...bringing in...not just me obviously [481-482].

Dan - An organically unfolding path.

Dan, aged 46, is a counselor working with adolescents. He was brought up in a moderately 'born again' Christian family. He remembers his younger self as 'curious': feeling that there was more to reality than what was presented, and an avid reader of books on Eastern and new age spirituality. Dan describes feeling a sense of 'mission': an intuitive drive to explore a wider reality and purpose:

I always used to read a lot when I was a teenager and got into meditation and always looking for that 'something else'...there was just something in me that had that... 'seeker' drive... I explored many different things [40-43]. ...I...felt it wasn't around me...so I had to go and look for it... [52-53] ...through reading those kinds of books that I realised there was this whole other way of seeing the world... [57-58]. ...an intuitive sense that there is more to find out...a sense of 'mission' [266]. ...a really strong sense of...I knew I had something to do... something to find, but...I'd forgotten what the actual mission was, so I had to find it... [271-273].

Dan sought to find what he describes as: the 'pieces of the jigsaw' of his own path. He learnt to practice Buddhist meditation and also explored the Western Mystery tradition with a charismatic esoteric teacher:

...I used to go to a Buddhist centre. Learnt meditation [60]. ...that was really an important part of the jigsaw, and I felt a real connection... when I came across the dharma...it was like a 'AHA' moment... [62-64] ...There was...a homecoming with that...but there was also a whole chunk that wasn't there, and so I had to continue that journey. ...that's where I connected with the Western Mystery Tradition, the more Gnostic type of thing [69-72]. ...that was another profound journey...another part of the jigsaw...things that I experienced...completely opened up my mind of other things happening in our reality... [76-78].

Dan felt the *Western Mystery* path eventually became restrictive. He needed to continue his explorations beyond the guru/student relationship to widen his understanding of what he calls 'the bigger picture':

There was a dynamic going on that I felt uncomfortable with. And I think that is normal with guru/teacher relationships, but...something of: 'I feel I am shutting some other parts of me down to be part of this'... [115-121]. ... for me, there was something about finding the bigger picture, to keep moving the view... [151-152]....I needed to make that change...different elements that I needed find... to...gather...bits of the puzzle before I found where I am now... [176-179].

After a period of travel to Nepal and India, Dan's spiritual focus turned to Tibetan Buddhism, which he felt represented an integration of his experiences so far. Dan however feels that without his previous explorations he may not have recognised what he was looking for. He feels the Tibetan tradition has the scope to take him further on his journey of discovery and he remains committed to this particular path:

...in terms of my path, I feel really at home or connected in with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and it almost feels like those other things that I experienced before all ...led up to that...Somehow it was all integrated within that tradition for me...different flavours that I didn't get when I first went to this Buddhist centre that I used to go to [87-91].

Dan feels a deep level of trust in his chosen tradition. He appreciates the access to skilled teachers and being part of a spiritual community. These provide him with reference points and support to make his spiritual path more tangible. He also feels his chosen tradition provides enough spaciousness and will not restrict his spiritual freedom:

...I found some kind of freedom, some kind of balance...within the tradition...there is that teacher student relationship but there's a wider picture, a wider vista if you like... [158-60] ...it's almost getting a taste...of that when you meet people that are so far on the path...that this is real...tangible, and there's a fruition there... [321-323].

And...other people on the path that you are walking alongside...to...reference or talk to [222-223]. I think it's...important... Because there might be times when you are ...going:' brilliant, I can carry on with this' and other times when you're completely lost...out there at the bottom, and it's actually having other people there inspiring you... [225-228].

Dan continues to feel intuitively guided in his choices, which he perceives are influenced by karmic past life connections. He considers his psycho-spiritual identity and path as a continuum spanning over multiple lifetimes:

... it's finding out more about yourself ... I really... believe and feel we do have these past lives and...past lives' influences... I have quite strong connections with

certain things... and...think 'oh okay this makes sense that that's how it would manifest... [81-86]. ...it's finding what works and... what you connect with and what inspires you...it's quite an intuitive thing... you can kind of try and work it all out in your head... [190-192]. But a lot of the time there is a gut feeling of 'okay this is right'... and then maybe your head can catch up with that [194-195].

For Dan, spirituality gives depth to his life. His sense of continuum further means that for him the path is organically unfolding, always in flux and unique to the individual:

...I've often thought what it would be like if I didn't have that in my life...- it feels so important...but also very integrated or embedded in just who I am...I don't know how it would be if I didn't have that...life would be so different and wouldn't have the depth I suppose... [8-11].

...it's that intuitive sense of 'I'm on the right path with that'...in terms of being within that framework, or that tradition, or that path, or that flow ... within that there's the personal journey...and personal discovery and growth and insight and that...is ongoing and continuing and there's always different stages to that [292-295]...it's always going to be an individual path that you have to walk yourself...or reach those kinds of insights or those experiences or those levels in its own way...in that sense they're always unique experiences... [329-332].

Dan considers it important for his path to be embodied, which he formulates as the integration of what he understands as his spiritual or 'true nature' and his psychological human self. He experiences the tangible results of his ongoing practice in his engagement with the world:

Working with other people and being able to sometimes stay calm in stressful, difficult situations. My practice has really helped with that kind of thing, to be able to think clearly...it's been beneficial and positive in that way [560-562].

...I've ...zoned out into all the spiritual stuff and lost touch with the material... but...as I've got older that seems much more integrated. ...it's about being grounded...of staying grounded and stay in the here and now as well as whatever is going on... [254-259].

Dan recognises that some commercialised aspects of New Age spirituality can be superficial in claiming that self-change can come easy and from an external source. He considers that to stay in experimentation hampers the ability to truly engage. Yet he also feels experimentation with various practices and traditions has to be respected as it can be necessary to the overall continuum of one's individual path:

I suppose there is so many different ways of manifesting spiritual paths, and it might be someone needs that freedom, to kind of pick and choose...because that's what they need to do in this life, or that time. But...there is dangers within

that... of getting caught up in not moving forward past a certain point or getting caught in ego likes and dislikes [395-399]. ...and it's...that clearing away of layers, rather than adding anything [484].

Dan acknowledges the opportunities provided by the access to spiritual exploration in current times. He welcomes the increased dialogue between faiths and traditions and further appreciates the inclusion of people's unique spiritualities outside traditions, so that people can be helped to find a context for the spiritual experiences they may have:

I wouldn't call myself 'new age'...but...like many people in this...time, I've explored lots of different things, and...had the freedom to do that.... I know it gets to criticizing some quarters and then in other ways...It's opened up a whole system of possibilities which is positive...But then it's navigating through all those things [404-408]. ...it's quite... important...to talk about this...level of experience...maybe more people need to be aware of these things happening... [575-9]. ...again, it's all awareness and becoming more familiar with all the different multifaceted manifestations of the way people express their spirituality... [589-590].

it's getting the balance...because a lot of these traditions have a history and a body of knowledge that is really important to support...but also... acknowledging that people have these experiences and go to these levels without any of that [607-610]. ... that have these spontaneous spiritual experiences, but they have no context for it [594-595].... the more dialogue or the more awareness the better yes definitely... [612].

Bert - Psycho-spiritual process and embodiment.

Bert, aged 59, is a transpersonal counselor and breathwork-facilitator. Born into a family with a theosophical connection, he inherited an openness to what he calls 'other beingness' and the freedom to explore spiritual ideas. Bert describes he perceived a heightened awareness of his own embodiment from an early age. He was also aware of a quality of disembodiment in his family due to trauma which included spousal abuse and post-war shellshock. These experiences informed his lifelong interest in psycho-spiritual process, embodiment, and the relationship between energy and matter:

...I had a strong embodied sense of energy. Sometimes I would see it but mostly I would feel it very strongly...from a very early age [123-124] ... my family was very disembodied. [153] ...my mother and my father, who...was shell-shocked, were all quite removed...in traumatic withdrawal...and...I had the capacity...if I

was present, bright and loving and paid attention to them, it would draw them out. So that had a very strong effect on my life [60-64].

I think that really got my interest in spiritual matters...also...in psychology... [66-67] by the time I was about fourteen I knew I wanted to do something to do with psychology [70-71] I knew that I had insight into things...an unusual level of insight... [73-74]

In mid-teens, Bert became an avid reader of books on spirituality and psychology. He studied macrobiotics, anthropology, Eastern cultures and energy work, and experimented with psychedelics. He found the teachings of Krishnamurti on deep inquiry and the Daoist notion of 'presence' profoundly influential:

That's what I wanted, I wanted someone who was saying: 'Use your powers of inquiry' and go deep ... and start to take it all apart. [105-106] ...through Krishnamurti, got this idea that we can inquire into anything, so I started really ...wanting to inquire into what is going on in this inner space... [175-176].

Bert cites two strong awakening experiences in his life which profoundly changed his sense of identity and affirmed his dedication to be in spiritual service. He describes receiving a strong vision of the relationship between spiritual energy and the physical dimension:

I knew at that point that my life was totally dedicated to this spiritual service... I was shown it actually in that moment [266-267] ...there was information in the sense that it was given, but it was a deep feeling of connectedness beyond space and time. I'd say I experienced my soul in its full magnitude ... that is quite different from everyday consciousness [269-271 & 273]. So that...did give me that strong sense of orientation, ...different from the orientation of the everyday mind on a quest to try and find stuff out [284-285].

...I had an hallucination of myself come to me, and said: 'Tell me who you are?' And I was looking in the eyes of myself, and then I saw the whole universe...the depths of soul, and the depths of being, and the non-being that is also the being [306-309]. And having taken my mind apart with the impossible question, it's like finding an answer which then undermines your identity in a really powerful way [313-314].

Bert subsequently immersed himself into his psychological process to integrate his experiences. He continues to use the discipline of deep questioning to find congruence, which, he understands, relies on a balanced functioning of all his senses: physical, intuitive, analytical, and emotional:

I then had to start doing all the deeper work to understand what it all really was about. ...the breathwork ...really connected me to my emotional process in a way that I hadn't been properly before. [287-289] ... And there's a strong spiritual component in that, because as you breathe, everything gets woken up. [292-293]

...it had to feel congruent...if...my understanding, and I could feel somewhere that it wouldn't be true...I would have to...look at 'why is it not true in that circumstance?' [200-202]. ...on a day-to-day level...I strongly rely on my physical senses...on my intuition and...what is my emotional response here. And what that is telling me about the world around me and other people [228-231].

Bert considers community and relationship to be an integral component of self-development and growth. He joined an alternative community to practice conscious connection to others. An experiment to open his then relationship into polyamory provided further challenges, which Bert considered as powerful opportunities for growth:

...it was like looking at 'what's this bringing up?' It was like getting married to ten other people. And then having all these different aspects of yourself and your past reflected to you simultaneously... [357-359]. ...a place to actually go and be in a family...being a conscious agent in terms of wanting to get to the truth of what was going on [370-371]. ...I do understand, and I still truly feel you can't possess a person – but you can try to wrap them up in your narratives, and...that's what I learnt [412-414]. ...coming back to this...sense of central core, it was like ripping all the places wide open...very growthful. [426-427].

Bert considers his 25-year marriage to his late wife as a profound part of his spiritual journey. He describes they both had strong experiences of receiving 'prophetic' guidance for them to build their own community. They felt guided to fulfil this vision over the years that followed, and to serve what they understood as their part in a greater process of collective transformation and healing:

... our lives were just a small part of this big big process [566]. ... going into the core-space...feeling that deep soul connectedness, and then words would come. And those words guided us...through the rest of our time before she died, and it was very profound and helpful. ...we found that way of connecting with guidance, which in terms of my development spiritually...was quite a divergence...finding a way to interpret the impulses from the soul level and bringing it into words... [573-579]. ...by following it we manifested what was supposed to happen [581].

Bert feels guided by a strong inner directive, informed by his awakening experiences, acquired skills, and dedication to inner process. He describes how his psycho-spiritual

work enables him to be authentically present beyond his personal narrative. He considers this to be his core-strength which gives him the resilience to undergo the challenges on his spiritual path:

...I am on a path which is growing wisdom and understanding, and...of...more than knowing...being able to empty my mind and become present . . . to bring presence to places that would otherwise be just unconscious patterns running [8-12]. ... When you're not believing in the narrative, you're being present to something far more than normal everyday consciousness allows [14-15]. I'm walking a path with intention, knowing that when intentions are really clearly set, things manifest [20-21].

...because I'd had those experiences of falling apart, plus quite strong sense of centeredness had built up...I knew that I could always come back... whatever is happening, I can feel the central core of my being. And in feeling that central core of my being, the emotional places...the instinctual imperatives...get to know that there is something here holding it. And that gives me a big capacity to go through big awakening experiences, and...the capacity to go through hell... [448-453].

Bert is aware of both negative and positive aspect of *New Age* spirituality. On the negative, he feels the skill of deep questioning is lacking, and the understanding of how we create our reality as too narrow and superficial, which he thinks has led to egotism and lack of responsibility. On the positive, he feels that new spiritual expressions which nurture a strong inner core through psycho-spiritual work are in a process of maturation. Their cultural impact is, in Bert's estimation, beginning to be felt, and the importance of the 'new' spiritual consciousness to stay present with current ecological and societal crises is increasingly recognised:

...spirituality is maturing, and that sense of the awareness of the non-dual is spreading out into Western culture. On the other hand, there's been a whole development ...along the lines of...you can create your own reality, you can have it all...and 'what you think manifests'Well...plenty of thoughts are creating your reality, but that's not actuality... [473-480] ... you have to look much deeper into what you are, what is this manifest space [521-522]?

The way that that is spreading out into institutions is...a real positive, but how to deeply self-question...how to apply critical thinking to oneself is not being taught...how not to be...spiritually lazy...and just say: 'Ahh it's all nonsense' ... Which, well when you have strong spiritual experiences you can't do that [532-536].

...our civilisation is...fracturing quite severely... the ecology of the planet is in massive crisis. And there's a lot of pressure upon human beings. And to be able

to be resilient through this process, a lot has to come together! And I do believe that this new spiritual consciousness has a role to play, and I see it as a sort of 'gathering some core and form', but that's still very much in process I'd say... [540-544].

Florence - A spiritual being having a human experience.

Florence, aged 44, works as a women's health therapist, shiatsu practitioner, doula, fertility massage practitioner, and *Red Tent* facilitator. She describes herself as a 'spiritual being having a human experience', an empath and healer:

...for me, we're all spiritual beings having a human experience... personally, how that manifests... that's been connecting with nature, dancing, praying, meditating, being in circle, being on vision-quest...it's important to me because life feels very hollow without it, it feels meaningless [4-9].

I've always been an empath...I would always hear voices, people talking to me... who are not here: dead people... it used to really frighten me as a child [342-344].

Although religion wasn't prominent at home, Florence attended a Christian school and identified as a Christian, which later she came to question. In her late teens she started to explore Paganism and Goddess spirituality:

...there was a tug for me wondering 'am I Christian or am I not?' And then I started finding out about paganism and it filled in a lot of the blanks for me [212-214]. ...it didn't make sense...and I couldn't make it work... ...finding out about Goddess spirituality...made so much more sense to me...more inclusive ...loving and... nurturing...then I started finding all these threads of history and...questioning the teachings of the bible as we have them now [223-228].

Florence suffered a serious accident aged 17 and had what she understood as a near-death experience during which she describes receiving a vision of the divine feminine. This confirmed for her the reality of what had previously been an esoteric concept, and gave her a sense of spiritual direction:

...I had a near death experience, and it turned a massive light on for me...and had this very sacred spiritual encounter with the sacred feminine. And it was real, and it wasn't just something I was reading about. It changed my nihilistic stance and beliefs in quite a lot of ways [172- 173]. ...It was just an esoteric concept for me but then I'd had, as far as I was concerned...physical interaction

with the divine feminine that could not be questioned in my mind...it was like...This is no longer something I have to have faith in, it's real! [235-238].

...my direct experience with the sacred or with spirit also then made me question all the tropes of paganism and the new age...and thinking...this is what I want...I don't want to go through another version of 'church'...another religion, I want...the more mystical path...to have a direct experience with spirit. And that's what I decided to open into... [248-254].

Florence has suffered from depression and chronic pain most of her life. Dissociation has been a major coping strategy. Embodiment, as the willingness and ability to stay in her body, is an ongoing challenge for her. A *kundalini* experience precipitated a spinal injury and an extensive period of incapacity. Florence understood this as a shamanic initiation into the underworld to find her power and define her spiritual path. The act of surrender to pain, and the expression of emotional states became a necessary psycho-spiritual practice:

...I've always felt at odds with my body...being in my body was difficult...I feel like a spirit who just wants to go home; the physical life is the thing that I find the hardest [165-167].

... it became a spiritual practice, to be able to deal with the constant pain...to find the moments of joy and ease within that [422-423] ... I see my back injury as a shamanic illness/initiation... [733-734]. The dark and difficult journey through the underworld coincided with the reawakening of my interest in shamanism...I feel that I was being given a choice - to embrace and step fully onto this path or to physically suffer. Once I had decided to embrace this journey of shamanic exploration, my experience of my back drama became easier to bear [737-741].

Florence describes her greatest challenge is to find her spiritual direction in the everyday world. Her NDE and experimentation with psychedelics gave her direct experiences of other realities, but she is realistic that these do not constitute the path itself:

...what I've learnt is that I'm very familiar with the roads of the underworld, but I'm not so familiar with coming up...again. ...where I find myself now, is how to come back out to the light, the everyday world, and I'm finding that challenging [447-450].

... It's [psychedelics] like the end destination, and then your spiritual practices are the ...hard work and dedication and...discipline, that take you to that place. ...those psychedelic experiences are great as snapshots, but that's not the path...you can't rely on NDE's or psychedelics (laughs)...to get to that place. Although I did for a while [258-263].

Florence is critical of what she perceives as hubris and denial of shadow in popular new age thinking. Particularly, she considers the popular notion we create our own reality to be very harmful as it generates what she calls 'new age guilt'. She found this reflected in the lack of empathy she herself received in relation to her health problems. Florence hopes that, as her own spirituality is maturing, the spirituality in the collective may be maturing also:

New age guilt...feels like a continuation of Catholicism...that we're being punished somehow: that if you are just spiritual enough... did your green juicing... meditated more, if you just – insert whatever new age practice...then you wouldn't be suffering. ...that we've created our own reality ...'it's your fault' [504-508] ...I had this coming in and it was pressing that trigger of ... 'on some level I don't want to be better' and ...'I'm stuck in this victim woundology' ...actually, sometimes we have to leave room for mystery; we don't know! [520-523].

But I think it is changing, or it could just be that I'm changing...spiritualities that call to me are ones with more authenticity. I'm not pulled towards that show of ego and the love and light brigade. Because... we also need to acknowledge the shadow side...because we do have these experiences that are challenging and if we just gloss over them and spiritually bypass them, it's actually quite damaging for the individual. ...I'd like to think that we've evolved a little bit... [537-544].

Florence considers her identity as fluid and evolving. On her continuing spiritual journey, she feels drawn to Norse shamanism, which for her provides a well-established roadmap to work safely with both spiritual energies and shadow. She is currently hoping to find a teacher who can help her authentically deepen her spiritual path:

...I don't want to be stuck in any one identity, I think that is where we start feeling old and rigid. ...I think identity is a constantly evolving process [70-71]. ...and it's a good thing to question oneself...as otherwise you just head off on the road of ego... and go 'well this is who I am' [682-683].

Authenticity is becoming more...important to me...getting older...I am less interested in the 'fluffy side' of spiritual practices. ...something that's been coming up for me...wanting to deepen more into the shamanic world, is finding ...an authentic teacher...who can show me what I need to learn and where I need to be next. ...particularly in our culture now there is such an explosion of things...weekend courses and all of that stuff. And I've done loads of those, and they're great on one level, but for me it's not enough. I am seeking a much deeper...more authentic connection; one that is based in truth, not...ego [275-282].

Florence's intention is to find greater tolerance, understanding and equality, both in her personal journey and the world. This for her is symbolised by the rebalancing of the sacred masculine and feminine to birth necessary change. She feels that collective healing must include the honouring of peoples' individual paths and hearing the voices of those who have been silenced and oppressed. Florence believes strongly in the interconnection between the personal and the collective, the worldly and the spiritual. She therefore argues we cannot separate ourselves from the world and must be proactive catalysts for positive change and social justice:

...what we are heading towards...collectively, is hopefully balance...between the sacred masculine and the sacred feminine. But where we are right now is in a quite turbulent state... But then as I know within my own body, to heal something you often have to break it [613-616]. ...hopefully that's where we are as a culture, is that we're now listening...that will lead to greater tolerance ... understanding and more equality, that's important to me [708-710].

I think more people are waking up to that, on a cultural, political level, and...I don't believe that you can separate politics from religion, or spirit from science, so if people are waking up to that on a human rights level, then...they are waking up on all levels of their being; spiritually as well [632-635]. You have to be part of the solution...towards harmony at some point... that's my mission, is to...drop pebbles of positivity and change wherever I go [662-665].

Qori - Sacred Feminine ministry.

Qori, aged 46, is a healer, artist, mother, and administrator. She was raised in a conventional *Church of England* environment where experiential spirituality was not encouraged. Qori feels that her innate sense of spiritual connection was shut down at a young age, although spontaneously re-emerged in her early teens. A series of sexual assaults in her late teens and early twenties shocked her into what she understands as a spiritual awakening, combined with a 'dark night of the soul' experience. This for her began a life-defining journey of self-discovery:

...not able to articulate the fullness of my being...that esoteric part of me would express itself through a deep joy, a playfulness...by the time I was about 8-9, that was closed down [145-148]. ...when I was 11, and I do remember ...it coming through me that... 'I can talk to God'...it had come through spontaneously and I [had] totally shut down for years [31-33].

... I was sexually assaulted by three different men. ...although I had years...of therapeutic and self-inquiry...it also opened me up entirely psychically ...I... became very aware of the psychic and spiritual dimension[s]...like I was shocked into awakening... [34-38]. ...there was a contraction because of trauma, it was actually a huge expansion into being aware that I was connected to other things [48-50]. Hearing voices, seeing people who had departed, seeing guides, seeing angels [107].

Qori experimented with different conventional and transpersonal psychological approaches to ground, understand, and find a language for her, what she describes as 'heightened mental capacity' and expanded sense of identity. She considers the development of her intuitive aspect as key to her own healing and for developing her capacity to be a healer for others. She subsequently trained in various spiritual development and healing modalities:

I nearly didn't come through it. Very...intense, very difficult... the language of therapy...was too limited for the experience I was having [40-41] ...it wouldn't feel there was a language to communicate or meet with me where I was at. ...putting me in a box of '...mental incapacity'. It wasn't...it was a mental heightening of capacity; an expanding of capacity, for which there wasn't at the time a language to describe [84-88].

...it did propel me into looking into many...different techniques including going to counseling and becoming very interested in people like Jung, where there is spiritual development [70-72]. ...I decided to learn for myself...healing, therapy... spiritual development courses...Kriya yoga...and...mindfulness breath techniques. Really working with what was going on in the body, which felt important [108-113].

Qori considers her spirituality to be her core essence. She works intuitively and organically in her healing work and feels herself to be in constant communication with inner guides:

...my spirituality is the core essence from which everything else derives...my personal feeling and experience is that we are human beings, but we also are spiritual beings coming here to have a human experience, and it over-lights everything that I do: ...being a mum or...working or gardening...interaction on every level, everything [3-7].

I get guided to do particular practices which are relevant to that particular moment... a sense of connectivity to the whole and inviting and invoking all those higher energies for the benefit of all. That is always part of it. The specifics are absolutely moment by moment, arising [11-16].

Qori perceives memories of previous lives and resonates strongly with the Gnostic notion that access to the divine is through an intrinsic inner divinity, which brings responsibility for one's own path. She understands her work in the context of *sacred feminine ministry*, which aims to restore equality and balance as opposed to patriarchal hierarchy:

...I definitely have very Gnostic past life memories, so therefore ...the access to the Divine is... through the divinity which is intrinsic to each person...that awareness that we ourselves are...responsible for the nurturing and the development of that. No one else is...going to do that for us [423-429].

...coming through the sacred feminine ministry; that anything based on hierarchy is spiritually suspect... there is no accident that I've embodied as a woman...I know I've been many times a man...it's about the marriage of those two parts to birth that light. ...honouring...and...recognition that both aspects:... both the sacred feminine and the sacred masculine, are equally needed for healing... [328-336].

Whilst Qori works with people from all walks of life and denominations, she feels a particular purpose to work with both victims and perpetrators of sexual assault and other 'shadow' behaviours. She describes how her work is guided by her faith in a common divine core in all beings. She feels this gives her the capacity for deep empathetic listening and to see beyond the behaviour:

I feel entirely clear that what happened to me...happened for a reason...because this is my life purpose. And there is this stubbornness; is no matter how dark the behaviours, the dark as in 'operating in and around an individual', I refuse to not see the light in them [176-179]. I have been given a very unusual opportunity to embody empathy...not just for victims but also for people who do these things [158-159].

...there is something about reaching to the core-essence of a person...I am always looking beyond the story, beyond the behaviours, to the essence [164-167]....I am looking for the fact that there is a common core which is divine in all beings [477-478].

For Qori, an authentic and embodied spirituality entails being fully engaged in the here and now, and finding congruency between physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. She recognises the danger of spiritual bypassing in current spiritual culture. Qori understands shadow work to involve self-honesty, a deep listening into 'self-shame', and surrender to imperfection, toward self-acceptance and healing:

...For me it's doing the nitty gritty work, here, embodied, fully engaged with the psycho-dynamic and bodily aspects of your being [118-120] ... working with what is at depth psychologically... spiritually...and bodily active. All those aspects...need to work together... [200-202].

...shadow work for me is absolutely essential, because the gold is in that! ...the spiritual bypassing...culturally...there is a lot of shame...around... 'I should be'...better than this, 'I should be' good, 'I should be' above my feelings [209-213]. ...a recognition that...we are learning, and we're work in progress. ...it is messy and sometimes the spiritual path really sucks! ...because you are put through it [357-361] ...in those moments of surrender in that true absolute 'this isn't what I signed up for!' That's when truth really...comes in [367-368].

Qori considers psychospiritual mentorship to young people to be of primary importance, particularly in relation to mental health issues. Within the context of a collective consciousness, she is hopeful that the effects of psychospiritual work and the reclaiming of spiritual authenticity are feeding through to future generations:

...access to that holistic spiritual aspect as well as the psycho-dynamic and physical aspects need to be raised...particularly for young people who are presenting with what may seem like mental health issues. We cannot fit that young person to the model; there has to be a sense of constant co-creation in terms of what is playing out...and...a willingness to engage with that as an ongoing dialogue... [536-542].

I feel that...the work that has been put into the collective field...to open up to...that collective sense of us as being part of a great whole...the ones that are born...that work is already available...because it's there in the field...and the ones that they give birth to that will be...easier again [265-271].

Qori sees herself as a spiritual activist and interfaith bridge builder and uses her skills of deep listening to enable conflict resolution within her community. She feels the development of humanity can be supported through conscious communities of 'resonant souls' who explore complexity and shadow together:

Do what it is that yours to do, and... grassroots: looking what's around you, at what you can do to use your voice to make sure that everybody is heard and respected. And that feels a really important part of the spiritual journey to me, otherwise it's not truthful or grounded in anything real [298-302].

...in a community of resonant souls, where we are all working and exploring these things [416-417] ...where we have the opportunity to safely explore that in our togetherness as well as in our aloneness. [420-421].

Qori perceives the current world situation as the necessary breaking down of outmoded structures. She feels guided to keep embodying her divine core and working in service of the light to bring healing to the whole through compassionate engagement:

... it feels like...a breakdown of systems that do not embrace and celebrate and honour the intrinsic specialness of every being [275-276]. ...a recognition that wherever there is inequality, injustice, lack of respect or appreciation, when people do not have the basics: water, housing, access to food...being able to be a child and be safe and unviolated...then it cannot work as a whole...the work is to bring it for everybody. Not the privileged few who might sit on a cloud just because they managed to access yoga or meditation! [286-290].

Rose - Embodied presence.

Rose, aged 52, is an intuitive energy healer and mother. Born into a Catholic family in a small mining community, she remembers feeling different and more sensitive than those around her, making her feel isolated and alone. She felt she could not relate to the Catholic faith and looks back on her childhood as spiritually 'disconnected', yet also feels that spiritual processes were active in the unconscious in that time:

I was born into a family where yes it was religious, and no, my sensitivities (laughs) definitely weren't supported. My parents are both Catholic [23-24]. I was brought up in that and it never resonated for me [26]. I certainly felt different...very alone and very sensitive...always being told that I was too sensitive....so much a fish out of water [34-36]. My sense for a long time was 'I was disconnected' ...but actually I have a deeper knowing that there was an awful lot going on in that time, I just wasn't conscious of it [42-43].

Rose cites two important catalysts for her psycho-spiritual development. Her first child was born with profound disabilities, which took Rose on what she describes as a process of opening into the heart and finding deeper meaning. Rose subsequently became severely ill with *chronic fatigue*. This instigated a profound journey of self-healing, which she experienced as a process of growing surrender: stripping away layers of disconnection, and finding reconnection to deeper levels of wholeness and being:

... she was and is probably my biggest teacher...she needs lifelong care, and...she began to open me up to what life is actually about...connection and the heart

and relationship, and deeper meanings that I hadn't been consciously connected to [56-59].

I really see that as the beginning of my healing...into wholeness... Because I was so unwell I had to strip away layer after layer, starting at the surface as physical things, and then mental and thought patterns...then looking at emotional [68-70]. I reconnected to places in me that I had lost. ...I feel it as a soul-disconnection...from that life force energy, and it has always been exceptionally hard for me to be on the planet...layers of unconscious resistance to that [78-81]. ...surrendering and beginning to open...in places that had been very shut down, and...to spirit...to consciousness...my whole experience of everything... completely changed [103-105].

Her continual practice of surrender and what she describes as 'the dying to egoic layers of identity', has profoundly transformed Rose's sense of self. She understands her identity as a process of being beyond personal identification and mind patterns, yet fully engaged and integrated with worldly life:

...it's ever ongoing. A complete dying again and again to that which is beyond identity, and a move from identifying with a personal being and personality ...circumstances and story...to something which is eternal and infinite and is inhabiting a form for a few moments [541-544]. ...it's the moving from the personal identification to the transpersonal or beyond personal...and then back into... okay I'm doing the dishes... [549-550 & 553].

I have five children and that's a soul choice rather than a personality choice... because I need to ground those energies...at a human level *and* go beyond it... evolve it. And it's both...not one or the other and I've gone too far one way or the other at different points. Yes, where there is any form of identification...it will be revealed, and it has to go...it's a gift for that to go [560-565].

Rose's healing journey deepened her sense of embodiment and opened her sensitivity to subtle energies. She describes her connection with other-dimensional beings and receiving channelled information to guide her. Her illness further taught her to live in the 'now' and develop her intuition. She went on to apply these skills in her healing work:

...my illness brought me into my body in a way that I wasn't before...like '...pay attention!' [234-5]. ...as I evolved and sensitivities...and awareness opened up ...often it comes through internally, visually ...just writing and channelling information [156-159]. ...it's so beyond the mental...it comes in divine timing and soul timing...that's my reference...it's truth that has come into me, through me, and it's not come from my mind [424-427].

Rose considers her trajectory as moving from an archetypally masculine, goal-driven, and transcendence-oriented path, toward an archetypally feminine approach focussed on intuition and embodiment. She understands her work to be about the balanced integration of both orientations:

...this interplay between the masculine and the feminine...the masculine is outcome...achievement oriented, action-based...drawn to the...non-dual way of presence. And then the feminine...aspects of surrender, and not knowing...intuition...feeling and grounding, and staying present to what's arising...for me there is always this flow between them [286-291]

Rose describes she increasingly experiences direct intuitive awareness of subtle energies rather than channelled information from other-dimensional sources. She attributes this to her increasing embodiment. Intuitive guidance manifests in her body as strong sensations providing tangible signals, which to Rose are unmistakable:

...I've worked a lot through the heart energy...but it's...dropped right down into my whole body and my belly would just give me a 'whoa...this is something that's called for'. ...that's always my guide. Even if something can come in at other levels, like vision, or sense or...intuitive hit, but if it's not really falling through then I know it's not in alignment. So, I really have no other choice than to move that way for me now [205-206]. ...A whoosh of sensation in my arms, legs, sometimes whole body...a wave of energy...goosebumps...sometimes the heart will start racing...quite strong sensations in the body to... 'wow, pay attention!' ...I always pay attention...that's infallible [249-252].

Rose continues to be open to learning from healers, teachers, and teachings. Yet ultimately she considers her spirituality as a pathless path, uniquely guided by her inner reference. She considers doubt and surrender are important to work with in order to learn about ego, authenticity, and the nature of trust:

...integrating all...experiences...formal study...modalities...and...integrating them and letting them fall away, and merely surrendering to a pathless path [11-13]. ...certainly, there was a lot of doubt all along the way...for a long time still had no reference point...yes, there is the inner reference...and I was not connected to that, or not trusting of that...that's been an ongoing development... [129-132].

... I've witnessed that impulse... 'How can I know, who can I turn to?' And of course, source...is a turning within and so ...Really it's within my own self [405-407]. ...my journey...continues to be...open to question and...doubt and yet, to find this balance of what feels truly authentic in this being in the moment; to trust that...there is no formula [494-496].

Rose's sense of authenticity and self-agency is grounded in radical trust and surrender into 'not knowing'. She formulates this as not grasping for information and proof, but rather, to be fully present and willingly surrender her consciousness to serve a larger energetic process:

...a more evolved approach is...to go in and...trust what shows up and not to give away our power or our sense of the source of wisdom to...this spirit, or this guide. ... where it is like 'up here on your own'...a deeper trust and...surrender and...refining...to dissolve into that and to trust it [173-177].... to trust the knowing that there is a vast amount occurring, but I don't have to see it, understand it at all... [184-186]. I trust that...if it's really true and...important and...calling for movement, it's not going to go away. I'll keep being called back to it and reminded of it [415-417].

In resonance with her own journey of embodiment, Rose understands her work in the world as grounding new energetic frequencies through her embodied presence, in service to greater balance and wholeness:

...I've come to understand that...everything is energy...and each of us has a unique make-up of energy and even just being somewhere...science has proven that changes things...sometimes...all that's asked for is to literally...be somewhere and that will change things [308-312].

There...comes a point where there is no choice. Any other choice, if I were to try and make it, would just create misery. And the foundation of walking this path is and always has to be service. It's not my job to measure or assess what I consider the impact of anything that I'm contributing to. To me it's simply to show up and do our best... for me it's the function of life is for us to be [521-528].

Rose feels much of *new age* spirituality can be ungrounded, imbalanced, and unauthentic. However, she is convinced that genuine change is taking place on subtle levels which will eventually become embodied and materialize, and spirituality is evolving and maturing:

I wouldn't generalise- but there's...a big theme amongst people connected to new age spirituality of being ungrounded; of a lack of authenticity [342-344]. I...feel that there's a 'post new-age' spirituality [336] ...people that are...evolved from that ...a readiness to be present to the depths and the darkness, and pain and magic and the unknown mystery... [352-357].

My feeling is that there is a lot of conscious work happening...that is having a profound impact... it doesn't translate into an immediate improvement in physical circumstance, but I am hopeful about what is happening in aspects of

the consciousness... [476-480].it is about balance; we're healing and reawakening *all* aspects of wholeness and transcendent *and* the embodied Do I feel it's happening? I'm certainly experiencing it [371-372].

Gilbert - Connecting to a deeper essence.

Gilbert, 43, is a shamanistic practitioner and homeopath. He describes his family-background as 'unquestioning' on spiritual matters, whilst he himself was always curious about the nature of reality. At the age of 14, Gilbert witnessed what he perceived to be a UFO. This event marked the first of several pivotal experiences in his life which challenged what he calls 'the bubble of mundane existence':

my dad...in his...'limited' perspective and questioning of his life... but...I have always been wanting to understand more about life and understand the make-up of reality... [35-38].

...a huge UFO hovered over us for about 10-15 seconds [44-45]. ...I remember ...afterwards feeling that 'holy crap, we're on a rock in space, floating'... [56-57]. I think you have moments in your life that you reflect back on and that live with you...where you really touch with something deeper than your average bubble experience... [59-62].

Gilbert experimented with recreational drugs in his teens to try to expand his awareness beyond everyday patterns of consciousness. Eventually however, this led to exhaustion and a hallucinatory near-death experience which caused an existential crisis. He realised he needed to connect to a deeper essence in life in order to heal:

...it was an important thing for me to experience because with ecstasy it really opens your heart...that teenage thing of breaking out of the patterns - and those patterns had been so wound tight... so it was quite a healthy thing actually...It was a tool [181-186]. ...that's why I got into drugs...It was a means to break open and expand myself [206].

...when I had my NDE, that was definitely something that I was looking to heal [243-244]. Just because it tore me right open, and it left me feeling like I was in hell...isolated in that thought pattern. And I think the only way you can really clear that is by connecting to a deeper essence in life [246-249].

Gilbert started practicing *Transcendental Meditation*, which helped him to recognise his mental-emotional patterns. The sense of separation he felt between every-day life and

his retreat experiences, prompted a search for a more embodied way of connecting in every-day life:

...as you are meditating...you have experiences of things coming up in your own self...in your life...from a different perspective...and that allows you to evolve mentally. So, I...started to become aware of that idea of...going through an experience within myself to grow and to get bigger [115-119]. ...as you grow into an individual, you mature and you're processing your...'bubble-dynamic' that you experienced when you were younger...breaking out of those old patterns and bringing in some kind of freshness... [124-125].

...going on retreats...it felt like there was a separation between going away and then coming back... [225-227]. ...I decided that actually, I don't think that going on retreats was the way to do it... it was almost like running away all the time [155-157]. ...I didn't want to be walking around three foot off the ground... in this kind of transcendent space. I wanted to be living in my life, in a real way [164-166].

During his thirties Gilbert travelled to India and subsequently to Peru where he had a series of powerful ayahuasca experiences. He felt that shamanism provided the integration he was looking for and decided to train in shamanistic practice. Following his shamanistic experiences abroad, Gilbert found a renewed connection to the sacred history of his native land:

...shamanic work...helped me to integrate the two... [229]. ...I had two or three really powerful healing experiences ...And I came away...thinking...I've finally come home!..., I finally feel like I'm fitting in...and I'm not...crazy... [297-300]! ...it was like, this can't be real, and then gradually you start realizing that it is. This spiritual reality is for real! And it still boggles my brain you know [316-318].

...you have an experience in that land and this land, and then you bring it back...you suddenly realise: '...I've got it all here as well, in my own land' [409-411].

For Gilbert, authentic engagement with any spiritual practice relies on self-referencing and purity of intention. This, he feels, goes beyond established tradition, back to the root meaning and purpose which keeps a spirituality alive:

...I find religions very interesting because I look to see: What *were* the deeper means to connecting...? ...by...self-referencing and connecting to that deep space in myself, I can then look at the religions and see what it is they were really saying...rather than...on a rational level, I can actually feel and *know* from my experience of that [487-492]. ...they are all talking about that deep space. And I think that we need to keep reinventing it...keeping it fresh [529-530].

...that's why shamanism really spoke to me, because it's about *me* connecting to my own divine nature and using that as a reference [538-539].

Gilbert's sense of identity has expanded through his practice of connecting to his inner source of knowing and being. He considers questioning and doubt as an important part of this process and finds a sense of freedom in surrendering to the mystery of a larger creative intelligence:

...you're learning to source from a different place, rather than...from the outside, from culture. ...you're learning to trust and connect to that inner source and rely on that...[132-134]. ...at some point there comes a transition whereby you don't have to swing from one to the other, it just becomes kind of normal to be in that space [139-141].

...if you can hold both, that for me is being whole... And sometimes life does take you away...and then you have those practices that you can bring yourself back to that sense of stillness...a sense of knowing that you're at home in yourself [608-611].

...there is some intelligence that is part of all that's creating everything. And I find that quite a relief actually; that I can just surrender to that and know that ...there is some dynamic that knows what's going on [635-637].

Gilbert experiences his spirituality as a connection to a deeper source of existence. He understands *embodiment* as a sense of 'wholeness of being, feeling and knowing'. His practice is to live the connection to a deeper creative space from his heart and to have clear intention for 'highest good', which to him is an act of service which affects the collective in a positive way:

...you connect to your heart, and it's not just about being in your head. It's about feeling it in your whole being and...knowing in every way. Again... religions...you can just be preaching it, or you can connect to that deep space...[497-500].

...all I can do is set an intention to do my very best, and that in my heart I'm working for the highest good of somebody, for the planet...and knowing I...mean that [521-523]....being of service...is a way of embodying...Because...you're making that connection with the here and that larger thing [623-624].

the more presence...a sense of awareness, that I can bring to my life as I walk through it, the more I think I can be of help to people or bring healing...and bringing things into synchronicity. ...that sense of freshness that you bring to your life by being that... awareness. I think...can clear...the energy just by walking that presence on the earth [386-392]. ...how I see shamanism is like a connecting to spirit in order to bring change into the physical reality that we're all familiar with [399-400].

The purpose of his shamanic work, according to Gilbert, is to help people to break through the limitations of their patterning and the materialistic mindset overall. He is sceptical about much of *new age* spirituality, but he does feel that people are becoming more aware of the urgency to find more wholeness within themselves and the world. As he puts it: Spirit wants to be seen and heard, and we cannot ultimately resist this without destroying ourselves and our planet:

...it's important for us to connect to...that deep spirit of life in order to live a life of wholeness...Because spirit *is* part of our lives, and if we don't incorporate it, we're not whole...And that's why there's so much shit in the world... [465-468].
...it's part of life...you can't push against that flow...And it will end up destroying the planet if we don't start embracing that aspect of ourselves. Because it is something that is needing to be seen, and we need to be whole [580-583].

I think we can each become...our own safe haven...that's...how it speaks to me. And I think as we're letting go of old patterns...the awareness raises as in people becoming more...aware. It's like boats going up in the water; if people are going to be weighted down with their old anchors... and they've got to be able to up anchor and go with it. And I think that's probably what's going on at the moment...people are having to let go and look... [694-699].

Sarah - Feeling it for yourself.

Sarah, 41, is an intimacy coach. Raised in an atheist, science- and art-oriented family, she enjoyed the freedom to be curious and explore. Sarah describes herself as an empath who from childhood felt a heightened sensory perception to an energetic dimension within nature and in people. As a child, she often sensed an incongruency with what people were saying and what she could perceive energetically. She found people confusing as a result:

...this paradox...of family that didn't really have a perception ...of a wider sense...and the energetic...world. And...me...talking to lots of invisible friends [14-16]. ...I was listening all the time with my body. I didn't think very much, and I found people confusing because they didn't say what they meant...their communication and how they felt was often not congruent. And I didn't realise that until I was older [19-24]. ...I was quite enquiring and almost psychotherapeutic in that sense. Because I could hear something going on underneath [56-57]. ...definitely an empath [59].

In her late teens, Sarah had a series of dreams which led her to a spiritual teacher. She went to live in a spiritual community in India where she was encouraged to seek direct experience of the teachings. She felt the practices reconnected her to the interior and enquiring nature of her childhood:

I...went to India and that...took me more into the place that I was as a child...listening with different ears to life again. I think in my teens I...got ...involved in everything on the outside. But I felt...I started going back in again [154-157].

I was very inquiring...teachers...if they say...you've got 7 chakras or something ...I'm going to meditate until I feel them. ...that's where the science comes in...I have to experience it, otherwise...it's just a concept, it's not real [49-52].

In her mid-twenties, Sarah began to experience non-dual states of consciousness and what she calls a “breaking down of her egoic structure”. She describes this as a heightened and embodied experience of awareness and a non-attachment to identity. She abandoned all religious instruction and practices in order to follow her inner directive and find her own path:

...I kept popping into a state of awareness that was beyond all the structure... something inside just showed me something 'beyond' ... And then...I just stopped doing the practices [166-171].

...willing to throw it all out and be completely wrong...Because that's inquiry! Why stay fixed on something...that's what happened with the moving out of that religious mould... we *have* the answers inside us. And they're not bound, I don't believe...by cultural instructions. We can just find it [377-382].

I've totally seen the concept...and the safety...organised religion can bring...I really get why people...want to be part of something. But to...really get the fruits...you have to step out of it, eventually [207-210]. ...it's like leaving your parents. You need to find your own identity [213].

Sarah describes how the falling away of her egoic and spiritual structures prompted a grieving process and began a challenging journey of integration and adjustment. Whilst staying true to the openness and fluidity of non-attachment, she had to rebuild a sense of personal identity and relationship with the outside world:

...a crisis...really strong kind of internal breaking, where the illusion of...having to pray a certain way or have a certain anything was broken...having to grieve that identity. Because...even though I was quite open ...there was still an identity, or a safety structure of...if I follow this then I'll be spiritual... [214-221].

...it was absolutely like learning to walk again ...in my view, our egoic structure has its place, I'm not talking about the emotional psychology; emotional ego - I'm talking about the ego that makes us be a separate self-identity. It was almost like rebuilding that...It was like being wiped clean [254-259].

Sarah describes having regular “out of body” experiences and accompanied by a resistance to return to her physical body. A turning point came to her as an intuitive insight that embodiment in human form is a matter of choice and purpose. With her propensity for scientific enquiry, Sarah began to develop the skill of linking the transcendent and immanent aspects of her being, and re-connect to her physicality:

... I used to *leave* my body... and...it was so painful being back in my body...so heavy. ...for quite some time I had this yearning to not be here [289-291]. ... I got very clear intuitive insight in my body that...I was given a choice...something went to me...'Right..., we either just take you out and you come back, but you did actually want to *do* something' [313-317]. So, I was like 'Okay I'll do whatever my tiny spark...of this amazing creation is...And I just stopped the yearning...It does come back, but I see it for what it is [324-326].

...If I've got to be here then I want to feel all that stuff...out of my body, *IN* my body...Because I will do things until I feel it ...in my self-created meditation practice, instead of going out of my body, I would stay *in* it and make it come to me [333-337]. It would like 'open up' in the core of my body... [340].

Sarah began to develop a method to help others to connect and become more embodied:

I just started to trust...what I felt would be a fundamental...practice to get people in their bodies...to teach them how to open up...that joining of feeling *into* their bodies, *starting* with the body as the doorway. Because my learning was always that I was trying to get *out* but actually, it's much quicker if you use the body as the doorway... [482-487].

... in the work that I do I...have my own integrity, my own ethos...and I offer that to people and they seem to trust it. Because I am mainly guiding them to find *theirs*, I'm not...saying 'follow me' ...I say...do these until you *feel* something... [643-646].

Sarah understands spiritual freedom as an openness and trust in the unknown, which is free-flowing and unattached to any outcome or structure. She takes a balanced approach, where both masculine and feminine principles support each other:

...spiritual freedom is a space where I feel like I trust the unknown...what I am trusting is that it's wild and rocky and unlinear and linear and makes sense and makes no sense; it's like having my mind wide, opens me up, the vulnerability of

that... [388-390]. I feel like I can play in what I do in the outside. I don't feel fixed in who [Sarah] is in some ways [606].

...from the concept of trust and intuition...more in the feminine principle.....my ethos ...is that it's a mixture of the two...the laser-like focus into my body is a very masculine focus of the mind and...the trust and the intuition and the curiosity is the [feminine] support of the masculine and vice versa. I don't really see masculine and feminine. You can't have one without the other [358-362]. I feel that the approach in myself is quite balanced [364].

Sarah considers the *new age* notion that we live in unique times to be a spiritualized cultural construct. She does however perceive that people have an innate spiritual understanding of interconnectedness and are searching for deeper nourishment beyond consumerism. Sarah considers embodiment pivotal to manifest interconnectedness and change, and the global communication is supporting this process:

...my perception is that people who live in the spiritual ideals or the new age are going into the construct of culture...it's so easy to be in that bubble...it feels bigger when you're in it, and all your friends are talking in the same way [511-513].

in my experience, there's a craving for something...consumerism...we're realising that it doesn't really nourish certain parts of us [544-547]. ...it's a choice...are we...as a global community, think of ways to do it together, or not be bothered? ...it's a big question and I think people are trying to find ways to do that. ...I think that taps into our innate spiritual understanding that we are all interconnected. I think *that's* the spiritual evolution; the global communication has opened up the dialogue inside...to ask ourselves those questions. Whether people are having tangible embodied experience of togetherness, is something else [556-562]. ...because that makes the difference of whether your *actions* then change [564].

By taking responsibility for her thoughts and actions, Sarah feels she can be a healthy cell within the greater whole, and thereby contribute to positive transformation in collective reality:

...where I'm coming from...even though we're tiny, we are all still all one cell of many ...cells of this planet [568-569] ... 'how do we then make a difference when ...we've all got small little lives...in comparison to everything. ...by being...the best that I can be... the centre of the ripple when you throw a stone...are you aware of the centre-point, and...aware of what your ripples are of everything you do and say [573-577]?

Sharia - A personalised and responsible spirituality.

Sharia, aged 68, is a trance medium and spiritual counselor. She describes her spirituality as passionate, devotional, and relational:

What is it about for me...I...have a naturally passionate relationship with God, Goddess, with the Divine...I've always had this kind of inner...'passion'...this natural desire to connect with the Divine...that's been there as long as I can remember, except in different expressions [7-12].

Sharia was educated at convent schools and describes herself as a sensitive child who was culturally and religiously programmed to be devotional to men and to a male Godhead. At 16, Sharia went traveling and found herself ill-prepared for the world outside. This challenged her religious ideas:

The only model I had was nuns bowing in reverence in churches...God was all about surrender...I was trained to surrender from a very early age to have all those Christian principles, to adore God...so that was a big programming [219-222]. ...a concept that a human being is 'less than' God [224-225].

...from an early age life was challenging... I found myself to be a very emotional being...growing up in a very religious environment and then literally breaking out at the age of 16 [16-20]. ...everything kind of exploded...: that God, that...High Church religion which had been brought up in...started dissolving, because the world wasn't like that! [22-24]

Sharia married young. Her husband's severe depression and subsequent suicide caused her to suffer a breakdown and a crisis of faith. In search for healing, she sought the help of a medium, which was a life-changing experience for her. Sharia joined the spiritualist association and immersed herself in channelled self-realisation teachings. She describes how she regained her faith by developing a personal relationship with the Divine:

...he'd set fire to himself. It was very shocking. And that began my spiritual life [105-106]. ...because at that point...'where was God?' ...I didn't have any way to meet the grief [108-109]. Those years, I can see, were the gradual demise of any structured beliefs [64].

... there was a spiritual recovery. The regaining of my faith and my relationship in a different way...with entering the spiritualist association and meeting people who had ...a more...pro-active and personal relationship with the Divine (162-166).

Sharia trained as medium and began to channel a spirit-guide who became her spiritual teacher:

...the assumption of God's presence was very strong...It was a divine transmission, it was coming from God, Christ...it was very obvious...that this being was a being of love, is a being from the highest thinking...the love that would come in...the perception and the vibration... [247-250].

Sharia and her partner lived in a commune. She left when this situation became unhealthy and found herself homeless with her children. Grieving the loss of her 'communal family', Sharia suffered another crisis of faith. She understood she needed to find her autonomy as a medium and renew her faith in her spirit guide on her own terms:

...for 17 years...We were all very passionate, very spiritual women, living with one man, and all our children [292-294]. ...it was complicated and...I had to analyse all that...come out of that and get healthy [275-276].

...when I left the family which I put all my energy into and all my faith and devotion...I was broken again. And I know that's a subtle thing that is necessary on one's spiritual path [362-364]....it was like...prove you exist and I'll have you back in because I'm not very impressed; my life isn't going very well and I'm...on my knees here. And I said: 'find me a house, now!' [378-380]. And literally within 3 days, I was in this little house of my own... [386-387]. 'Okay you're there!' And so that was very important because...I needed to understand my relationship on my own like that [389-390].

Because of her unique experience as a full trance medium, Sharia has a particular understanding of embodiment: as making her body available for other-dimensional beings to enter in order to bring through spiritual teachings:

...as a medium I do experience literally the whole body of a being coming in... they are ...made of light and...don't have a body...in order to link with my sensory system in my body, they're using an intermediary of a memory and their own sensual memory of 'body'. ...many beings come into me and they all feel different [487-492].

Sharia is a founder member of a Goddess temple and priestess community in her local town. She understands the emerging Goddess spirituality as a re-birthing of a heart-led spirituality, connected to the archetypal feminine qualities of love, surrender, creativity and devotion which cares for the earth and future generations:

...I received the calling from Goddess...she showed me visions...the beauty that was coming through... absolutely incredible ...drawing me into this perception of the real meaning of life... [335-337]....this was the first time that I just got it... that female spirituality is basically love-led, it's heart-led [351-352].

I personally...do not see that there is gender in divinity... but...under that banner of Goddess are all...that I believe in...love-orientated, compassion-orientated, care-orientated, *fiercely* feminine...: allowance...surrendering to expression...of emotion, drama, creativity...it's all about birth, creation; we are the beings birthing a new time...the birth from the womb of the universe of a new understanding: the Christ energy coming through the divine feminine ...humans coming back to realising the importance of caring for the earth, for their lives, for each generation [634-642].

Sharia personally does not relate to *new age* as a label, other than that it denotes a new approach in relation to what came before. She understands new spiritual expressions to be about a more personalised, autonomous, and responsible relationship with the Divine which can be conducted both within and outside traditions:

... the predominant conceptual difference between old age spirituality and new age is...there is an allowing for each individual to have a personal relationship with whatever aspect of the divine is authentic for them. ...you *could* be ex or present, practising even *any* faith. But ...within your faith, you are taking more independent, individual autonomy [420-425].

You have to be now *conscious* within your faith and you might even have to take your people to task! You've got to be present and...in ownership. ...that's one of the most important aspects... we're working on ourselves...responsible...present ...a...more personalised responsible spirituality [429-433].

Sharia adheres to the principle that any human structures rely on the consciousness operating within them and are therefore capable of change. She observes that any spiritual framework, old or new, can fall into dogmatism when the original aspirations of authenticity and self-responsibility are forgotten:

...there need to be forms that people can work within...buildings, thought-forms, religions, all these things are of human creation and they can *all* be converted from within, it's all about the people's consciousness inside them [619-622].

...I was part of the founder group who created the Goddess temple...and we so specifically said 'there are *no* dogmas!'...just your authentic relationship with the feminine divine. But I've watched over nearly 20 years...gradually people are becoming dogmatic! ...And I'm going 'wait a minute, don't you remember?' [456-460].

Sharia considers the most important issue in relation to world problems is the damage to the masculine inflicted by patriarchy. She feels that Goddess-focussed spirituality must become more inclusive, and explore how to help men heal and become empowered through reconnection to the sacred feminine:

...there's very few...men in their empowered masculinity coming forward into a Goddess focussed spirituality. And I think that the next phase is to listen...as to why that is...men who move towards inner work normally do so because there's an inner wounding that's very strong, that's...come to control their lives... they will come into a female led group because they need to be held in a breaking down of all that has trapped them...But it's rare, the men who can do that [648-655].

I do not see Goddess spirituality *yet* answering the most important problem, which is how did patriarchy wound the males [656-657]. So, that's...I feel, the next stage of evolution within Goddess spirituality; is to listen to the men [659-660].

Sharia feels the new paradigm is founded on communal living, sharing, and cooperation. She hopes to create a spiritual centre for people to come together for psycho-spiritual work, and find a sense of belonging in spiritual community:

...there is such a 'lostness' in...new age people who wandered off on their own and then got completely lost...and are incredibly hungry for just 'belonging'; being in some sort of group that thinks like them [559-561].

...Safe...free...witnessed...heard and still belonging...not dominated, not guru led, not overpowered, but...just 'a part of' and growing and invited to grow and...bring their wisdom... I can really feel [spirit guide] working with these very delicate places in people of 'help me but don't tell me what to do' [563-566].
...they are a new wave of consciousness...They're all aware but...'where do we go?' 'How can we?' [572-573].

Maggie - Subverting the triangle and co-creating the circle.

Maggie, aged 55, is an ordained pioneer minister in the Church of England. She was raised in a Roman Catholic environment. She identifies an early sense of relationship with the Gospel of Jesus, yet feeling unable to relate to church doctrine, particularly in relation to the position of women:

...even at a young age I could see...something was not right. That what we were being taught did not chime with the world, and...with myself, particularly in relation to the way women were supposed to behave. ...our Lady...was good and passive and well behaved...all the priests were male, and all the servants were women, etcetera [18-23].

...it was very passive...you went to church, you receive, that was it. There wasn't any room for '...what about?'... we need to...have a dialogue, to be able to agree and disagree [67-70].

Maggie left home and entered a search for her identity as a woman and for deeper meaning. She felt drawn to the egalitarian ethos and simplicity of the *Quakers*:

...I was estranged from my family. There was a lot of talk about God and love, but...my experiences of God had been painful, being outcast, and I was... discovering feminism...my identity as a woman...and beginning to find a voice [48-52].

There was no clergy, no priest, no icons, no singing, no talking [74]. ...in a Quaker meeting the power is held in a circular way. ...that was radical to me...I just embraced that way of meeting...I carry that with me now, ironically, as a priest, and...my work, which is about subverting the triangle and co-creating a circle of meeting... [83-87].

During the painful break-down of her first marriage, Maggie found herself compelled to read the bible and to renew and deepen her relationship with the Divine. Influenced by the religious template of her Catholic upbringing, she decided to explore becoming a nun:

I hadn't read a bible in decades, but I felt compelled [92]. I knew something was so wrong. And I found myself calling out in...the night...not to God the father...I cried out to Spirit to help me [99-100].

I...had this huge opening...when the big moment hits, is when we call on 'why are we here?' [103-106]. I felt...this calling to...deepen my exploration...my relationship with the Divine [108-109]. ...I thought, I'll be a nun...crazy! But not crazy, because there was a big yearning inside me. And...because of the culture I've been raised in, that was the map...we're all born with different maps [113-115].

Maggie met a nun who became her spiritual director and who introduced her to *creation centred theology*. Maggie felt this was the deeper Christian framework she had been searching for and which supported the empowerment of women. Her spiritual director advised her against becoming a nun, but rather, to be in the world. Exploring her faith in action, Maggie felt drawn to work with the marginalised in society:

...this extraordinary woman...the moment I met her it was like coming home ...she introduced me to...*creation centred theology*...it starts with the deepest ...primary revelation of God is not the word, it's creation! God speaks to us through the mountain, the sea, the sky [126-129]. ...somehow this deep connection...with Christ... found a language and...framework in creation theology, that just felt like coming home [131-134]. ...by then I also knew enough about the power of women, how we sister each other, and pave the way...and support each other...she really was that for me [154-156].

Maggie married an Anglican priest yet continued to identify as 'spiritual but not religious'. On a retreat to Iona, Maggie first witnessed a woman priest. She remembers her visceral reaction to this experience as a key moment in her spiritual life:

...my husband was going to be the religious one...I wanted to stay a civilian ...spiritual but not religious [203-205]. I have a great empathy and understanding of what can...be a derogatory term in church context; of the 'spiritual but not religious'...the church is not necessarily at all a spiritual place, and there is a difference [208-211]. I needed to comfortably sit on a fence for a long time ...staying safely away from patriarchy that manifested in religion [211-213].

...walking into the abbey and saw a woman priest! ...It felt...like I was having a panic attack...I couldn't take my eyes off her...I also...wanted to run... Seeing a woman there was the most natural and familiar sight, and I had never seen it before...it was very beautiful and very troubling [188-193]. I didn't know I really really wanted that [197].

Maggie suffered a heart attack, which she understood as a signal she was not living her inner calling. During a pagan spiritual retreat, she consulted a channelled spirit guide. Despite her scepticism, Maggie again felt a sense of belonging and continues to be part of a pagan spiritual circle of women. In his circle, Maggie describes having a profound encounter with Jesus, which deepened her understanding of the gospel as the embodiment of freedom:

...I encountered on a very profound level, Jesus...and...the awareness...that I was 'needed' to *be* love, *be* the hands and feet [253-255]. ...I connected to...the radical route of the gospel, that the holy spirit can't be housed or controlled, and...I was beginning to really *experience* it... was an embodiment of freedom [307-309].

Maggie joined a community project with women-clergy working with vulnerable people. This inspired her to consider the priesthood for herself. She realised becoming a vicar would provide a culturally accepted vehicle with which to realise her inner calling:

...I...let myself imagine what it would be if I was a priest, if I was ordained. And my body just went 'aaahhhh'; bliss. My head went nuts, but my body went aahh [285-287].

...on the face of it...Why on earth would an intelligent passionate woman want to throw her lot in with that? ...that's mad. ...witnessing these amazing women who mirrored to me a tradition that is much deeper and profound than the control that sits in the doctrine [295-298]. I really had to think...am I...being insane...asking for trouble...asking for a fight? ...I also was exploring whether to train to be a priestess in Avalon [323-325].

...interactions that have been brokered because I am known as this thing called 'Rev'. I can occupy a space that is safe enough for people to enter into. If I turned up as a priestess, I wouldn't have even got through the door [334-336].

Maggie has struggled to forge her own path within the institutional church. She is passionate about her vocation to do transformative work with people in crisis. This, she identifies, is a deeper tradition resting on the embodied relationship with spirit and the agency of 'God within':

...the first two years have been so tough, because I was put in a very narrow pigeon-hole role... it literally nearly killed me...I couldn't be authentic, I couldn't be me, I lost my voice...my breath...crushed by a power that was not about truth and life, but about power [364-367].

The deeper tradition...is 'God is with us'; *in you, in me*, in between us the holy spirit is here, and...there is a compulsion for justice...here for a purpose...to transform our world [379-381]. ...a tradition whereby...people want to encounter the other...away from where the power is... vulnerable, where you can't hide behind...the correct way...and innumerable laws...to be obeyed ...just encountering another human being in an empty space...it's...more of God and ...love...than getting caught in the laws and the tradition [408-415].

Maggie continues to actively question her chosen tradition and find her own pathway. She considers her embodied relationship to spirit allows her the freedom to surrender to something greater:

...I had to leave it...abandon it...critique it...in order to decide and find another doorway...to shed some of the really oppressive interpretations... ..if it's not about freedom, it's not about God. I had to find the freedom...and really hold fast my embodied relationship with spirit, to navigate what could be very tight little alleyways in the church [437-441]. ...I made a decision...to surrender my independence to become a part of something I knew was broken, in order to take part in something bigger [452-454].

Maggie's pagan women's circle remains an essential source of spiritual nourishment and development for her. Embodied spiritual relationship and practice is to Maggie fundamental to recognise our interdependence, and to find common ground between traditions and spiritual choices:

I have to reconnect with my sisters to be affirmed...in the Feminine Divine...and I look for...the incredibly strong feminine archetypal icons in my story that need unearthing ...I search for them...I revel in them, and in this dimension, in this body, that's why I need my women...to laugh...and swear...and shout with, in

order to turn up a fully honoured woman, not a...lady vicar, but as a woman [445-451].

...we are all equipped with a deep instinct for...what is life-affirming and life-giving and where wisdom resides. And if we just give up any notion of that it looks like this or that [230-232] ...meeting the different traditions and finding the huge common ground that we have... and it does require a letting go of identity sometimes... [479-482]. ...the future of our planet depends on the bridges; ...seeing we really *need* each other...I am more me because I've met you...*your* path teaches *me*, informs *me* [485-489].

Heather - Connecting to the flow of universal energy.

Heather, aged 54, is a mother and holistic healing facilitator. She was brought up in a conventional Church of England and science-oriented environment and describes herself as a sensitive child who felt she did not belong on this earth:

...I was sensitive in...that...I could feel emotions possibly more strongly than other people... [278-279]. ...through my early childhood and my teens, I did have strong feelings...a melancholy...a longing for...the source that I've come from which I wasn't remembering, that I was from somewhere else and...feeling homesick...not really belonging here....like...this isn't really home [305-311].

I started realising that there was something more, that I was missing... something that I hadn't quite accessed... [42-43]. ...something with more meaning [47]. ...wanting to move into something that had value [55].

After working in the corporate sector, Heather sought more meaningful work in teaching and counselling. Becoming a mother marked a big turning point for Heather. She describes she felt a strong past-life connection with her daughter which gave her existence a wider meaning:

...the feeling...when my daughter was born, was so strong...it kind of woke me up [91-92]. ...it took the meaning of 'why you're here' to a different level. Once that person who you've agreed to come for is there and you've got to be there, there's no other option, so...it made me look more deeply into what's going on here...'why have I come to this lifetime' [108-111]?

Heather trained in healing which, she describes, provided a tangible and embodied relationship with what she terms 'the energy of the cosmos or source energy':

With reconnection healing...there's a power beyond 'us here in this earth's life'... And I felt it, physically and tangibly and so that is undoubted...I know that there's

a force of...universal energy...because I can feel it [152-155].... it's a very ...soothing...flow of...calm energy. When I connect with that...it feels like everything on the outside falls into place [247-249].

Heather subsequently trained as a past-life regression practitioner. She is critical of those who commercialise healing techniques and promote their own prescriptive methods. Heather considers it important to experiment with techniques and to be responsive to what she calls the 'flow of universal energy'. She describes how she aligns with this flow in her healing work:

I am experimenting with doing it in different ways [455]. I don't think anyone can have a trademark on universal energy...that is just cosmic energy [458-459]. ...what we can do is...hold ourselves in the flow - as much for us as for other people...the body does heal when it's taken into a deeply relaxed state...my body vibrates bringing in high frequency light when I'm regressing somebody. So, we both access the frequencies together while we speak to *Source* through their body [465-470].

Heather describes how the outer 'God-figure' of her religious childhood has shifted to an inner awareness and relationship to a creative universal energy which she calls 'source'. She understands incarnation to be a temporary stay in a specific frequency:

...as a child I had a...picture of the bearded God on a cloud type thing, which...I had to...make myself erase...it does pop back, I think it's engrained when you've had that religious upbringing [214-217]. I know there isn't a kind of 'personable' one who is punishing or rewarding...I know it's just an energy that's creative...all loving and love is how everything works [218-220].

I definitely have an inner knowing that there's something that you can't access ...in this 3D reality... [303-304]. ...what I know about the higher energies, this is just a frequency which we're living in... And I find that quite difficult to understand as well...part of me knows it and part of me is very human and can't really understand it [323-326].

Intuition and gut-instinct play an important role in how Heather finds her direction in life. She feels she is in a co-creative relationship with universal energy which opens up possibilities when she consciously connects, relaxes, and sets a clear intention:

...with me it's ideas and a gut instinct; a pull to a thing, or a pull away... [178]. ...A knowing that the Universe will arrange it for me, if I take a step towards a thing that is right for me...finances and logistics will fall into place if I have taken the first step and committed towards something [200-203]. Yes, it does feel like a relationship [207]. ...when I take the time to stop and still myself and feel into

the energy...making a conscious effort to make contact...and interact with it...when I'm relaxed then the universe creates for me, with me [225-227].

Heather acknowledges the comfort that structured beliefs provide. She however knows that this is not her path and is meant find her own way, guided by what she understands as her transpersonal 'higher Self':

...it is harder to not be part of...a tradition [348]. I do feel adrift sometimes, and I don't always know where to go...But when I see people...going to their religious structured weekly things, I do notice how ridiculous it feels to me... [352-355]. But I can see that it's comforting and it would be nice to have that community. Because even in the...spiritual healing community, everyone's different...there aren't...any definite beliefs that are understood between everyone. Whereas in a church, everyone adheres to those beliefs [357-360].

...something that has been saying to me: 'You need to do it your own way'...and we'll show you and I suppose that's my higher self saying: 'Listen to me, I will show you, this is *your way*', not through those other ways [428-431].

Heather believes each individual has the task to awaken to their unique gifts and abilities, and everyone has their own way of interpreting reality. She considers the role of doubt is to make her question everything and encourage a deeper listening into her senses and intuition for affirmation:

...I'd like there to be no doubt...but actually...that's probably quite dangerous...even though it's hard, I think it's...good that I always feel that I don't know what I'm doing, because I'm always...checking and looking and wondering and feeling to see whether it's the right thing...So rather than thinking that I know how to do everything, which would be nice, I don't really think that's very beneficial...because you would just do things without really questioning anything [436-443].

Heather considers 'new age' as an umbrella term covering many different perspectives and changing over time. She also recognises her own changing perspective. Heather stresses the importance of self-development work for positive change. She is particularly passionate about how spiritual development informs how we treat our children. She perceives positive change in the younger generation in their ability to relate and resolve conflict:

...I relate to much of it, but I wouldn't say that I follow a particular person or...path... there's so much variety of beliefs in that umbrella term. And it has changed...because the things I thought were probably true 20 years ago, I've

become slightly disillusioned...and...from this perspective now...it...isn't for me. Or...it's no longer relevant to me [135-141].

...this spirituality where I'm at now, I think self-development has been very important ...People who act not very cooperatively...usually...haven't done the personal development work [549-553]. I think the young people now...are more aware than we were at that age, and they do seem better at expressing their feelings towards each other and how to sort out a conflict...So, I think gradually, through the way we're treating our children...that should come through now [566-569].

Heather considers spirituality is about being responsible and creating awareness in all areas of life. She perceives that more people are waking up to a wider meaning and reality beyond the physical and feels a responsibility to share her knowledge in this field. Heather is positive about the future and sees that people are working more cooperatively towards positive change as a community:

I think we are evolving so fast now that we need to say what we know, although it is difficult to mainstream people...And I still have that sense of inferiority that ...'who am I to say these things' [337-340].

...people waking up or becoming aware that this isn't just it...and there is a wider energy and meaning...I think that is reaching a critical mass now where that...will take over gradually from...traditional physical beliefs [478-481]. ...I think what's happening gradually...it will be more of a collective movement ...and it won't be 'alternative' [496-498]. ...people taking responsibility for managing themselves and the community [503]. Yes, it's a people driven movement, and it's all connecting now...it is really good...really positive [507-508].

...to me, spirituality is a whole way of life and it's about looking after our bodies and...the earth and...each other [525-527]. I've...a lot of frustrations with how things are, and I think in the future...people will be more aware in *all* the areas [539-540].

Pablo - From isolation to belonging.

Pablo, aged 38 is a graphic designer, musician and choir leader. He was raised within a Christian environment where felt he could not find spiritual connection. He

describes himself as sceptical from a young age, questioning why people believed what they believed:

I would ask people what their beliefs were...and...I couldn't really identify with anyone's answer. There was nothing really 'fitting'...during childhood [41-43]. ...I would...ask...why do you believe in this and what happens if this happens, and why do you believe that? ...they always had an answer! ...and I would ...question the validity of that... [45-48].

I always felt like I wanted to express more as a human being in life, and never really found a vocation that really supported that...I felt this deep 'there has got to be more to this life than what I'm perceiving here'... Particularly along the lines of human connection [300-303].

Pablo travelled to India and Thailand in his twenties where he explored Buddhism and studied yoga. The stark contrast between the spiritually engaged environments he encountered and his own religious upbringing, made him feel increasingly alienated from his native culture. Although he valued his time living in spiritual community, he began to feel this was too sheltered, and that a non-dual approach left him too detached and ungrounded:

...there came a point where I felt like '...everything I'm learning...is very beautiful and...philosophical, but I don't have any tools to then actually live my life with it. Because it's so removed from the majority of the world's living [79-81]. ...a sense of...those teachings are very lofty, and...the bliss of meditation ...another...realm which isn't really spiritual...like a self-directed avoidance, like the bliss of no responsibility...the various pitfalls [184-187].

...the thought of having to turn back to Europe ... filled me with anxiety [74-75]. It's not part of culture in the UK...a feeling of 'the more I learn the less I'd fit in' [86-87].

Pablo identifies a pivotal moment when a psycho-spiritual coach questioned him on his motives in relation to his spiritual 'lifestyle', which prompted him to re-evaluate his choices:

...a couple of people who were quite...blunt with me about what I was doing [76]. ...when someone sees through your personality and then shows that to you and says: 'Are you this or are you your personality?'... there is a discomfort associated with recognising what you're not [102-105]. ...on a mental level there was this...delusion of 'the path' and how it had become a lifestyle for me...that was a pivotal moment... [331-333].

Pablo travelled to Peru to explore indigenous spirituality and shamanistic practices. There he experienced the more tangible connection between spirituality and his earthly life that he'd been seeking:

...it seems like the East is about...'everything is one' through this...emptiness concept, whereas in the shaman world...'everything is one' through this hyper-connected framework, which includes birth, life, death, and animism all at once...it just felt more complete... [239-242].

...those...ceremonies connected me to a real mystery spot...where those four questions: Why are you here, where did you come from, what is your purpose and where are you going to after this life? - For split seconds...you can have a...mystical experience where all those...things aren't separate anymore...like the struggle of searching didn't have to go on [221-225]. That it's okay to be a part...of the world...to actively take part in your life, but from a...slightly non-attached perspective. To be present [246-247].

Pablo resonates with the indigenous oral tradition which encourage self-responsibility and questioning. He understands embodied spirituality as an opening of the heart and being fully engaged with earthly life. This understanding helped him to reconnect to his family and community:

I find it difficult to follow a guru...if the line that they represent is coming from...written down spirituality...Whereas I find less resistance with people who sit before a line of oral traditions, which ask you to ask yourself the questions... [109-133]. There seems to be a sense of responsibility in shamanistic practices. Whereas in Eastern practices it seems...you're not responsible...there is no volition, choice is an illusion [254-256].

... in a native tradition...there is celebration of the potential of life, there's song and prayer...remembering...of people in a tribe...what they stood for and...you can potentially carry on...therefore... family actually is one of the most spiritual things...in your life and...share with your peers in that spiritual family. And that... opens my heart ... [273-278]. Certainly, I discovered more gratitude...for what my family has done for me [288].

Pablo particularly values the rites of passage in indigenous spirituality, which he feels he missed in his own youth. In recognition of the patriarchal conditioning he inherited, his ongoing psycho-spiritual development involves re-evaluating his masculinity through the rebalancing of archetypal feminine and masculine aspects within:

...what appealed to me about...shamanic practices is...they were quite difficult and physically arduous and that...could be used as your own passage of rites. Not into manhood but into spiritual adulthood... [556-559].

...to find my spirituality is also to find...what it is to be masculine...in a culture ...England...doesn't really talk about the balance between masculine and feminine [576-578]. ..there's a...dependency on each other as our archetypes: As male and female in...native...spirituality, which is really appealing, which ...settles the anguish that I could feel toward the over-culture for being quite patriarchal ... also to discover myself in spirituality is to discover my more feminine side ...like compassion, service, selflessness;...qualities which you're not really asked to attain in a consumer culture which is competitive and about goals... [583-588].

Pablo returned to the UK to forge a relationship with his native land based on the indigenous principles he learnt on his travels. He is passionate about bringing diverse people together in circle to share sacred songs, stories, and prayer. He describes how the simplicity of this communal meeting opens the heart and spiritual connection:

...learning about...these practices, why are they done that way, and how can we use them in our own country to remember who we are... Without being too overtly Celtic or pagan...falling into those archetypes... I think the simpler the practice...the practical: 'Can I use this in my life...to engage with my community' [425-430]? ...the values that native American tribes have, but... in an English context, in an English landscape with its English plants...spirits that are native to this land. It's definitely alive, yes [474-476].

...when you...share really simple practices...things shift inside...because we're together and...recognizing each other through this process...it really feels shared on a down to earth level. ...being in a church and singing other people's hymns and Latin... you're all...facing the altar. Whereas in a more traditional society you're all in a circle...symbolic things like that make a big difference [417-424]. ...a sense that we are holding something...and passing it on in a non-written way ...none of us individually know it all and...we're all helping each other remember every bit of it that keeps it together [470-472].

Pablo understands his spiritual path as the embodiment of spirit through form based on the principles of love, relationship, and community. He feels a sense of continuum through the remembering of ancestral past and connection to spirit, with the purpose to protect life for future generations. He recognizes the challenge of navigating authentic spirituality within what he calls the 'over-culture':

The idea that you are here on borrowed time from your children...what you would like to see...unfold and how you relate to each other...within the context of a love-relationship feels very...complete as a life practice [364-368]. ...there's a lot of issues...in the world...if we can tackle them in our community...that's a good thing [440-441].

...work with prayer...is a daily practice and way of keeping in contact with that notion of 'I'm doing a practice' and it's real and it's ever-present...a relationship to that practice which feels heart-based...an ongoing relationship...like any other relationship in life...that needs care, it needs attention [368-372].

Pablo describes his spiritual journey as a process from isolation to belonging. He seeks to reconnect to the sense of 'child-like' wonder and immediacy in life. Pablo continues to value experimentation and feels he has gained focus through inner faith, guidance, and trust in the process of life:

I have faith that I'm guided... that outside of this physical form I am not alone ... a sense of guardianship... I trust more the process of life. It still has challenges ...but there's a lot more trust...because of that feeling of non-aloneness [503-506].

I was very experimental [344] ...it's still going on...But... in a...more narrow channel now. I'm not looking outside of that so much. I'm not as distracted as I used to be [346-348].

...that feeling that there is this magical embodiment of spirit through forms and... continuation...you're moving...with a purpose, rather than...this is just happening around me and I'm just mediating'. ...there's a longing in me for a sense of magic and wonder...I had as a boy...going out on my bike and experiencing nature and exploring, without any sort of guidance, just like 'oh, what's here?' [372-377].

Niamh - Connection to something bigger than myself.

Niamh, aged 66, is a process-oriented psychotherapist. She was brought up in a non-religious family in a small conservative community where religious conformity was the social norm. Niamh had the opportunity to encounter other cultures in her childhood, which profoundly changed her perspective on the world. As a result, the spiritual and social restrictions of her native country became more pronounced:

...all the palaver around religion, coming from Northern Ireland, I really didn't like [16]. ...when I was 9, I went to Nigeria... that gave me a feeling of: 'Oh, there's a huge world out there!' Where I live...and our customs...is just a...tiny blip in the whole thing... my spiritual development - at an early age I had a much bigger sense of that than...people around me because they hadn't had the opportunity [53-58]. ...when we came back I felt that I didn't fit ... [95]. ...coming back to that same small village, I felt...'there's a big part of me that I can't express here' [98-99].

Despite her discomfort with religion, Niamh felt a personal relationship to what she terms 'a concept of God' in childhood. She describes feeling a sense of expansion and connection to 'something bigger' which was especially present for her in nature:

I felt I had a personal relationship with God...that God was something I could talk to [22-24]. I...had this feeling of 'there was something much bigger than me'...I connected it...very much to nature...having experiences in the woods ...that just made me feel 'ah this is what it's all about'[71-74]. I certainly had a feeling of... something much bigger than me that somehow seemed similar [to]...my concept of God...and that of my experience in nature [90-91].

Niamh went to college and became involved in women's activism and explored various spiritual pathways. Although she felt interested, she could not find a sense of belonging with any particular spiritual pathway:

... what spirituality meant to me started to be crystallized...more in relation to all these different belief systems...I explored different things [191-193]. ...a part of me...wanted to find a community to belong to, or a direction, somebody - but not a follower...something repelled me [195-197]. ...a part of me *wanted* to find somebody I could really trust in terms of spiritual guidance, but I never found them...and that I struggled with... I wanted to belong somewhere. Because I felt that this was a theme for me...as a child that I didn't really belong...or there was something much bigger and I hadn't fit in... [200-205].

Echoing the theme from her childhood that in order to belong she would have to adapt and give up her right to question beliefs, Niamh consistently resisted conformity:

...with the process work community, I was doing the same thing...looking for somewhere to belong...in the end I realised I don't *want* to subsume my identity... [226-228]. I felt that I couldn't; that if I was questioning something about the way things were done in a particular set-up or community, and...I thought: 'You're just not thinking for yourself!' You're just giving me this rote answer and that makes me feel hmm, is this what is required? To give up your critical thinking in order to be part of this then, no [235-238].

Niamh experimented with LSD and psilocybin which, she describes, gave her a sense of interconnection within a fractal web of existence. She greatly values subsequent experiences with ayahuasca which, she explains, took her into a deep psychological and embodied process of confronting inner patterns that block interconnection to a larger reality:

...one of the important things I did was to take LSD. And I remember...seeing everything around me as a pattern, like a fractal thing...realising 'oh...I'm part of

this, it's all a pattern...all...interconnected'...a real sense of again being a part of something much larger... [141-147].

...it didn't feel like 'out', it felt like 'in';...it wasn't distinct from my self...a unified experience and...completely authentic and not something...made up or ...occurring only in my head...I could feel it through my whole body and it stayed with me... [156-159].

I have taken ayahuasca and I find that is really helpful...[it] brings up...all the neurotic ways of not being able to connect. ...*everything* comes up that is not... love...and that is really quite confronting, but I think it works [293-299]. ...it *can* be a short-cut to connection. And...a very stark reminder of what stands in the way... [306-307]. ...an extraordinary heart-opening...to...maintain contact with that... That's the work; and using the insight into the neuroses to keep going 'okay, this is how you know you stop yourself and this heart-opening is possible, and it is safe to do it' [312-315].

Niamh understands authentic and embodied spiritual experience as a feeling of heart connection and expansion. She explains the transformational potential of her psycho-spiritual work involves finding what is in the way of maintaining this connection, to support compassion toward ourselves and others in life:

...for me an authentic transformative experience is...the expansion of my heart [324-325]. It takes me into...compassion but also...acceptance of all the pain ...sorrow and...cruelty [328-329]. There is only love, is the deepest truth I have discovered on this journey [337]. ...the true test of spiritual development is your ability to live in the world and to bring it into all your interactions [365-366].

...the essence of what I do is to help people connect to their essence...their soul. ...experience...themselves of 'oh I'm much bigger than all this' and having recognised that bigness I can also afford the generosity of embracing that smaller part of me that is sometimes angry or jealous or gets sad. So that bigger sense of self, which...is always interconnected with the whole [261-266].

Niamh relies on her intuition, experienced as a tangible sense of alignment, expansion, and freedom in her body. She describes how doubt and stress can block her embodied connection to her deeper knowing:

sometimes I have a real...sense of interconnection and of being held in that web in a positive way....I can spend long periods not being able to get there and that usually turns up in my body as...kind of 'not aligned' [278-284].

I feel it in my body when something is really not right...it's an inner knowing ...'ah this is really no' [400-401]. ...spiritual freedom comes when I feel that sense of alignment and...a physical sense of...I feel comfortable. Because I feel expanded ...in myself. It's very different from that kind of...cramping movement physically ...mentally and emotionally [418-421].

Niamh describes her healing process from cancer as a deepening into life and growing trust in what she perceives as a 'guiding intelligence', expressed in intuitions, synchronicities, and symbolic dreams. Through this work, she understands her purpose as healing the balance between the masculine and feminine energies within and in the world:

...what unfolded...was to deepen my connection to life itself and my belief in a guiding 'intelligence' which manifests in all aspects of life and especially through the body [524-527]. ...the challenge of really trusting my own intuition and information as to what his melanoma was 'about'. And going against the advice of the medical profession and others [532-533]. I feel very grateful to have experienced amazing synchronicities which confirmed my choices and my intuition. And felt guided on the way [543-544].

In my work with...dreams, I have discovered that an important reason I am here on the planet at this time is to bring a balance in masculine and feminine energies, both in myself and in the world... I believe we are faced with the urgent necessity to bring the Sacred Masculine into harmony with the Deep Feminine order to restore the relationship with Gaia the Mother who sustains us all [551-555].

Niamh considers that for spiritual development to be authentic, it must be embodied. and expressed in increased awareness of one's physical reality and in the maturation of relationship with others and the planet. She identifies 'spiritual bypassing' as endemic. Therefore, embodied psychological work is for Niamh vital to enable self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and healthy self-agency:

...spirituality has to be grounded in the body. ...the whole thing is a continuum; spirituality doesn't exist without your body! So, integration of that into your physical being...is really vital. ...I think that also if you treat your body with disdain, you are going to treat other people and the planet with disdain too [467-472].

...seeing more and more of these so-called spiritual leaders being revealed to have committed...egregious acts and being abusive...these people are an example of what happens if you do that...a reminder to stop using that information to avoid your psychological development [451-456].

Niamh considers her psycho-spiritual path to be a process of increasing self-integration. She considers life-challenges are about 'growing down' into the increasing manifestation of her essence already present in childhood:

...you have to...go through...the...maturation of having to deal with the vicissitudes in daily life and having a body in order to grow into that [494-495].
 ...I've made some detours...but the essence hasn't really changed. ...as a child...I had that sense of interconnection, but... it's been a...question of integrating it into all aspects of my life...there is not much that I really regret...it's actually a delight to look back and see that younger self and think 'oh I can really feel that in me still!' That's who I am [480-488]!

Anoush - Living from a soul-level.

Anoush, aged 58, is a holistic psychotherapist. Born into a migrant family, she experiences displacement as an inherited wounding which strongly influenced her search for spiritual belonging. She describes feeling connected to a spiritual realm and being protected by a guardian angel in childhood. Anoush attended Catholic church and loved its ritual and ceremony, whilst being aware of the church's negative attitude towards women:

...I had a very strong sense of a guardian angel...I really needed...to have that connection, with everything that was going on in my family [7-9]. ...two generations of displacement...a big theme...growing up... I think Spirit has helped me find that sense of belonging in the greater picture...in a more transpersonal unity of consciousness...to flip that question of not 'where do I belong', but that 'I belong everywhere' [15-19].

I loved the ritual...the Catholic church had... and...I love creating ritual and ceremony with the Divine in my life [54-57]. ... the other side of the church is that it's punitive...judgemental...incredibly sexist and misogynistic...from a very young age...I sensed that...I just had my own discernment... [61-64].

Anoush defines her spirituality as a mystical sensibility to a unified transpersonal field of consciousness. Her psycho-spiritual practices are about making space for silence, conscious listening, and retrieving what she calls 'lost soul-aspects'. This, she describes, enables a receptivity and re-alignment to 'live from a soul-level' which guides her path in the world:

I think Soul-level is...finding nuance and...the numinous in our everyday living...to see the five-dimensionality of life...and allowing ourselves to be open and receptive to other dimensions of consciousness...our essence...we bring into our everyday life, that doesn't just look at face-value, but...at the dimensionality of...that we're experiencing [135-140].

...cultivating inner quiet and listening is a sacred practice. ...I *need* to be in nature...back to something primal...where I come back to myself; I realign [450-454]. ...they talk...in shamanism about...retrieving the soul and...I...relate to that. I've had to go through...soul-retrievals...it's been therapy...rebirthing, breath-work; I've just plunged myself into lots of different experiences in my life. When they felt 'yes' to me and...I've always had that...inner knowing that feels like the next thing to do [562-568].

Anoush attributes her intuition to the archetypal feminine aspect of consciousness, which requires trust and conscious listening to subtle signals in her heart and body. She has learnt to trust her intuition and sensory signals to find her authentic guidance in life:

...intuition is definitely part of this feminine consciousness...the wisdom and guidance that comes...through our heart or...our gut or through an energetic auric perception...that you hone into and you trust by following the...signals.... And it really strengthens through consciously listening...allowing yourself to dwell in that place of the numinous and trust it and then respond to it from that place of trust [144-150].

...there is a spiritual practice of being in uncertainty that is very...discombobulating. But if you can be patient...and be with it, something does produce itself. ...I use my body as a reference point; am I just doing this because it's something to do...or is this coming really from a deep authenticity; a deep 'yes' in my body? And I feel I'm just following that now [444-449].

Anoush considers reconnection to the 'feminine' consciousness of the body as central to her psychotherapy work. She feels that aspects of new age spirituality focus too much on transcendence and therefore lack this embodied grounding:

...we need to have an embodied spirituality. I think that the new age particularly is really messing with people's heads [179-180]. ...we're so in our higher chakras...that we've lost...what I see as feminine consciousness, which is... connected to the earth ...it's our base and we need that groundedness to really be safe...so that when there is something that doesn't feel good, we sense it in our body and we listen...and we respond to it and we don't just kind of float up [183-188].

Anoush travelled to Peru to work with female shamans and learn about plant medicine. She observes that, by sharing their teachings, indigenous cultures are reclaiming their power. Anoush credits her psychotherapeutic experience with dreams and symbology for helping her interpret the visionary information she received in ayahuasca ceremonies:

...we went into the jungle...and we prayed, and...it was about teaching us Westerners around valuing the earth again and our relationship to plant-life that also has a consciousness; that we are all consciousness [291-293].

...cultural appropriation has been going on for centuries [271] ... I think this is part of co-creation...there's going to be people who are going to be exploitative, but I think ...indigenous people are picking up their power by teaching [279-281].

...having a background in...*Psychosynthesis* and...*Process-Oriented* psychology...I did a lot of study with symbols and dreams and developing an awareness through the model of psychotherapy...creating a meta-position where you're also witnessing what you're experiencing and developing a vocabulary around imagery and symbolism from a psychological but also a Soul-level [124-130].

Anoush understands spiritual freedom as a state of surrender and responsiveness to the cosmos. She relates to various archetypes such as that of the 'mystic' and the 'wounded healer'. Anoush describes her path as sometimes lonely and difficult, yet she always feels interconnected to the transpersonal realm:

...it's a path...of letting go and allowing the flow to happen and to celebrate 'what is' in the moment [338-340]. I define spiritual freedom as...we're part of this incredible cosmos and if something calls you... the universe is flirting with you...and to be open...and to respond to the flirt [345-347]. Yes, it's about relating to everything, that everyone and everything is with you and relating to you [351].

...the mystic is often a loner...like the spiritual warrior, they often have their own path that has challenges...had some wounding...they've often had a 'dark night of the soul' and...they've come out the other end transformed, there's been an alchemical process. And I think that has been my process [316-320].

Anoush believes that the principle of interconnectedness necessitates a radical responsibility to work on oneself and our conscious engagement in the world. She considers that life-challenges are an opportunity to find deeper inner and outer relationship toward personal and collective transformation:

...knowing that you're connected to everything...there is a radical responsibility that comes with that... and that yes there is a spirituality, but it's not going to change by you sitting in a room with your legs crossed! ...part of it is how you live that out in the world and take responsibility by...your action [384-388].

...the role of challenge is an opportunity to get to know yourself and to go ...deeper in your own consciousness...not just see yourself as a victim...what I'm noticing in myself is that I'm getting better at just accepting it for what it is [467-470]. If you don't address it from that perspective of the transpersonal and

engage with it, it'll just be another challenge and you'll just say 'well I've had a crappy life' [482-484].

Anoush describes her psycho-spiritual process as a threefold combination of surrender to 'what is'; therapeutic healing work; and reconnecting to what she calls her 'inextinguishable essence'. This helps her disidentify from being a victim into a place of empowerment:

...what changed is I don't identify with the victim story anymore [527]. I feel like the work that I have done...helped me...to drop that story, and to really know that I have choice in how I feel [531-532]. ...my journey has certainly been ...about really coming back to my essence, having lost connection to it...through the tumble-drying of the world, and then finding it again. But it was always there, and I had to...connect to it in a different way [557-560].

Anoush understands the current paradigm as being on a 'masculine' oriented frequency. The new paradigm is about people exploring new pathways and a widened perspective:

...I feel that we're...on these different frequencies; that...gross frequency of the mainstream that's still in a very structured and...very masculine oriented consciousness. ...and there's another kind...the explorers [235-239].

...people *are* seeking something greater...if we only look at the world on its face value, in its one-dimensionality...consensus reality, then there's a lot to be depressed about... I think we need a bigger...collective perspective that ...actually gives hope [209-214]. ...that's where the mystical comes in...it is part of the unified consciousness that is not made manifest yet [171-172].

Anoush feels spirituality reflects a search for an expanded perspective and a move towards a feminine consciousness which draws on indigenous wisdom. She feels the next step in spirituality is to bring the masculine and feminine consciousness into balance:

...there is a growing appreciation...in feminine consciousness that's around the earth...around co-creation and...having a relationship to the earth [239-241]. ...to bring in male and female consciousness together...I think that's the next level [247-248].

...the word 'spirituality' is really expanding...that everything is spirituality, or...has a sacred element to it... it's a sense of presence that you bring...that makes it a spirituality... I imagine that our ancestors...had that...consciousness ...more deeply...we're both drawing on that but also creating new ones [573-579].

Edward - Finding a more authentic way of being.

Edward, aged 49, is a filmmaker. Raised in a Catholic family and taught in a Protestant boarding school, he remembers himself as a curious child with an innate sense of religiosity and sensitivity to invisible realms. From an early age he recognised an incongruity between the ideal represented by religious role-models and of that of actual behaviour. Realising that religious representatives were unable to answer his deeper questions, he resolved to find his own answers. He started practicing meditation in his early teens in search of his inner nature:

I've always had that...awareness that there were other energies...guardian angels...having invisible friends; they were real to me [92-94]. ...awarenesses [sic] of not being alone...experiences...were they dreams...not dreams...they were very real...these things were a golden thread in my life [96-98].

...I would meditate in my dormitory...without anyone knowing [155]. ...get up in the ...the night and...read *Revelations*...I was a weird kid basically [159-162].

...'questioning'...the material structure of a religious organisation as opposed to the internal experience...I started to question everything. And that has been my liberation ... [49-52]. I realised that the priests weren't...the good representatives...they should be...I started to see their realities [132-133]. ...I feel there is much more to this, but no-one is giving me any satisfactory answers, so I started exploring [138-139]. I was asking questions and the people who supposedly should know...you could tell they couldn't answer... [172-174]!

His search for answers led Edward to books on *Black Magic* and experimentation with satanic ritual. He realised he had opened his psyche to something beyond his control which negatively affected him physically and emotionally:

...I ended up entering into areas that are 'unhelpful' to the psyche...to be open to these things...had many repercussions; physically, psychologically [52-57]. ...I came across a book... connected to Satanism...whoa...what's that about [175-179]? I started to...piece together rituals... almost like being given to me, and I was getting terrified...because the potential of what they could do...it came to a point where I didn't know what to do...where to put it in myself...it was terrible! ...I didn't want the ability...to hurt someone...it was just awful, but I had opened that part of my psyche... [203-208]. And my life just came off the rails... [219].

Edward became an avid reader of esoteric literature, which spoke of a 'revealed' knowledge underlying manifest traditions. These materials helped him to discern

between paths. The healthy path, he learnt, was that which helped him connect to an eternal and essential aspect of his being:

I couldn't cope with whatever I tapped into and...I didn't know what I was doing ...I'd promised myself I'd never do anything like that again until I truly understood it. ...I knew that things aren't good or bad, it's...how you use them ...that was innate to me [234-238]. ...from that point...everything becomes very clear. It's understanding there is a healthy path and...a less helpful path...to then discern which is which [284-285].

...this idea that there is a single source of knowledge that...becomes materialized in the culture, in the time, in the traditions of that place, and then becomes manipulated...this idea that there is...a continual representing of knowledge that helps you to connect with the more eternal...essential part of the human being [288-294]. and the idea of revealed knowledge and academic knowledge, and the...difference of those [300-301].

Edward believes that past-life influences steer his unconventional choices and interests. He came to realise that he needed to work consciously with his sensitivity to subtle energies in order to discern his intended path:

...these influences that...have come into my life that don't fit within the social context and framework and ambience of this physical body...the choices I've made, the places I've gone...the people I've seeked out, they don't fit within my...background...they come from other places, that's very clear [194-199].

...the more I became disconnected...my physical body suffered, the more ill I became.... It was only by...realising that I actually had to connect and take responsibility...and live what this impulse... was and start to do what...I had to do, that I could start to re-construct my life [497-502]. I didn't know how to deal with the world ...And...as I took responsibility ...to inhabit this body...live this life and use this vehicle ...be grateful...and find out what I need to do...I try and be of service... [504-508].

Edward feels spiritual and psychological processes are fundamentally linked. His practices are focussed on learning to recognise behavioural patterns and negative energetic influences which obstruct what he terms his authentic way of being:

...it's the only place that you can actually do anything. ...I have to know myself ...my behavioural patterns...my traumas, my conflicts, my phobias, and how they affect me...then...more deeply...to understand...pulling those threads...are the dense...psychological aggregates that are residual in each one of us, and that all of the great traditions speak about in their various terminologies [371-378].

...there are teachers...structures...practices, that can help me to unpick and return...to that individual authentic nature that is connected to the origins of

our universe...that's my comprehension, so for *me* my journey and what...I try to do and practice...[is] to get to that more authentic way of being [349-353].

Edward perceives the deeper purpose of life is to create awareness of unconscious psychological influences and increase authentic self-determination. He understands free will as the connection and surrender to the purpose of his spiritual 'subtle' nature, which he considers to be an act of service toward positive change:

knowing that *that* is my programming...the triggers...the patterns...being played out, if I can have the strength of will to then either stop that...or...try and take it on into a different level...re-orient myself and...connect with the more subtle aspect of myself...then I change my future. Because if I stay unconscious, I'm just playing out mechanical patterns [385-391].

...it's about service. Surrender is service. Surrender is sacrifice. ...there...is...a reason...why each one of us are here. And...surrendering to that, that is free will...the one and first purpose we have *is* to reconnect with our consciousness and waking our consciousness and what all of that means...we *need* to do that, is my belief [482-488].

For Edward, spirituality is the essence and purpose of life. Despite periods of feeling lost, he describes an enduring inner knowing from childhood which has guided him throughout. He understands his spiritual path as the continual re-alignment to the timeless perception of this internal nature:

...it's the essence of life, there is no other reason for being. Anything we do that is not associated with our internal nature is just a distraction from it [8-10]. ...it's something that you *know*...probably since your earliest awareness...that when you move away from that, there is a discomfort or ...a 'lack' that you end up searching to re-discover [14-16].

...that sensation...I felt as a child, if I'm trying to live to that...– *that* is my journey [344-345]. ...it's always been there, I've just forgotten...or I had put it in a box and tried to destroy myself, or it didn't make sense...and thinking... maybe I *am* the crazy one! [430-432] And because of the opportunities and the individuals that I've had the opportunity to meet, step by step...take me to a point where I think 'yes, I wasn't completely crazy. The feelings that I was feeling as a child, they *were* right [442-444].

Edward identifies an endemic lack of guidance, information overload, and subliminal influences in our society which sabotage our conscious connection to deeper reality and inner guidance. He therefore feels discernment and safety are the main challenges in contemporary spirituality:

...the lack of guidance to keep you safe is almost endemic and...institutionalised in... society...the subliminal messaging of everything...around us... is much more connected to the dense nature of this internal experience than...the subtle [110-113]. ...not just spirituality...the geo-political situation...there are perpetual messages...to maintain a particular form of belief...to keep us from really connecting [565-568]. ...anyone who has an interest is overwhelmed...it was bad enough to...be discerning when I was going through this... how on earth can anyone...stand a chance [570-572]!

Edward considers his physical body as a temporary vehicle for his eternal self to experience the manifest world. He believes in the idea of *Morphic Resonance*, which reflects an energetic connection between all beings within a universal subtle reality. By taking responsibility to act positively according to his deeper nature, his own energetic frequency and behaviour is changed which in turn affects the 'ambient' of the collective. This, according to Edward, makes his spirituality socially relevant:

the wider world is the accumulative result of all of us...how we live our life is allowing the wider world to be and vice versa. It's an interaction on that level ...How we *behave* and the decisions we make determine the ambient.... My responsibility is trying to live as constructively...and to be as giving in a positive energetical sense to this ambient as I possibly can [547-552]. I am one being...I can't change the world. However, I change myself, the world is different [552-553].

Mary - Earth-based alignment with Higher Self.

Mary, age 55, is an artist, women's retreat facilitator, celebrant, mother, and grandmother. Her parents were non-religious. She describes feeling other people's emotions very acutely. This overwhelmed her as a child and made her feel she was different. She now recognises herself as a highly sensitive empath:

I always felt a bit different. Even as a child, I would feel things that weren't spoken about or you couldn't see [56-57]. ...I remember crying and not understanding these feelings inside...around death and birth and life...it was so intense...like a ball of energy inside me. ...I wanted to know if there were other people out there...experiencing the same thing [100-105].

The death of both her parents in her early twenties propelled Mary into a deep grieving process and search for meaning. Her exploration into the workings of her psychology and heightened perception helped her to understand herself:

I had...a massive push into something that I wasn't prepared for, which turned out to be one of my biggest teachers and probably one of the biggest initiations I've had [72-75]. ...I didn't really call it a spiritual search – but the search into death...was part of my grieving process...I *needed* to understand why this had happened [165-167]. ...through navigating my own emotional process and ...grieving and the death of my parents...taught me so much [292-293].

Mary eventually found belonging in Druidry. She learnt her craft through experiential practice, and she let go of written knowledge:

I knew that lots of people were feeling in a different way to the norm that... society...portrayed [82-83]. I was looking for my tribe [107]! ...I realized...what I was doing...was *Magik*,...prayer and...using...my intuition and a part of myself that I needed to explore more [135-137]. I spent years learning...experientially ...I stopped searching...and I found this place where who I was...what I felt and ...did was totally accepted. ...I studied Druidry...which gave me...a really solid... safe base...to practice. It gave me the foundation and the support [141-146].

When I stopped reading the books and searching...through written knowledge and I sat with my body bare naked on the earth and let myself sink into this and actually *feel* physically... *that's* just somebody's opinion, *this* is what's real [409-412].

Mary needed to explore her femininity to find inner balance. She underwent a challenging period and left her marriage. She describes this as a shedding of all aspects in her life that did not support her path. She feels her awareness and trust in a higher Self helped her through this difficult time.

I'd gone far more to the masculine side of my being...the feminine side of myself was too damn scary, and I had to do something about that [434-435]. I was coming to some kind of balance in my life and everything that didn't fit ...was falling away...It was really quite painful...I ended up losing everything and had to build myself back up again. ...I knew then if I didn't have that greater awareness and higher self and trust that I would never survive [442-446].

...I believe that there is a higher energy... I also believe that there's a *Higher Self* within us...without ego, without judgements, without blame...I can talk through that for my own solace sometimes, for my own needs, sometimes for wisdom, to help others... and I realised then that I'd been doing this for years and...as a child [128-132].

Intuition plays a central role in Mary's spirituality and work. She considers the insights that come in ceremony as ancestral knowledge received through intuitive knowing. This understanding motivates her to help re-awaken intuition in others.

...I think we're beaten out of it from a very young age not to go with those gut-feelings [258-259]. ...I do question it sometimes...but...I've opened up parts of my being that are normally closed [273- 276]. ...it's quite a simple balance for me as long as I'm nicely grounded in my life...because I'm very affected by emotions and...anxiety becomes a block... [236-238].

...I believe that we are...passed wisdom...or knowledge down from our ancestors [200-201]. I...know that the trust I have in...the *Higher Self*, is there because I step into that place...where...I become a part of that and it becomes a part of me [223-226]. ...I sink into that place so readily and easily and in total trust, *that* makes me happy, *that* feeds me, *that* means...I'm doing the right thing and *that's* what I'm here for [229-231].

Mary has learned to manage her empathic sensitivity and to protect herself. This enables her to help others to strengthen their psychic boundaries. She considers discernment, forgiveness, and learning to say no as her important life-skills:

I've had to learn how to close parts of my being with being empathic, because ...other people's feelings hurt so much [276-277]. ...as I've...matured more, I've realised...I can be in more control...and I can say yes or no, and I can give back what's not mine [281-282].

...through experience I began to help other people that were going through the same feelings [305-306]. ...understand how important it was to forgive someone, how important it is to not hold somebody else's process that they need to do themselves [309-311]. Constructively... 'this is not mine, this is yours', and I send it back to you in love...for you to deal with, not for me. And...I realised that I had to protect myself [315-316] I think spiritual maturity is that, really [318]. ...boundaries are so important [320].

Mary feels that spirituality must be free from restriction, non-judgemental, and grounded in direct experience to be relevant. Spiritual practice for her is about inclusive relationship of shared humanity beyond all labels. She is open to learning from other paths provided these resonate with her:

I have never...wanted to exclude anybody...In fact, I want to learn more about their spiritual path and see how it integrates with me. ...I feel...my spiritual practice... as this bubble around me...that just keeps...expanding and relating [463-467]. ... I don't want to be restricted. I have my boundaries and I need to be safe, and I need my people around me...but my spiritual self; ...that's...non-negotiable... [482-485]. ...the spiritual path that I choose to take is non-threatening and it tries not to judge...we're only human, I'm only human...and I think it has a great teaching about how to be [495-497].

Mary feels she embodies her spirituality in every aspect of her life. She is encouraged that people are looking more inward. However, she is concerned by people's lack of

boundaries and discernment in their experimentation, where they seek experience without doing the preparatory work.

I embody my spiritual path because I *live* it...every day, it's not something that I pick up when I need it [377-378]. ...I express it...through ritual ceremony ...through making and creating, sometimes...by being with people that want to share that experience... And I think that's embodying my spiritual path [380-383].

...I think people are giving themselves away...too much, too easily, without understanding exactly what they're doing [323-324]. ...a lot of people...are vulnerable and it can...be quite damaging [330-331]. It can be very naïve [333]. ...they're desperate to find this 'something else' and they want it *now*, without doing the work...and the falling over and the bearing of wounds [342-344].

Mary believes in the existence of a collective consciousness and that it is important for people to come together in shared humanity. She is passionate about creating group ceremonies that give people a sense of belonging and interconnectedness in life.

...people coming...and exchanging and being together and...it's all-inclusive and that's really important to me [469-472].

...we're more connected as human beings than we've ever been, through technology. But even if that wasn't there...there's evidence that we all over the world practice very similar ways...there is a collective consciousness and...a way of thought, a way of being that, as we're the same species, we're all connected with that. [550-555].

Mary feels she is longer looking outside of herself for answer but finds wisdom within. She values the sharing of wisdom with others, and describes she is continually learning about herself, life, and other people through her interactions. Mary recognises psychotherapeutic work as integral to her spiritual development, which represents to her a deeper life-choice to heal.

I don't think I'm looking for that much anymore *for* anything...it's when I stopped looking and came back to within myself, is when I found...peaceful quiet wisdom. ...I don't think we ever stop learning about ourselves, about life, about other people. I love human beings; I think they're fascinating...interacting with other people is my teacher at the moment [11-17].

I have had really dark times of depression. I've taken medication, I've had psychotherapy...I've worked with that so painfully...that's taught me a lot...I am more comfortable with myself now [439-442]. I've grown much more into my skin...But I've worked on myself an awful lot and that's been part of my spiritual path...to acknowledge all the bits that need working on and actually doing

something about it [533-536]. I've chosen to learn from them rather than hold them as...dark...wounds...I've chosen to heal [565-567].

Theo - From disconnection to connection.

Theo, aged 34, is a psychologist and researcher. He remembers himself as a curious child and feels that having been brought up in a non-religious family helped him be open-minded and trusting of his inner experiences:

...there was nothing like this...in my upbringing, so I didn't feel any pressure ...maybe I also felt...something missing in my life because of that...But I think it was...more easy for me to...connect with something inside of myself and ...trust...where it would lead me. ...I think for many people that grew up in... religious practice; that didn't feel healthy...this deep layer of unconscious rejection... So, I think...that the way I was brought up helped me [614-622].

Theo understands his spirituality as a connection to the deepest core of existence that transcends the material world. He feels this is embodied by his awareness of sensations and feelings, and a commitment to truth and honesty:

...to me it means to be connected to something that...transcends the material world...to the roots...of...all existence... [10-12]. ...connected to the deeper parts of yourself...acting and making decisions...connected to that part...and not getting lost in...intellectual thought-processes...losing touch with your body and...spiritual emotional side, but...really embody that kind of connection [393-398]. ...it's very much about...deep honesty to yourself...is this something that...I really feel or really embodies truth, or...something that I...unconsciously maybe *wish*...or wish not to be true [654-657]?

In order to explore the deeper dimensions of being, Theo experimented with psilocybin in his late teens. He read up on indigenous spirituality, Buddhism, depth psychology, psychedelics, and took up meditation. He calls this a process of reconnection to his intrinsic guidance and motivation beyond cultural construct:

...it started to...open up a process that...reconnected me to something that I lost touch with...because of...this culture...I started to feel there was more to life, that was much deeper than the way we were living...a very strong confident feeling...this connection...felt like the deepest guidance that was possible to me [38-44].

I felt...deeply defined...connection during that experience...really confirmed my belief that I had before...but which was...more unconscious or...latent...that

...reassured me that there was something more to this life. And...very important to explore for me [53-57]. ...gradually I started to open up all my intrinsic motivations...I started to read about Eastern Philosophy...about psychedelics and indigenous wisdom...Freud and Jung... [176-180].

Theo went on to explore Ayahuasca, which he describes opened him up to hitherto unconscious psychological, physical, and energetic processes. He values the use plant medicine as a spiritual practice with ritual providing a safe container to surrender into the experience:

...I...started to realise the importance...of rituals...to have very clear boundaries around the whole experience and this...creates...safety or protection or clarity. Within this container it's...more easy to surrender...into the depths of the experience...it's like creating some...vehicle that helps...direction [273-278].

...I started to open up to...an emotional...or an energetic part of myself that I wasn't having access to before...that I had been suppressing or rejecting some emotional part inside of myself or...body-awareness or energetic awareness [284-289]. ...really reconnecting to the depths of my body instead of having all kinds of ideas or insights [290-291].

Theo considers ritual is only useful if the person resonates with the narrative.

Therefore, secular individualised ritual containers can be newly created to prepare for, follow, and integrate the experiential process:

The rituals can be very secular, they don't have religious or spiritual connotations ...then ...people can come up with their own experience and...develop their own ways...[500-502]. ...I think the safety component...respect, and...clarity is the most important...also for people to feel the freedom to change or adapt rituals in ways that make sense in their own cultural perspective [595-600].

Theo's experiential process led him to fully rely on his intuitive knowing, which he now trusts beyond intellectual, scientific, or spiritual understandings provided by others:

It felt like a really deep connection...whether it's my own deeper self, my deeper soul or something external...I don't know and I'm not sure if it's so important. I felt there was...some very deep wise being that I had a connection with from that moment...guiding me through life [95-100]. ...I...always had the trust from that moment onwards that everything was going in the way that it had to...in my life [118-119].

I was reading...and listening to...gurus...reading about psychedelic science ...taking all that information very seriously, but...I was confident that my own inner knowing...was the only...deepest thing that you can trust or be guided by. And that doesn't mean...you know everything...you can still learn a lot from

other people, but they wouldn't lead me astray or...get confused in all...the intellectual games...Because I always felt this connection... [119-127].

Theo went on to study psychology. He describes his relationship with science as 'ambiguous' yet sees it as a tool to integrate the spiritual with the scientific aspect. He conducts interdisciplinary scientific research into psychedelics to explore the efficacy and healing potential of altered states of consciousness:

I considered...to just quit the whole science game because I felt it *could* be so superficial. And I also saw the importance of having those two worlds connected ...do it from a place in which both ways of looking at the world...are really integrated...why I always stayed connected...to the science is because I really see it as a strategy to make this Western world aware of the potential and importance of deeper or altered states of consciousness... [411-419].

...for the bigger goal, maybe it's...a sacrifice sometimes for my own personal process, but...it's something that I really feel is worth doing...using the science as a tool to make other people and the whole world more connected and spiritual hopefully as well [456-460].

Theo believes in the potential benefit of plant-medicine in secular context. Yet he has concerns that the spiritual potential of plant-medicine may be lost through the involvement of the pharmaceutical industry. Although he has developed a trust in the psyche's innate self-healing intelligence, he feels dubious about the use of hallucinogens when therapists do not have experiential understanding, or if insufficient preparation or integration is facilitated:

...I think the danger is more in the society...around you that cannot support you during the coming back...it's not so much...the experience that is dangerous but...the discrepancy between those two [331-334]. ...there was a huge amount of cognitive dissonance within me...to mainstream those substances and those states of consciousness...I see the implications...that sometimes...people ...have ...not necessarily the spiritual connection... [473-479]. ...that people...have this potentially...mystical, meaningful, deeply transformative experience and they go back home and... are...left confused... [527-533].

...the body knows perfectly well how to heal itself...the psyche...knows this...but it...needs the right support and...setting and those kind of...substances can help you open up to this...process that intuitively shows you the way, but you can easily be lost and confused if you don't have anybody around you that has the experience...to support you through that... [562-567].

Theo considers spiritual alignment as a life-long process involving daily practice and attention. His focus is on embodiment: as working with sensations and feelings which

indicate energetic blockage. He describes this work as a valuable door into the psycho-spiritual dimension:

it's very easy to back into your own old patterns and to get...disconnected again from the depth of being connected... [318-320]. ...if you don't...practice in your daily life and don't pay attention to the process then...most of it...will evaporate [324-325]. ...it's a huge challenge, especially in this society to...stay connected [399].

...this process for me...is not so much about...transcending mystical experiences, but ...about having a very deeply rooted connection with the earth and my body... [388-390].

...sometimes it feels things are stagnated...an emotional...spiritual...energetic ...or...a physical thing, but I guess it's all at the same time [678-680]. ...there is work to do there for me. But...it's also the door into the spiritual dimensions. So, I'm very grateful for that block, whatever is causing it...I feel I can always connect with this...and it's a very easy doorway for me to connect with my deeper self [683-687].

Theo formulates self-transformation as a shift from disconnection to connection. He understands spiritual practice to be about dissolving blockages to deeper self-connection caused by cultural conditioning or trauma. He feels psychedelics can be a fast and effective tool to dissolve the boundaries between the everyday and the deeper self. He considers this reconnection as the most important challenge for humanity today:

Transformation...for me is...about...opening up and getting rid of things ...standing in the way between being who you really are...and all the cultural or traumatic...rigidity in your personality... [642-646].

Whether it's connecting to the emotions or...lost memories or...on a social level with your family or your friends, or...with nature or...cosmic universal or spiritual connection, for me it's always about moving from disconnection to connection [421-424]. And I think...our society is so sick...because we are very disconnected on many levels...I always felt that it's hugely important to help people reconnect ...and to take more responsibility for how their actions are influencing everything around them and that they're part of something...bigger and alive ...and to act from that connection...it's so important...I mean the clock is ticking! [424-432]!

Diama – A search for self through art.

Diama, aged 47, is an artist. She was raised in Malaysia by her grandparents and attended a Buddhist school. Due to the communal and ritualized nature of her culture, she remembers herself as 'unconscious' to a sense of individuality in childhood. She understands her spiritual journey as a search for herself:

I was totally unconscious about my journey at that time. There was no 'me'... growing up in Asian tradition that is not individual; you are part of everything, you function like an ant [125-127].

...feeling that something is missing in my life, and I was searching for something from the outside; from a man, from a teacher...going around in a circle that actually...My spiritual journey is me searching...for the connection with *myself*. But it was looking out first, before I came back in [5-9].

At 16, Diama moved to Australia. The individualism of Western culture and a difficult relationship with her estranged mother triggered a profound identity crisis:

I go from a very collective tribal upbringing into a very individual...family situation and culture [136-137]. I was seriously quite lost...being a sensitive spiritual person... [106]. I *have* to search for myself because I don't have the foundation...of feeling at home in myself, I have to find it! ...in Malaysia...the extended family holds the foundation for me. But when I'm in...Western world there is none there; I have to hold myself [169-173].

Diama worked in the corporate world which she describes deepened her sense of soullessness. On a trip to America, Diama began a relationship with an artist who introduced her to art and countercultural ideas. She describes this as a process of de-conditioning. She also recognises her co-dependency in trying to find identity through another person:

...the things he said just blew my mind! ...things that I never heard...if you've been brought up in a very conditioned way... [206-208]. ...he...deconditioned me...whatever I've been taught as a kid was wrong...I was questioning everything ...rebellious against everything [231-233]. ...a woman searching for God through men [343]. ...I was totally devoted to him [349]. ...I was a baby who wants to just depend on this person to give me the answers ...searching to experience life through this really crazy man [354-357].

Inspired by the writings of Van Gogh and experiencing a vivid dreamlife, Diama realised her calling to be an artist. Although not belonging to any religion, she felt deeply inspired by religious art and architecture. She describes her spirituality in this period as

‘devotional’: searching for the spiritual outside of herself through the visual experience of beauty:

through that journey of art... Van Gogh’s writing came into my life and...I knew I have to be a painter...his letters, he is spiritual as an artist. ...I realised...a spiritual moment of calling...to be an artist...I always also have got dreams.... everything that is visual is speaking to me in a very powerful way [238-243].

...visual experience feeds my soul...it talks to me in a very subconscious way ...being surrounded by the beauty of the visual spiritual, that is my spiritual journey really [252-255]. ...I don’t belong to any particular religion but...it’s the beauty of life that speaks to me [266-267]. ...I was...devotional to the Divine. Still searching *out*, still looking out as the visual experience, as a devotional experience [283-284].

Diana spent time traveling. She describes the human interaction with people she encountered on the road as a spiritual experience which increased her capacity for compassion and empathy. Despite her insecure existence, she describes feeling ‘something bigger than herself’ was taking care of her:

...truth is when there’s a human contact with another, without...agendas...that really touches my heart...the experience of being in life with people, with whatever experience they’ve been through and where they are meeting you and what they *want* to give you [292-296].

...we were travelling...surviving...we never know what is going to happen but for some reason, it just flowed...that is a spiritual experience because you know something bigger than you is taking care of you [396-300].

During labour giving birth to her daughter, Diana underwent what she describes as a life-changing out-of-body experience of internal rebirth. She felt this experience opened her into the spiritual connection within herself that she had been searching for all along:

I flew up to the ceiling...there *in* the picture of Michelangelo’s Adam and God... a one second experience...I came back...ecstatically happy...like spiritually I was born the moment she was born. And I *knew* at that moment anything is possible, I *knew* I will be taken care of, I *am* connected [363-367]. ...an inner experience ...a visual experience...you just know you’re connected to everything ...‘this is my life in my hands’ ...That’s what I was searching for... [401-404]. ...the journey was the experience in life and trusting the universe is taking care of you. Now is *me* trusting *myself* in every single moment that I’m making decisions... [502-503].

Diana describes her spiritual development as moving from conditioning to de-conditioning, through suffering, into surrender to what she calls ‘the universal being

inside herself'. This understanding gives her spiritual freedom yet also an increased responsibility to act with integrity:

...to really trust inside me there is this universal being...constantly engaging with me... [498-499]. ...conditioning, de-conditioning, suffering, surrender...this judgement of what you think it is you know, and you have to break that... [550-552]. Integrity...is a constant practice...of awareness...and know every single decision I make is going to take me into a journey that I have to answer to myself [589-591]. Surrender to yourself...whatever centre you hold from that space of true love and kindness and beauty...if you live your principles there, you surrender to that, because you *can* surrender, because you *are* already ...whole [555-558].

Diana feels her practice of intentional surrender enables a co-creative relationship with life, which communicates back to her through synchronicities and dreams:

...working with how life presents to me through synchronicity and...dreams, and my interpretation of my life and my dreams together and all...my conscious understanding of what I can gather around me as information that reflects back to me what I need to see [628-631].

Diana has had a long-term interest in healing. More recently, she understands her path is about accessing what she calls her 'inner light' and reflecting this outward into the world through her creativity:

I've come to realise actually, it's not about healing, it's about creativity. It's about me knowing myself as expressing my inner light...and the expression of that... I feel like the journey of healing is past. It's about knowing...and getting in touch with my light and shine that. That is the journey right now [634-693].

Diana reflects upon her spirituality as navigating two parts of herself, which she describes as the consciousness 'known' and the 'not yet known' beyond her conscious awareness. She understands embodiment as a reaching out into the unknown and anchor what can be made conscious through her creative expression:

Diana as a spiritual experience in this body in this experience, this is my life journey, ...my expression of my body, my movement, my sounds, my voice, my way of writing and painting, my expression of myself... And I can only experience myself...as conscious as I *can* be...at the same time reaching to the 'what I don't know' ...as constant exploration of the unknown as an artist, but at the same time experiencing and expressing the known of who I am [438-445]. I look at it as me in this consciousness expressing my *self* beyond consciousness [449].

Diama understands herself as a multidimensional being in co-creative relationship with the Universe. She aims to reflect this expanded sense of herself through her art and thereby contribute toward expansive change in society. Diama does not relate to the term new age, which she considers to be a label denoting an outward cultural manifestation. Diama hopes her art can help others to connect with their deeper selves and widen their perception beyond their cultural conditioning:

...my life is not new age. My life is life itself. I'm just an ordinary human being living my life being spiritual...an artist living my life connecting with who I am... expressing myself and my understanding of the Universe [647-651]. ... I like to change the social structure and rebel as an artist... There is need for a change of perception of reality into a new understanding of our history as a human being [659-661].

as an artist, I like...to primarily help people to be getting in contact with who they are...they are the essence of God-consciousness...expressing itself. ...not just in terms of culture, the understanding of the bible and all religions, is teaching us that, but man's interpretation of that has been misunderstood. ...I hope that could be...my contribution as an artist in opening people's perception to something much bigger than the conditioning education that limits us [670-675].

Jedi – love in action.

Jedi, aged 50, is a shiatsu practitioner and custodian of an ancient pilgrimage site. Adopted into a dysfunctional family, he remembers 'always feeling different'. He suffered abuse at a Christian prep-school and felt that throughout his childhood people 'wanted his soul', which provoked his defiant resistance. Jedi describes hearing an inner voice when he was 8, which began his curiosity of invisible dimensions and about his purpose in the world:

I was out on a limb in the world...the way I came out of the mould... I've got a real ...warrior thing...woman nurturing thing, and...really sensitive emotionally ...in a very dysfunctional prep-school...beatings and...always the one...in trouble, because there was already...violence...within my domestic scenario [51-59]. ...a dynamic around people trying to...'have my soul' [65-66]. ...a...spartan spiritual training from the start really...like: 'Can we scare you into handing over your power?' ...for me there was always that dynamic [91-93].

...these...loud words into my head whilst I was...contemplating my existence ... *'to those whom much has been given, much is expected'* ...that's...stayed with me all my life [106-109]. ... a really profound... 'oh my God, what's that?!' ...Like a lot of things in my life, I'll sit and observe them and...get the juice out of it...not...overanalyse, because...you can miss the wood for the trees...in terms of spirituality anyway [120-125].

Although set to study theology, Jedi describes becoming increasingly aware of the negative history and power-abuse of the Christian church. At 18, he abandoned his studies to explore his spirituality out in the world:

...I...reached the point of...no desire to have anything to do with the church because it's...been sick for an awful long time, the more I find out [200-202]. ...realising that ...relationship with God is nothing to do with institutions ...with form...with exterior stuff. And...there is many different paths of the Sacred [204-206].

...I wanted to...explore...my spiritual path, which is actually the doing it and being in the world and, enough book-reading...that whole Christian paradigm ...really exploring my path...that's always been where I've been at. I'm now free, no-one can tell me anything...I'm tired of...academia of just a Christian dynamic, let's go and see the world [270-279].

Jedi understands his spirituality as 'love in action' and feels a strong sense of service. He briefly considered becoming a friar but realised he would not be able to pledge obedience to any order. Nevertheless, inspired by the Franciscan ethos, he set out to work with drug addicts, homeless people, and disaffected youth:

I considered...joining the Franciscan friars, because...at least they're radical doers...then I got to the point of...I can do chastity and...charity, but I can't do obedience, because that's between me and God, ultimately [165-169].

...my own version of Franciscan...running a night shelter and worked with drug-addicts and homeless people... living on the road, living out in the woods... [282-284]. ...A very strong sense of purpose; service to human beings, to the world, to souls, to spiritual process, growth, to healing, yes [536-537]. ...love in action...in as dark and difficult places as I can...find, because that's where the juice is...where the truth is [629-630].

Jedi visited sacred sites across the world to explore spirituality beyond religious tradition or cultural perspective. He describes his pilgrimages as going forward *into* things; being open to experience, engaging with people, and creating his own ceremonies and prayers. He understands transformation as resolving inner blockages born from fear and unconsciousness which obscure what he calls 'truth in reality':

...exploring the world and other cultural spiritual contexts...go to those sacred places and do my own thing; not *their* ceremonies...being free and...getting a world-context view in terms of experience [550-555].

...deliberately refusing to take on anybody's point of view or trip...the truth being... 'the journey is the destination'...being authentic to my own self and ...open to learning and exploring and doing my own work in terms of any pain and trouble I've had through my childhood experience... [327-332].

...transformation *is* where the juice is because that's where the blocks are ... where the fear is...where the things are that get in the way of love and that's why...we're living in hell on earth. Because most decisions have been made out of fear and unconsciousness. And it's not for me to judge other people, it's always for me to hold my own path [664-668].

Jedi was sceptical of any spiritual claims he had no personal experience of. He describes a personal paradigm shift when seeing an extraordinary event involving a holy man.

This prompted him to delve deeper into the invisible realms:

I was quite anti 'cosmic people', because I saw so many illusionist, delusionist pretenders, egotists...people who talked about past lives...always...queen Cleopatra...never the bog-cleaner... [319-322]. ...it's not that I doubt that reality, it's...that I don't personally believe it because I haven't got my personal gnostic experience [352-353].

...I am seeing beams coming out of this guys' eyes... I've read all kinds of stuff, but...it's only on seeing that I actually can believe it. ...that was a real paradigm moment...because if *that* is true...it's time to explore another whole level of the invisible or the cosmic stuff that I'd been so resistant to [591-601].

Jedi works with 'Qi' energy in his shiatsu work which can bring about healing deemed inexplicable by Western science. He appreciates the oriental perspective that the physical and energetic 'hara' centre provides information beyond intellectual knowing:

...the Soul...your conscience...your feeling or...inner wisdom...call it Hara; your gut; your real knowing rather than your head... [178-180]. ...the oriental...point of view about...Hara...energetically...that place *is* our centre from which... information can come...which is a whole completely different approach from thinking information from the head [688-695].

Jedi describes his spirituality as 'maintaining an authentic sense of resonance with the Divine'. This for him must come from the heart in service of creation. He feels this core value has been lost in religious traditions, citing abuse of power, manipulation of information, and the suppression of alternative spiritual perspectives as examples:

...Whether it's coming from the head or the heart. It's as simple as that really. ...people have tended to...use whatever cultural religious form...as a way to control and manipulate people. Which is the opposite of...what that...should be in terms of opening to heaven and earth and...making it all better; creation rather than destruction [718-722].

Jedi describes himself as 'clair-empathic': able to intuit people's underlying motivations and feelings. He considers this stems from his childhood where he learnt to follow his gut-instincts to survive. He feels averse to those who he feels manipulate or impose their spiritual beliefs onto others:

I am quite clair-empathic; I...pick up on people's feelings and what's really going on for them rather than what they're saying or presenting... Maybe that was one of the skills that helped me in my childhood, but also...that sent me...on my path [212-215]. ...a...skill that perhaps is part of a survival thing through... childhood ...with me having to have strong boundaries and also explore myself [230-231].

...constantly wanting to explore myself in terms of my own authenticity or clarity. ...I can be quite...fiery...when people are talking...spiritual fascism, I just can't stand it... [470-473]. ...because you've trodden on my precious place, and ...you're going to get my authentic response...questioning and...prodding the weak points of...your religious point of view or...cultural context of the religious interpretation of that point of view [672-675].

Continuing his childhood theme to not surrender his soul, Jedi claims the spiritual freedom to follow his own flow rather than rely on established frameworks. He considers this to be a more difficult path because it requires a higher level of responsiveness, commitment, and the openness to learn from multiple perspectives:

I'm not taking on anybody's blah, because that's nothing to do with God or the Goddess or Spirit or 'it'. So, it's a much harder path because you haven't got anyone to tell you...you're doing the right thing, and this is the way to go' [355-357]. ...it's about finding your own way and having the trust and...being able to do that alone...not rely on others to prop you up [362-363].

...No surrender from me...you're not having my soul and I'm going to keep exploring...finding truth in reality...between heaven and earth, and I don't have to be any more definitive about it than that, it's...an ongoing thing that has all kinds of levels to its exploration and...experiences, involving other cultures and all sorts [614-618].

Jedi feels aligned to multiple traditions: Shinto, Pagan, and non-denominational spirituality, and holds ceremonial positions in each. He continues to draw on his inner

purpose and experience to enable others to claim the freedom to explore their spiritual identity and gifts:

...to me it's about working *with* and trying to make purer and stronger my own little gem of whatever I've been given, but also meeting and working with ...people who've got to the point of trying to work with...their little divine gift [660-662]. ...it has to be alive and dynamic for me. It is my life...It's my purpose and has been since I can remember. [500-501].

Composite Depiction

Note on terminology:

The term 'spiritual pathfinder' was chosen by the author as a general and unifying characterization to reflect the pro-active and personalised quality of contemporary spiritual engagement in this report. The remainder of terminology in this depiction adheres to that used by participants themselves.

1: Profile and Overview

1.1: The Spiritual Pathfinder

Pathfinders consider themselves to be 'spiritual beings having a human experience'. As such, spirituality is fundamental to their life, without which pathfinders would feel bereft of depth and meaning:

Qori: ...my spirituality is the core essence from which everything else derives ...my personal feeling and experience is that we are human beings, but we also are spiritual beings coming here to have a human experience, and it over-lights everything that I do; whether I'm being a mum or whether I'm working or gardening, or interaction on every level, everything [3-7].

Dan: ... it feels so important... but also very integrated or embedded in...who I am all my life...if I didn't have that...life would be so different and wouldn't have the depth I suppose... [9-11].

Edward: it's something that you *know*...probably since your earliest awareness... when you move away from that, there is a discomfort or ...a 'lack' that you end up searching to re-discover [14-16].

Sharia: ...I've always had this kind of inner... 'passion'...this natural desire to connect with the Divine...that's been there as long as I can remember, except in different expressions [7-12].

Pathfinders understand their spirituality as a multifaceted path which involves a harmonizing of all aspects of their individual self: psychology, intellect, and physicality, into alignment with a greater wholeness of being. Overall, spirituality is understood as an experience of interrelationship to both a wider transcendent reality and to a profound immanent essence of existence:

Theo: ...for me it's...about...really connecting to the deeper parts of yourself and always acting and making decisions...connected to that part...not getting lost in ...intellectual thought-processes...losing touch with your body and with your spiritual emotional side, but...really embody that ...connection [393-398].

Spiritual pathfinders either choose to live, or have come to terms with needing to live, outside the cultural and religious mainstream. They see themselves as explorers, heretics, mavericks, and pioneers. Whilst they are open to learning from teachers and traditions, ultimately, they claim self-agency over their decisions and direction. The spiritual path is aimed at inner growth and personal experience, with a flexible, organically unfolding trajectory:

Jane: ...it means thinking outside of the box, not going for...the set religions...I can't ever be allowing...a priest or a rabbi or an imam dictate to me what practice I follow, because I follow my own...to me that is...important, that there is no dogma attached [15-20].

Pathfinding is a deeply personal endeavour. To guard themselves against misunderstanding and to not dilute the sacred nature of their experiences, spiritual pathfinders often feel to keep the profundity of their spirituality private. This perpetuates their feeling of being outsiders:

Pablo: ...teachings, practices, and experiences...have to remain quite private, because...people just don't understand what you're doing, or why...and there's a fear of rejection...There's a sense...if you are to share too deeply a deep insight ...you let it open for interpretation...it loses its value. So, there's a... strong sense of privacy about it [480-485].

Dan: ...it's quite a personal thing and often these things don't get dialogued. But actually, it's quite...important...to talk about this. Another level of experience... maybe more people need to be aware of these things happening... [576-580].

1.2: The young pathfinder

Young pathfinders often consider themselves to be 'cuckoos in the nest' and 'fish out of water'. They report to intuit, feel, and question more intensely, and as a result perceive their reality to be different from their family and others they encounter in early life:

Rose: ...Catholic...I was brought up in that and it never resonated for me [24-26]. I certainly felt different...very alone and very sensitive...always being told that I was too sensitive...so much a fish out of water [34-36].

The feeling of being different or displaced can be due to family or life circumstances but can also be felt in a more spiritual sense: as a yearning for 'home' as transcendent source of their being:

Heather: through my early childhood and my teens, I did have strong feelings ...like a melancholy...longing for...the source that I've come from, which I wasn't remembering. That I was from somewhere else and...feeling homesick... and not really belonging here [305-310].

Seven pathfinders specifically describe themselves as 'empaths': as having a heightened intuitive perception of the underlying emotions and motivations of others. They explain that living with, and managing, the intensity of their perceptions, necessitated a steep learning curve around healthy self-boundaries and self-understanding:

Jedi: I am quite clair-empathic: I...pick up on people's feelings ... Maybe...that helped me in my childhood, but also was the thing that sent me off on my path [212-215]. ...a...skill that perhaps is part of a survival thing through ...childhood ...having to have strong boundaries and also explore myself [230-231].

Related to their permeable psychic boundaries, empathic pathfinders also report to perceive what they regard as other-dimensional beings such as invisible friends, spiritual guides, guardian angels and ghosts. Their empathic perception expands their sense of reality and awareness that they are 'not alone':

Edward: I've always had...the awareness that there were other energies... guardian angels...invisible friends, they were real to me [92-94]. ...an awareness' of not being alone...these things were a golden thread in my life [96-98].

The young pathfinders' emotional and psychic sensitivity to the suffering of others can foster a 'healer identity', particularly in their primary relationships. As their own needs are often not met in this equation, they seek protection and bonding in the transpersonal realm:

Bert: ...my mother and...father...had...been through the war...were...quite removed...in traumatic withdrawal...I had the capacity to be present and bright and loving, and I learnt that if I...paid attention to them, it would draw them out...that had a very strong effect on my life [60-64].

Empathic sensitivities include a heightened sense of interconnectedness with nature which is experienced as expansive, congruent, and receptive, in contrast to the lack of congruency and receptivity perceived in their interaction with other humans:

Niamh: I...had this feeling of 'there was something much bigger than me'...I connected it ...in my childhood very much to nature...having experiences in the woods...that just made me feel 'ah this is what it's all about' [71-74]. ...this feeling of connection ...people were kind of difficult... And nature was...warm and receptive [82-83].

Sarah: I would stand sometimes...just staring at a tree...I was listening all the time with my body. I didn't think very much, and I found people confusing because they didn't say what they meant...because their communication and what they felt was often not congruent...I didn't realise that until I was older [18-24].

Spiritual pathfinders report to have a rebellious streak. Those raised within a religious context remember being acutely aware of unhealthy power-dynamics within religious institutions. Particularly female participants were aware of gender inequality and misogyny in the church from a young age:

Maggie: ...even at a young age...I could tell something was not right. That what we were being taught did not chime...particularly in relation to the way women were supposed to behave...our Lady...was good and passive and well behaved ...all the priests were male, and all the servants were women etcetera [18-23].

Jedi: ... my boarding school...there was a dynamic around people trying to... 'have my soul' [65-66]. ...like: 'Can we scare you into handing over your power?' ...for me there was always that dynamic [92-93].

What all young pathfinders appear to share is a curious temperament. Their intuitive and independent disposition cause them to question the validity of inherited beliefs. They are explorers of their inner space, ponder the nature of their existence, and their connection to what is often still formulated as 'God' in their early years. Particularly the male respondents are often avid readers of complex spiritual material in adolescence:

Bert: I was fourteen...reading Krishnamurti [96] ...That's what I wanted... someone...saying: 'Use your powers of inquiry' and go deep...and start to take it all apart. [105-106] ... I started really...wanting to inquire into what is going on in this inner space... [175-176].

Dan: I...read a lot when I was a teenager and got into meditation and always looking for that 'something else'...something in me that had that... 'seeker' drive...I explored many different things [40-43]. ...I...felt it wasn't around me...so I had to go and look for it... [52-53].

1.3: The seeking pathfinder

A quality of 'searching' initially drives the pathfinder's choices and trajectories. There is a strong or growing awareness that something is missing that needs to be found.

Particularly for those who were not able to nurture a sense of spirituality in childhood, their search begins as an outward widening of horizons and proceeds inward, toward a search for deeper experience and identity:

Diana: ...feeling that something is missing in my life...searching for something from the outside: from a man, from a teacher...going around in a circle that actually...My spiritual journey is me searching...for the connection with *myself* [5-8].

Jane: ...the journey of...finding myself...both from the family...and from the religion. [54-55]. ...reviewing where I sat in terms of the religion and the spiritual, ...because I felt I was on such a different path to them [63-64].

The pathfinder's perception of reality is more expansive than the reality-construct they were initially conditioned to adopt, causing them to challenge structured beliefs:

Gilbert: ...sitting in my room...and just feeling that 'holy crap, we're on a rock in space, floating!' ...and it is still something that sits...as a...point in my life... moments...that you reflect back on and that live with you...where you really touch with something deeper than your average bubble experience... [56-62].

Some pathfinders underwent more extreme experiences of spiritual crisis which, in their view, conventional religious or therapeutic language was too limited to meet.

Their search focused on finding 'expanded' language with which to contextualize their experience:

Rhiannon: ...there was no spiritual language with which to understand ... what was happening to me...I couldn't understand intellectually...either merely in the context of psychotherapy... it was something else, and I realised in order to understand that I had to make a journey away from where I'd come from [50-54].

Because traditional parameters are insufficient in meeting their internal perceptions and the actualities of their life, pathfinders often undergo a process of disillusionment with institutionalised religion and accompanying dogma and doctrines:

Edward: ...that...'questioning'...of the material structure of a religious organisation as opposed to the internal experience and how those two should exist...I started to question everything. And that has been my liberation in many ways; that questioning [49-52].

Whilst the exoteric religious model is rejected, esoteric aspects are re-evaluated and retained. The search for personal authenticity is accompanied by a search for the mystical foundation which underlies, yet transcends, the religion that was built on it:

Jane: ...what...I carry from the Jewish heritage. But my spirituality is not Jewish ...at the same time, I sometimes have echoes and beautiful senses of the Shekinah power... which is wonderful, because it then integrates and brings me back to the true root of who I am and allows me to embrace it all, because nothing is not valid... [69-73].

Jedi: realising that ...relationship with God is nothing to do with institutions ...with form...with exterior stuff. And actually, there's many different paths of the Sacred [204-206].

Not having to overcome a religious mindset can be considered an advantage. Yet those raised in a non-religious environment can equally experience their secularity as a 'missing' of spiritual dimension in life, and similarly feel that a core part of themselves has been shut down or has not been allowed to flourish:

Theo: ...there was nothing like this...in my upbringing, so I didn't feel any pressure. And maybe I also felt...something missing in my life because of that... [614-15].

Rhiannon: ...something in me got very squashed...growing up. ... that part of me that had that wildness...that was in touch with all those realms...it was so not allowed. And something so core to my being got shut down... [286-290].

1.4: Spiritual but not religious

Pathfinders identify as 'spiritual but not religious' and have an ambiguous relationship with religious traditions. Although the belonging that traditions provide is appreciated, it is mostly deemed too restrictive. Pathfinders are also wary of what they consider to be shadow distortions within religious organizations, particularly in relation to patriarchal hierarchy and abuse of power. They are however very motivated to explore the essential 'esoteric' meaning within mystical teachings and inspirational art:

Sarah: I've totally seen the concept...and the safety of [what] organised religion can bring...to be part of something. But to...get the fruits, I...think you have to step out of it, eventually [207-210]. ...it's like leaving your parents. You need to find your own identity [213].

Maggie ...I have a great empathy and understanding of...the 'spiritual but not religious'. ...the church is not necessarily at all a spiritual place...I needed to...sit on a fence for a long time...staying safely away from patriarchy that manifested in religion [208-213].

Gilbert: ...I find religions very interesting because I look to see: What *were* the deeper means to connecting...? ...self-referencing and connecting to that deep space in myself, I can then look...and see what...they were really saying...I can actually feel and *know* from my experience of that [487-492].

Similarly, conventional science is regarded with some scepticism in its limited appraisal of non-ordinary states of consciousness and spiritual experiences. The scientific approach is however recognised as an important tool to connect the inner and outer worlds, and to present experimental consciousness research in a language accessible to the mainstream:

Theo: ...the whole science game...could be so superficial...I also saw the importance of having those two worlds connected. ...in which both ways of looking at the world...are really integrated. ...I really see it as a strategy to make this Western world aware of the potential and importance of deeper or altered states of consciousness... [411-419].

2: Qualities and themes

2.1: Authenticity

The search for authenticity is central to the pathfinders' quest. As they mature into their spiritual pathfinding, they become less interested in exploring the surface expressions of contemporary spirituality and aim to go deeper, which is generally formulated as 'beyond ego':

Florence: ...as I am getting older...I am less interested in the 'fluffy side' of spiritual practices... in our culture now there is such an explosion of things ... weekend courses...they're great on one level, but for me it's not enough. I am seeking a much deeper...more authentic connection...based in truth, not based in ego [278-286].

Bert: I've become aware of how we are not what we think we are...I am looking ...where the thoughts...are resonant with 'what is' in a way that can help me deepen my presence...my centeredness, and sense of connectedness... [212-215].

Pathfinders consider the discernment of their 'deeper truth' as key to living authentically, one major indicator is a feeling of heart connection:

Niamh: ...for me an authentic transformative experience is...the expansion of my heart [324-325]. It takes me into feelings of compassion but also... acceptance of all the pain and the sorrow and the cruelty. It sounds trite, but just the pure experience of 'there is only love' [328-330]. There is only love, is the deepest truth I have discovered on this journey [337].

Living a heart-guided life involves the intention to contribute to a 'greater good', formulated as serving creation not destruction, and acting from a place of kindness, compassion, and love in relation to the world and oneself:

Jedi: ...Whether it's coming from the head or the heart. It's as simple as that ... opening to heaven and earth and just making it all better: creation rather than destruction [718 & 721-722].

Mary: ...people...exchanging and being together...in peace and love...inclusive ...that's really important to me. But...that's...come with a lot of life experiences ...for me to say...the things I'm not able to do and trying to be as honest and open about things that I *can* do... [469-475].

2.2: Connectedness and alignment

Authenticity is also perceived as a sense of alignment or congruency with what is viewed as a 'higher' or core self, variably understood as a connection to soul, source, or wholeness. This connection is experienced as a soma-psycho-spiritual sense of expansiveness or freedom, and calm surety:

Mary: ...the trust I have in something that is bigger...the *Higher Self* ...I become a part of that, and it becomes a part of me...I sink into that place so readily and easily and in total trust, *that* makes me happy, *that* feeds me, *that* means I know I'm doing the right thing and *that's* what I'm here for [223-230].

Pathfinders report to feel an interconnection with a larger 'transpersonal' reality beyond the visible world. This is often formulated as living from a 'soul-level' or being tuned into an expanded awareness or essence. Such reality or realities are understood as different frequencies or dimensions. For some this includes a more personalised relationship with what are interpreted as other-dimensional beings:

Anoush: ...Soul-level is...finding nuance and...the numinous...to see the five-dimensionality of life...allowing ourselves to be open and receptive to other

dimensions of consciousness...that is really our essence...we bring into our everyday life, that doesn't just look at face-value, but looks at the dimensionality of whatever it is that we're experiencing [135-140].

Heather: I...have an inner knowing that there's something that you can't access here in this 3D reality [303]. ...knowing what I know about the higher energies, this is just a frequency which we're living in here...part of me knows it and part of me is very human and can't really understand it [323-326].

2.3: Guidance

Spiritual pathfinders identify inner guidance as making connection to an awareness, wisdom, or conscience, experienced as a primary and more immediate quality of consciousness than mind-based surface perception:

Theo: ...whether it's my own deeper self...or something external from me, or...some guide...I'm not sure if it's so important. I felt there was...some very deep wise being that I had a connection with...guiding me through life. And I...felt...this is...the right direction ...and although people might disagree...I didn't let that influence the things I did... [96-102].

Jedi: ...the Soul...your conscience or your feeling or your inner wisdom...or you could call it Hara; your gut; your real knowing rather than your head playing catch-up with making the patterns make sense [178-180].

Female pathfinders in particular report to 'receive' guidance. This is variably described as a tuning into 'higher energies', or channelling information coming from other-dimensional realities or beings:

Rose: ...as I evolved...sensitivities...and awareness opened up... often it comes through internally, visually... [156-158]. ...it comes in divine timing and soul timing...that's my reference...it's truth that has come into me, through me, and it's not come from my mind [424-427].

Sharia: ...I received the calling from Goddess...she showed me visions ... pulling me as though there was a magnet...drawing me into this perception of the real meaning of life... [335-337].

Some pathfinders reported to feel guided by memory or influences perceived to come from previous lifetimes, which informs their current perspective and direction:

Qori: ...I definitely have...Gnostic past life memories, so...the access to the Divine is... through the divinity which is intrinsic to each person...that awareness that we ourselves are also responsible for the nurturing and the development of that. No one else is...going to do that for us [423-429].

Pathfinders can feel guided to a particular spiritual structure or map which resonates with their spiritual experience:

Rhiannon: ...I was opening up to a world that I hadn't had any access to before or even any awareness of... I...was not interested at all in esoteric things, until... something happened to me and I had to become interested, because I had to understand what was happening... [84-87].

2.4: Intuition

Intuition is considered as the most important function to guide the spiritual pathfinder. Learning to recognise and subsequently trust one's intuitive knowing is understood as a developmental process and a skill to be honed. Primary practice involves a tuning into a feeling of inner alignment from which intuitive knowing flows:

Heather: ...with me it's ideas and a gut instinct; a pull to a thing, or a pull away... [178]. ...when I take the time to...still myself...making a conscious effort to make contact with the energy and interact with it. ... then the universe creates for me, with me [225-227].

Aside from spontaneous clarity of thought, gut-feeling, and heart-felt knowing, intuition is also validated through bodily sensations, considered to provide the clearest affirmation and undeniable point of reference:

Rose: ...a wave of energy...goosebumps...sometimes the heart will start racing... quite strong sensations in the body to...'wow, pay attention!'...I always pay attention...that's infallible [249-252].

Anoush: ...I use my body as a reference point: am I just doing this because it's something to do...or is this coming really from a deep authenticity: a deep 'yes' in my body? And I feel I'm just following that now [446-449].

2.5: Doubt and trust

Without traditional spiritual guidelines and doctrinal sureties, uncertainty and doubt are inherent to the pathfinders' daily experience. Going within for answers and surrender to 'not knowing' are considered important practices:

Heather: ...it's probably good that I always feel that I don't know what I'm doing, because I'm always...checking...and feeling...whether it's...right...rather than thinking that I know how to do everything, which would be nice, I don't ...think

that's very beneficial because...you would just do things without really questioning anything [438-443].

Pathfinders understand they have the psycho-spiritual choice to trust the guidance they receive and overcome doubt. This active choice is understood as fundamental to self-empowerment. The act of trusting includes creating stillness for deep listening, an acceptance of 'not knowing', and responsivity to an inner directive flow:

Rose: ...a more evolved approach is...to go in and...trust what shows up and not to give away our power...a deeper surrender and...refining of the ability ... [173-175]. ...to be...open to question and...doubt...yet to find this balance of what feels truly authentic in this being in the moment, to trust that. And there is no formula [494-496].

Pablo: I have faith that I'm guided in some way...that outside of this physical form I am not alone...a sense of guardianship... I trust more the process of life, it still has challenges, there's still effort required...but there's a lot more trust ...because of that feeling of non-aloneness [503-506].

Even for those whose paths are relatively settled within a chosen tradition, the personal journey is still intuitively guided and therefore fluid:

Dan: ... that intuitive sense of 'I'm on the right path with that'. ...in terms of being within that framework, or that tradition...there's the personal journey ...and personal discovery and growth and insight and that...is ongoing... [292-295]. ...without over-thinking it...to intuitively...sense... 'how do I feel about this?' for me...knowing there's a mystery, gives...space, because I don't have to know it all...- I can just trust this inner ...'doesn't know', and that's okay [441-444]!

2.6: Opening and openness

All pathfinders spoke of pivotal 'opening' experiences which marked a radical shift in their spiritual perspective. For some this came through significant life events such as illness, birth, and death, which caused a deeper questioning around the meaning and purpose of their life:

Maggie: ...I knew something was so wrong...in the middle of the night...I cried out to Spirit to help me [98-100]. I just had this huge opening...how pain can be such a huge opening. These huge life events... when the big moment hits, is when we call on 'why are we here?' [103-106].

Some pathfinders shared their story of psychic opening through extreme circumstances, experienced as an initiation, a 'dark night of the soul' or 'spiritual emergency'.

Qori: ... I was sexually assaulted...it...opened me up...I then became very aware of the other dimensions...like I was shocked into awakening...I had a 'dark night of the soul' experience...[34-39]....although...there was a contraction because of trauma, it was actually a huge expansion into being aware that I was connected to other things [48-50].

Jane: I had what I would call an initiation, this powerful life changing experience which I then *was* ...completely on my own with...A psychic, emotional and mental, spiritual breakthrough... [130-133]. ...it was life-changing and... separated me from the tribe I had come from... and took me onto a completely new path, which was only my own... [179- 182].

Four pathfinders reported that a near-death or out-of-body experience opened them into a new perception of reality, which shifted their spirituality from abstract idea or belief to a, for them, undeniable actuality:

Florence: ...I had a near death experience...it turned a massive light on for me... this very sacred spiritual encounter with the sacred feminine. ...it was real, and it wasn't just something I was reading about [169-172] ...It was just an esoteric concept for me but then...I'd had physical interaction with the divine feminine that could not be questioned in my mind...This is no longer something I have to have faith in, it's real! [235-238].

Diana: I flew up to the ceiling with God there *in* the picture of Michelangelo's Adam and God... a one second experience – and then I came back. I was so ecstatically happy! ...like spiritually I was born... And I *knew* at that moment anything is possible, I *knew* I will be taken care of, I *am* connected [363-366].

Pathfinders are expressly open to learning from cultures and traditions other than those they inherited. For participants these include Buddhism, Druidry, Goddess spirituality, Tantra, Shamanism, Yogic tradition, Shinto, Gnosticism, Spiritualism and Creation-centred Christianity:

Dan: ...in terms of my path, I feel really at home or connected in with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and it almost feels like those other things that I experienced before ...led up to that...Somehow it was all integrated within that tradition for me [87-90].

Earth-based traditions are valued because of their embodied ecological and interconnective ethos, which chimes with the pathfinders' notion of multi-dimensionality and aspirations for sustainable co-existence. Participants seek to experience both their native pagan tradition and travelled abroad to work with medicine people and shamans. These indigenous approaches are considered to have retained an authentic core that religious traditions are perceived to have lost.

Pablo: ... travelling there with a purpose to accumulate...connection like those native people had [201-202]. ...it seems like the East is about this 'everything is one' through this...emptiness concept, whereas in the shaman world... 'everything is one' through this hyper-connected framework, which includes birth, life, death, and animism all at once...it just felt more complete... [239-241].

2.7: Challenge

Pathfinders consider challenge and difficulty as inherent to their path, which provides opportunity to foster spiritual learning, resilience, and deepening of process:

Qori: it is messy and sometimes the spiritual path really sucks! ...because you are put through it [360-361] ...presence comes...in those moments of surrender in that... 'this isn't what I signed up for!' That's when truth really really comes in [366-368].

Bert: ...because I'd had those experiences of falling apart, plus quite strong sense of centeredness had built up...I knew that I could always come back... whatever is happening, I can feel the central core of my being...there is something here holding it [448-451].

Challenges are worked with from a symbolic and transpersonal perspective, which provides opportunity to deepen one's consciousness and self-knowing, and an enhanced relationship with intuitive guidance:

Niamh: ...what unfolded...was to deepen my connection to life itself and my belief in a guiding 'intelligence' which manifests in all aspects of life and especially through the body. ...I was frightened but...I knew this would lead me to discoveries about myself and would take me down a path of which I could not have previously conceived...the challenge of really trusting my own intuition...as to what this melanoma was 'about' [526-532].

Although their spiritual relationship is well-established, pathfinders acknowledge their ongoing challenge to maintain spiritual connection in every-day life. Daily spiritual practice and a constant vigilance is applied to counter what they understand as the 'misguided' egoic self and the many distractions coming from the cultural sphere:

Theo: ...it's a huge challenge, especially in this society to...stay connected... you lose consciousness of it all the time but...you become aware of it and you go back to the process and...breathe deeply and...feel your feet on the ground ...the more I cultivate that, I feel the more I'm aligned or in synchrony with my deeper self... [398-404].

Pablo: ...is a daily practice and way of keeping in contact with that notion of 'I'm doing a practice' and it's real and it's ever-present...a relationship...which feels heart based. And it's...like any other relationship in life...that needs care, it needs attention [368-372].

On the other hand, the experience of intense of spiritual process can make it a challenge to engage with the world:

Florence: ...I've learnt...I'm very familiar with the roads of the underworld, but I'm not so familiar with...how to come back out to the light, the everyday world ...I'm finding that challenging [447-450].

Pathfinders report that it can be challenging to find direction in contemporary spirituality due to the lack of traditional shared beliefs, structures, and community:

Heather: ...it is harder to not be part of...a tradition [348]. I do feel adrift sometimes, and I don't always know where to go...But when I see people ...going to their religious structured weekly things, I do notice how ridiculous it feels to me...But I can see that it's comforting...to have that community [352-357].

3: Psycho-spiritual Process

3.1: Exploration

The individual psychospiritual process is core to pathfinders' direction. They are proactive in their search for a meaningful spirituality that resonates with what they hold to be their inner knowing and truth. This involves experimentation, exploration and the ongoing questioning of assumptions and conditioned beliefs:

Sarah: ...willing to throw it all out and be completely wrong...Because that's inquiry! Why stay fixed on something? ...moving out of that religious mould ...we *have* the answers inside us. And they're not, I don't believe, bound by cultural instructions [377-382].

Rhiannon: ...for me a genuine spiritual path: you're actually questioning...conditioning in itself...not just accepting that conditioning and then trying to apply...' spiritual principles' to...achieve what you've been told you should be achieving [637-640].

Pathfinders use an eclectic variety of explorative tools which they feel encourage and support connection to their deeper being. This includes prayer, breathwork, meditation, entheogens, dream-work, alertness to synchronicities, healing, and therapy:

Diana: ...it's my own journey of working with how life presents to me through synchronicity and...my interpretation of my life and my dreams...and...my conscious understanding of what I can gather around me as information that reflects back to me what I need to see [628-631].

Spirituality and psychology are considered profoundly interrelated and mutually enhancing on the spiritual path. Choosing to combine practices from both areas is understood as essential to the process of discernment, integration, and self-growth:

Anoush: I did a lot of study with symbols and dreams and developing an awareness through the model of psychotherapy...creating a meta-position where you're also witnessing what you're experiencing and developing a vocabulary around imagery and symbolism and from a psychological but also a Soul-level [125-130].

Ritual, ceremony, and meditation practices are understood to create a safe and effective container for self-exploration:

Gilbert: ...as you are meditating...you have experiences of things coming up in your own self... from a different perspective...they open in a different way, and that allows you to evolve mentally...going through an experience within myself to grow... [115-119].

Pathfinders further recognise the importance of receiving support from others who have an experiential understanding. This 'mirroring' of their experience helps them to explore any underlying transpersonal value and meaning. Pathfinders in turn can provide this mirroring for others. Healthy support provides grounding, affirmation, guidance, and sometimes confrontation with uncomfortable truths:

Pablo: ...when someone sees through your personality and then shows that to you ...can be quite unnerving, because... there is a discomfort associated with recognising what you're not [102-105].

Rhiannon: ...trying to stay steady, but you can't navigate...or get any understanding...I have always needed a teacher or someone who...can make some sense of what goes on when that gets a grip... [398-395].

Through consistent engagement with their inner process, pathfinders aim to bring an enhanced level of presence to their everyday lives:

Bert: I am on a path which is growing wisdom and understanding and... more than knowing...being able to empty my mind and...bring presence to places that would otherwise be just unconscious patterns running [8-12].

Gilbert: the more presence... a sense of awareness, that I can bring to my life as I walk through it, the more I think I can be of help to people...bringing things into synchronicity... [386-390].

3.2: Embodiment

Pathfinders consider immanence and transcendence as a continuum. The physical body is therefore integral to wholeness, and spirituality must be grounded in the body to be authentic. The notion of 'embodiment' is understood as a 'deepening into life' through being present with emotional, spiritual, and energetic experiences, and the heightened responsiveness to somatic signals to help identify and anchor the psycho-spiritual process:

Niamh: ... the whole thing is a continuum; spirituality doesn't exist without your body! ...integration...into your physical being...is really vital. ... if you treat your body with disdain, you are going to treat other people and the planet with disdain too [468-472].

Rose: I have five children and that's a soul choice...I need to ground those energies very much...at a human level *and* go beyond it...evolve it. ...it's both ...not one or the other... [560 -563].

The body is understood as a vehicle for the spiritual self to experience the manifest world. Likewise, the body can provide a gateway to the transpersonal dimension:

Sarah: ...by checking in and getting feedback...I...started to trust what I could see ...and what I felt would be a fundamental...practice...to open up the seeing... *starting* with the body as the doorway [482-485].

Theo: ...sometimes it feels...stagnated...and I'm not sure if this is an emotional... or a spiritual...or...energetic...or...a physical thing... [678-679] ...I feel it's also the door into the spiritual dimensions...for me to connect with my deeper self [685-687].

For some pathfinders, the strength of identification with their spiritual aspect was accompanied by a resistance to their physical being. They describe their challenge of coming into relationship with their body and accept their incarnation:

Edward: I didn't know how to deal with the world...And bit by bit...I took responsibility for 'I need to inhabit this body' and live this life and use this vehicle that I have been given and be grateful... actually *use* it and find out what I need to do and where I need to go [504-507].

Rose: I reconnected to places in me that I had lost. ...I feel it as a soul-disconnection ...a disconnection from that life-force energy, and it has always

been exceptionally hard for me to be on the planet...layers of unconscious resistance to that [78-81].

The intention to live an embodied life helps pathfinders to navigate the balance between transcendence and immanence, both in relation to their own sense of wholeness and how they understand their spirituality. An embodied spirituality means to be grounded into everyday life and 'being at home in yourself':

Jane: ...to allow our bodies to flow as much as our being and...the sexual energy is as important as the spiritual...there's no separation...we've just chosen different words for the same thing...that's how I embrace now being human and divine [335-339].

Gilbert:...I didn't want to be walking three foot off the ground... in this ...transcendent space. I wanted to be...in my life in a real way...our physical being and our 'deepness' that we can connect to and attune to in one another [165-167]. ...if you can hold both, that for me is being whole [608].

Embodiment can be a creative soma-spiritual experience of opening into the core of one's being, entering into a tangible relationship and reconnection with the 'unmanifest': as the unification of the known and the unknown:

Diana: ...a spiritual experience in this body...is my life journey...my expression of my body, my movement, my sounds, my voice, my...writing and painting ...experience myself in this conscious way, as conscious as I *can* be...at the same time reaching to the 'what I don't know' ...as constant exploration of the unknown as an artist, but at the same time experiencing and expressing the known of who I am [438-445].

3.3: Healing and wholeness

The search for healing and wholeness is central to the pathfinders' experience. Psychological exploration of unhealthy patterns and healing of inner trauma is understood to be vital to the overall spiritual process:

Mary: ... I've worked on myself an awful lot and that's been part of my spiritual path [535]. I have had really dark times... I've had psychotherapy...and I've worked with that so painfully, but for the best...that's taught me a lot... [538-540] ...I've chosen to learn by the tragedies...rather than hold them as... wounds ...I've chosen to heal [565-567].

Pathfinders understand their psycho-spiritual wholeness to require the inner integration of masculine and feminine energies, where the two archetypal forces complement and support each other:

Sarah: ...trust and intuition...are...more in the feminine principle... But...my ethos...is that it's a mixture of the two...a very masculine focus of the mind and...the trust and the intuition and the curiosity is the support of the masculine and vice versa...you can't have one without the other [357-362].

Feminine and masculine energies are worked with as archetypes in the psychospiritual process. Personal and interpersonal work involves a search for direct experience and insight to recognize and heal distortion and inner wounding:

Maggie: ...there are...strong feminine archetypal icons in my story that need unearthing and pulling out to the light. And so, I read, I search...I find...I revel in them...in this body. ...I need my women...to laugh...swear...joke...and shout with...to turn up a fully honoured woman, not a...lady vicar, but as a woman [446-451].

Sharia: ...men...move towards inner work...because there's an inner wounding that's ...come to control their lives, so they're just *forced* from inside...they will come into a female led group because they need to be held in a breaking down of all that has trapped them... [650-654].

Psycho-spiritual work is understood as a process from disconnection to connection, which is inherently healing:

Theo: Whether it's connecting to the emotions or...lost memories or...connecting on a social level with your family or your friends, or...with nature or...cosmic universal or spiritual connection, for me it's always about moving from disconnection to connection [421-424].

3.4: Purpose

Pathfinders believe in the principle of co-creative relationship with a transpersonal dimension termed in various ways, such as 'spirit' and 'universal consciousness'.

Accordingly, they understand there to be a direct relationship between intention and manifestation. The unveiling of inner purpose through psychospiritual engagement is as such experienced as a self-empowering 'soul' or spiritual choice to incarnate and having a 'mission' to accomplish:

Bert: I'm walking a path with intention, knowing that when intentions are really clearly set, things manifest. ...there's 'meeting what happens with clear consciousness in reference to the intention' and knowing that if I intend to be ...conscious about say, patterns of neediness, I seem to get events in my life that show me where I'm needy, and so I become conscious [20-24].

Spiritual pathfinders feel that their spirituality connects them to a strong sense of purpose in life. Their quest to grow in awareness and authenticity is not intended to be limited to the personal sphere but is ultimately about being a catalyst for positive change in the world:

Rhiannon: ...I feel...part of an awakening ... exploring ways of living that are more loving to the planet... a conscious relating. ...the paradigm that exists...it's not working on so many levels, and we're trying to bring in something new. So yes... part of my purpose is to help a change... [512-516].

Based on the notion of a 'collective consciousness' or shared 'oneness', pathfinders consider their personal purpose to be interrelated to a greater collective purpose. They actively seek to be 'part of the solution' and to be 'in service to the greater good' and believe that increasing personal congruency will ripple outward to positively change patterns of behaviour in the collective sphere:

Jedi: ...A very strong sense of purpose; [service] to human beings, to the world, to souls, to spiritual process, growth, to healing, yes [536-537]. ... love in action ...in as dark and difficult places as I can possibly find, because that's where the juice is and ...truth is...when it's actually really difficult to maintain love and compassion for someone [629-631].

Several female pathfinders expressed to feel a deeper reason for having been born a woman. They regard their own process of reclaiming their inner feminine and empowerment directly relates to their greater purpose to restore the feminine in the collective sphere and heal the imbalance between feminine and masculine aspects in the world:

Qori: ...coming through the sacred feminine ministry; that anything based on hierarchy is spiritually suspect...there is no accident that I've embodied as a woman...it's about the marriage of those two parts to birth that light...the recognition that...both the sacred feminine and the sacred masculine, are equally needed for healing... [328-336].

The understanding of co-creative relationship with a 'higher' self and/or multidimensional reality also means that 'negative' experiences such as pain and

suffering can be embraced as initiatory catalysts for new learning and direction toward greater wholeness:

Rose: ...the beginning of my healing or coming into wholeness... I was so unwell, I had to strip away layer after layer, starting at the surface as physical...and then mental thought patterns...and then looking at emotional - I'd had no idea what was buried in there [68-71].

As they follow their impulse to serve a greater good, pathfinders often enter vocational work which fulfils that purpose:

Niamh: ...what I find important doing my work is to help people increase their self-knowledge ... to embrace all those different ways that they express themselves as a human being, so that they have the freedom to choose more easily. So...the essence of what I do is to help people connect to their essence... [258-262] ...that bigger sense of self, which...is always interconnected with the whole [265-266].

3.5: Shifting perspective

A shift in psycho-spiritual perspective can happen in various ways for pathfinders. For some, an encounter with living examples that resonated with yearnings hitherto undefined or unrequited, provided a sense of acceptance and 'homecoming':

Gilbert: ...in that first...shamanic training I had...really powerful healing experiences...I came away from that week just thinking...I've finally come home'..., I finally feel like I'm fitting in with things; that I can feel part of and I'm not ...crazy... [297-300]!

Maggie: ...on Iona...walking into the abbey and saw a woman priest! ... It felt ...like...having a panic attack...I couldn't take my eyes off her, but I also... wanted to run...I had never seen it before....it was very beautiful and very troubling [188-193]. ...I didn't know I really really wanted that [197].

The witnessing or experiencing of 'extra'-ordinary events can shift the boundaries of what can be believed and instigate a new chapter of spiritual exploration:

Florence: ...thinking 'oh, this is my direct experience'...this is what I want ... I don't want to go through another version of 'church'... go through another religion, I want...the more mystical path...to have a direct experience with spirit. And that's what I decided to open into... [249-254].

Jedi: ...seeing beams coming out of this guys' eyes...it's only on seeing that that I actually can believe it...a real paradigm moment... That opened a whole other

thing of right, it's time to explore another whole level of the invisible or the cosmic stuff that I'd been so resistant to [591-601].

Six pathfinders valued the use of entheogens and psychedelics as a tool to access other-dimensional realities and widen their perception beyond the five senses of everyday consciousness:

Niamh: ...one of the important things I did was to take LSD. ...I remember sitting ...at the sea...seeing everything around me...like a fractal... And realising 'oh... I'm part of this, it's all a pattern; it's all...interconnected'...there was a real sense of ...being a part of something much larger... [141-147].

3.6: Identity and Transformation

Pathfinders' psycho-spiritual work is aimed at self-transformation or self-realisation, which is understood as a breaking through the constraints of the conditioned constructed self and opening into a deeper essence of selfhood and surrender to the mystery of life:

Gilbert: ...the cultural patterns that we are breaking through...you're learning to source from a different place, rather than...being sourced...from culture. ...you're learning to trust and connect to that inner source and rely on that... [131-134] ...at some point there comes a transition whereby you don't have to swing from one to the other, it just becomes...normal to be in that space [139-141].

Self-transformation involves a continuous process of undoing self-restricting, habituated and unconsciously driven narratives, personality patterns and identities. This includes any identity-investment in set spiritual pathways. The combined work of psychological self-healing and spiritual opening to 'being', enables inner freedom and creativity of expression to unfold:

Rose: A complete dying again and again to that which is beyond identity...a move from identifying with a personal being...life circumstances and story...to something which is eternal and infinite...when...I've got comfortable in any kind of identity...then that has to go...it's the moving from the personal identification to the transpersonal or beyond personal...and then back into... okay I'm doing the dishes... [541-551 & 553].

Sarah: ...I went through a...really strong...internal breaking, where the illusion of ...having to pray a certain way or have a certain anything, was broken... a phase

of having to grieve that identity...or a safety structure of...if I follow this then I'll be spiritual or something [214-221].

Pathfinders combine spiritual and psychological disciplines in the ongoing process of self-integration. They understand their personal responsibility to both 'ground' or embody transcendent experiences, and to nurture a healthy psychological foundation to experience their spirituality:

Qori: ...transformation is an ongoing process... I...will fall back into old ego patterns or not very useful paradigms based on distractions...tiredness...or overwhelm. But it's that keeping with, returning to it...that's a moment-by-moment practice, without self-judgement! [504-507].

Shifts in identity can be experienced as a stepping out of passivity or victimhood, into self-empowerment or self-agency, expressed as a trust in the wisdom of a greater Selfhood or beingness. This heightens the pathfinder's capacity for responsibility and responsiveness to life and provides a strong foundation and confidence to walk one's unique path in the world:

Diama: ...it's an inner experience...you just know you're connected to everything; you know this is your life now...whatever you make it...that was the moment I was born. That's what I was searching for ... [401-404]. ... [from] the experience in life and trusting the universe is taking care of you. Now [it] is *me* trusting *myself* in every single moment that I'm making decisions... [502-503].

Surface identity is experienced as an interface with the world that is unfixed and evolving. A more profound sense of self is strengthened through the process of self-knowing and self-acceptance.

Jane: I really didn't have a sense of self. I now have an incredibly strong sense of self. But that self is incredibly malleable and shaped and continuously connecting to others and so I can recognise when there's something I need to learn...something I need...to share [502-505].

Pathfinders make a direct relationship between the freedom from fixed identity and spiritual freedom, formulated as the surrender to a deeper intelligence, or trusting the unknown, or possessing self-agency to follow one's own intuitive knowing:

Sarah: ...spiritual freedom is a space where I feel like I trust the unknown...that it's wild and rocky and unlinear and linear, and makes sense and makes no sense; it's like having my mind wide, opens me up; the vulnerability of that... [388-390]. Being in the changing flow of everything that's going on... [613].

Pathfinders often related the quality of their core-self to the perception they remember from childhood. Self-transformation is accordingly experienced as the reconnection to an original openness and freshness of being:

Niamh: ...the essence hasn't really changed...as a child already I had that sense of interconnection, but... it's been a...question of integrating it into all aspects of my life...some part of me went underground...I took...detours ...However, there is not much that I...regret...it's...a delight to look back and see that younger self and think 'oh I can really feel that in me still!' That's who I am [480-488]!

Although identity remains fluid and open to new experience, pathfinders feel they move toward increasing inner stability which changes the quality of their psychospiritual process: as less emphasis on searching and more on clarity of direction:

Mary: I've spent many years looking for something and actually it's when I stopped looking and came back within myself, is when I found some very peaceful quiet wisdom [12-13].

Pablo: I was very experimental for...4 or 5 years [344] ...it's still going on...But... in a...more narrow channel now... I'm not as distracted as I used to be [346-348].

3.7: Transforming the Collective

Pathfinders value authentic relationship within community and the wider collective sphere. They feel that real societal change is happening ground-up, driven by those who share a wider transpersonal perspective and ethos of interconnectedness. Pro-active service to the greater good represents 'life as practice':

Qori: Do what it is that yours to do... it's about grassroots...to use your voice to make sure that everybody is heard and respected...feels a really important part of the spiritual journey to me, otherwise it's not truthful or grounded in anything real [298-302].

Heather: ... people taking responsibility for managing themselves and the community [503]. Yes, it's a people driven movement, and it's all connecting now...it is really positive [507-508].

Based on the principle of interconnectedness and the perspective that inner patterns create outer manifestation, pathfinders believe their personal spiritual development can positively transform the collective psyche through the undoing of socio-cultural conditioning:

Edward: the wider world is the accumulative result of all of us...how we live our life is allowing the wider world to be and vice versa. It's an interaction on that level. ...How we *behave* and the decisions we make determine the ambient...My responsibility is...to be as giving in a positive energetical sense to this ambient as I possibly can [547-552].

4: Pathfinders and the new Paradigm

4.1: The new spiritual paradigm

The new spiritual paradigm is understood as non-denominational, personalised, and self-responsible. The primary focus is on the quality of consciousness the individual contributes through their engagement as an act of co-creativity:

Sharia: Safe...free...witnessed...heard and still belonging...not dominated, not guru led, not overpowered, but...just 'a part of'...and invited to grow and... bring their wisdom [563-565].

Anoush: I think the word 'spirituality' is really expanding...that everything is spirituality...has a sacred element to it... it's a sense of presence that you bring to what you do that makes it a spirituality... I imagine...our ancestors...had that... consciousness much more deeply...we're both drawing on that but also creating new ones [573-579].

Maggie: ...we are all equipped with a deep instinct for life...for what is life-affirming and life-giving and where wisdom resides. And if we just give up any notion of that it looks like this or that... [230-232].

The new spiritual paradigm allows and demands people take ownership of their spirituality. Pathfinders explore different ways of learning and knowing in search of what is 'essential', and human-created structures are thereby always open to change. Engagement can happen outside *and* within old and new forms, but practitioners have autonomy to find their own 'gnostic' knowledge in relation to doctrinal teachings:

Sharia: ...an allowing for each individual to have a personal relationship with whatever aspect of the divine is authentic for them....you *could* be ex or...*any* faith. But...within your faith, you are taking more independent, individual autonomy [420-425]. ... they can *all* be converted from within, it's all about the people's consciousness inside them [620-622].

Contemporary spiritual expressions are further understood as a rediscovery of ancient knowledge predating patriarchal monotheistic religions. Pathfinders look to both earth-

based indigenous and Eastern traditions for pathways and practices where the interconnection between the sacred and profane is preserved:

Pablo: I feel like my spiritual compass is pointing backwards through time towards the simplest practice...of people living more closely with nature...living in this...age and seeing how much the planet is changing...there's a...wanting to keep tradition alive, but in a way that is understandable in my own language, in my own community [384-389].

Anoush: ...I think that there is a growing appreciation...in feminine consciousness that's...around co-creation and...having a relationship to the earth [239-241].

A major theme in the new spiritual paradigm is the rebalancing of feminine and masculine principles in service to wholeness. Pathfinders feel that religious traditions and secular culture are deeply distorted by patriarchal hierarchy. The interest in indigenous, pagan and Goddess spirituality reflects the pathfinder's search to explore and re-empower the sacred Feminine and the qualities attributed to the feminine principle such as heterarchy, embodiment, intuition, love, compassion, creativity, and surrender:

Sharia: I...do not see that there is gender in divinity...BUT...under that banner of Goddess are all the things that I believe in...love-...compassion-...care-orientated, *fiercely* feminine...: allowance, surrendering to...expression of emotion, drama, creativity [634-638].

The prominence of women in contemporary spirituality also accounts for a more feminine approach and a search for representative archetypes:

Rhiannon: ...people are finding new pathways. ...Women seem to be leading that... because...women are wanting to find something that is authentic to them - hence the rise of the Divine Feminine, the Goddess ...people needing archetypes that reflect them [591-595].

Contemporary spirituality is about embracing the fullest possible spectrum of one's humanity, encompassing both transcendence and immanence. Spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional aspects are all considered inherent to human beingness and therefore necessary components to explore. This represents an integrative path toward wholeness:

Mary: ...more people are looking within themselves for their spirituality, because it's more real...we walk, we eat, we shit, we bleed, and we can't get away from

that...But within that...there's so much more of ourselves to learn and...different ways of learning that [366-369].

Rose: My path continues to be in constant evolution...of balancing of what we see as masculine and feminine aspect...my path at this time involves integrating all of the experiences and formal study...and modalities that I have been involved in and...integrating them and letting them fall away, and merely surrendering to a pathless path [7-13].

4.2: The Shadow in contemporary spirituality

Pathfinders welcome self-directed spirituality entering the mainstream. They however voice concern about commercialisation in the 'new age' movement, where the approach has become too formulaic, generic, and individualistic as a result. As new spiritual ideas become popular, complexity is seen to be lost and dogmatism can creep in. Overall, pathfinders either do not, or no longer, resonate with the label 'new age', as it is felt to have lost the original ethos of authentic relationship, organic unfolding, love, self-inquiry, self-responsibility, and self-agency:

Rhiannon: ...there are parts of the New Age...informed by the culture of individualism, where what's offered...is: 'Here is a prescription for you to get what you want'. ...you're not actually...examining that...to question this culture...[and] the beliefs that I have... [626-630].

Bert: ...spreading out into institutions is...positive, but how to deeply self-question...how to apply critical thinking to oneself is not being taught...how not to be...spiritually lazy ...when you have strong spiritual experiences you can't do that [532-536].

Pathfinders are overall very aware of shadow aspects in contemporary spirituality. The issue of 'spiritual bypassing' is frequently mentioned, understood as a lack of psychological integration, naivety about what the spiritual process entails, and cherry-picking spiritual practices. This creates an idealized 'lifestyle' spirituality and magical thinking which fails to meet the complexities of life, does not empower through self-responsibility, and preys on people's vulnerabilities:

Pablo: ...I felt like...everything I'm learning here is very beautiful...and philosophical, but I don't have any tools to...actually live my life with...it's so removed from the majority of the world's living [79-81]. ...those teachings are very lofty, and you can go into the bliss of meditation...which isn't really spiritual ... like a self-directed avoidance...the bliss of no responsibility [184- 186].

Pathfinders diagnose a denial of 'shadow' in popularised spirituality which solely endorses the 'light' of transcendence. This has led to an abusive culture of shaming those whose experiences do not conform to the idealized picture, and a disrespect for the deeper work that authentic psycho-spiritual engagement entails:

Mary: ...people are giving themselves away ...far too much...without understanding exactly what they're doing [323-324]. ...they're desperate to find this 'something else' and they want it *now*, without doing the work...and the falling over and the bearing of wounds [342-344].

Qori: ... people...focussing on the light aspect, and avoiding doing the deeper work... The shadow work for me is...essential because the gold is in that! ...culturally...there is a lot of shame around...what people experience...that 'I should be' ...better than this, 'I should be' good, 'I should be' above my feelings [208-213].

Pathfinders acknowledge cultural appropriation and exploitation in the commercialised spiritual milieu. They however also feel that learning directly from indigenous cultures and taking such wisdom forward into their own communities is aligned with the co-creative principle. Provided it is done with integrity, they see a greater purpose for inter-cultural exchange: to remind the Western psyche of its spiritual foundation of interconnectedness and the sacredness of life:

Anoush: ...cultural appropriation has been going on for centuries and I feel ...that aboriginal people are coming forward and offering to teach, so that it's not taken... [271-273]. ... I think this is part of co-creation. ...of course, there's... people who are going to be exploitative, but I think that...indigenous people are picking up their power by teaching [279-281].

Pathfinders perceive that new paradigm spirituality is gaining in influence and maturation, and some of the more naïve and narcissistic tendencies are being recognised and addressed:

Jane: ...I can see...the movement that I am a part of...having more influence... maybe effecting change in the world...for people to be better...psychological growth has already done that [411-414]. ... The language wasn't there, and slowly...the language is there...there's a momentum... [423].

4.3: Interconnectedness, crisis, and collective awakening

Pathfinders hold that humanity's inherent interconnectedness with the sacred means that all beings carry the potential for spiritual transformation. They further consider themselves as individuated consciousness existing within a field of collective consciousness. Consequently, the symbiosis between self, collective, and the sacred makes a collective 'awakening' possible. The internet is viewed as a symbolic outer manifestation of this inner awareness, which facilitates the sharing of spiritual teachings and new spiritual ideas:

Mary: ...we're more connected as human beings than we've ever been, through technology. ...there's evidence that we all over the world practice very similar ways...there is a collective consciousness and...as we're the same species, we're all connected with that [549-555].

Gilbert: ...that...freshness that you bring...by being that sense of awareness. I think...can clear...the energy just by walking that presence on the earth [389-392].

Pathfinders are acutely aware of the environmental and socio-economic crisis caused by Western individualism. They perceive a necessary breaking down of outmoded forms and feel engaged in a collective search for new solutions based on the spiritual principle of interconnectedness:

Bert: ...our civilisation...it's fracturing quite severely...the ecology of the planet is in massive crisis. ...there's a lot of pressure upon human beings. ...to be resilient through this process, a lot has to come together! And I do believe that this new spiritual consciousness has a role to play...as a... 'gathering some core and form', but that's still very much in process I'd say... [540-544].

Sarah: ...are we going to, as a global community...do it together, or not be bothered? ...it's a big question and...people are trying to find ways to do that. ...I think that taps into our innate spiritual understanding that we are all interconnected [556-559].

Pathfinders believe the reinstatement of the Feminine principle in spirituality brings about a collective shift towards co-creative principles, sustainability, equality, and wholeness. The current turbulence in our world is considered as the symbolic labour of birthing this new paradigm:

Sharia: ...it's all about birth, creation: we are the beings birthing a new time...the birth from the womb of the universe of a new understanding: the Christ energy

coming through the divine feminine...humans coming back to realising the importance of caring for the earth, for their lives, for each generation [638-642].

Florence: ...what we are heading towards globally or collectively, is hopefully balance...between the sacred masculine and the sacred feminine. But where we are right now is in a quite turbulent state... But then...to heal something you often have to break it [613-616].

Pathfinders can struggle with loneliness and lack of direction as they leave the traditional paradigm behind, which often includes their community of origin. They seek to create new 'conscious communities' of like-minded peers to find belonging and explore the spiritual process together:

Heather: ...we...have our own way of interpreting reality... and it's really nice when you meet people and...have a common understanding...and can feel it... You then do get a much stronger bond...because you've both understood something that sounds far too weird for most people to even consider [362-367].

Pathfinders recognise their spiritual explorations can be challenging as mainstream society and traditions are unable to acknowledge or support transpersonal experiences. New conscious communities therefore provide a support-base and buffer in relationship with the world:

Theo: ...I think the danger is...in the people around you that cannot support you during the coming back... it's not so much...the experience that is dangerous but more the society that is dangerous...the discrepancy between those two [331-334].

Born from their personal process and sense of purpose in the world, pathfinders explore which pertinent questions need to be asked in the collective sphere. Issues such as mental health, spiritual guidance, discernment of deeper truth, and protecting the next generation, are felt to be of major concern:

Qori: ...access to that holistic spiritual aspect as well as the psycho-dynamic and physical aspects need to be raised...particularly for young people who are presenting with what may seem like mental health issues. We cannot fit that young person to the model, there has to be a sense of constant co-creation in terms of what is playing out in this moment and...a willingness to engage...as an ongoing dialogue... [536-542].

Pathfinders passionately feel that spirituality cannot be separated from everyday life and culture. The transformation of society with regards to social justice, sustainability,

inclusivity and respecting the sanctity of life, are intrinsic to living a congruent spiritual life:

Jane:...there's a lot going on that needs to change...to feel back in harmony with ourselves and the world and with each other...connected to that bigger growth of: 'What are we doing in this world?'. ...it's not just about being spiritual because it's deeply about being human [285-289].

Pathfinders feel called to be bridge-builders in the world. They search for common ground and dialogue between people and between traditions, based on shared values, shared human experience, and unifying mystical awareness. Using what they learn from their personal process, they aim to foster a deep listening and openness to other perspectives and a reconnection to the sacred in the collective sphere:

Maggie: ...I seriously think that the future of our planet depends on the bridges ...Not...just tolerating, not just accepting, but seeing we really *need* each other ...*your* path teaches *me*, informs *me* [485-489].

Pathfinders see themselves as trailblazers bringing in a new paradigm of interconnected, interdependent, self-accountable, co-creative and fully embodied spiritual humans. As explorers of their own process and experience, their inquiry begins in the personal and extends to the collective sphere; aiming to bridge the disconnect between people, between traditions, between science and spirituality, and between the sacred and the secular. To do this, pathfinders pro-actively keep an open mind and aim to bring fluidity to any fixed social or spiritual or identity-construct. They do their best to heal their shadow and stay grounded, to embrace their humanity and claim their spiritual freedom, and remain humble in the face of Mystery.

Self-reflection

A vital component in *Heuristics* is that of self-reflecting on how one's frame of reference is expanded through engagement with the experiences, influences and perspectives of fellow peers engaged on similar pathways. As the researcher, I have my own internal frame of reference, based on my perceptions, intuitions, beliefs, values, and judgements, as well as inherited socio-cultural, and residual religious patterning. All these aspects inform my subjective experience of spirituality from which personal meaning and worldview is born (Moustakas, 1990). The composite depiction revealed a great number of themes. Whilst some evoked a stronger sympathetic resonance with my personal experience than others, I hoped to represent fairly the distilled qualities and psycho-spiritual trajectory of the spiritual pathfinder in shared "archetypal" terms.

Like many of the participants in this study, I felt to be a cuckoo in the nest: a changeling child. I could not find belonging in my family or world, and I subconsciously resisted my 'incarnation'. I was raised as one of six children in a Catholic household in an otherwise secular society. My parents raised us as they themselves were raised: imposing fixed gender roles and instilling suppressive attitudes toward sex, secular influences, and independent thought. My natural creativity and sensitivities were not understood or supported, which was traumatizing to me. Neither did my upbringing provide a healthy archetype to represent, let alone honour, my femininity. Being Catholic was a way of life according to set rules such as being seen in church on Sundays: it represented a social construct rather than a spiritual path.

I left my native country at the age of 18 to find my own path in life. At that point, my understanding of freedom translated as a freedom to rebel and live outside the norm. It was a 'freedom from' the dictates of my past, but not yet a 'freedom to' explore my own being. Finding creative freedom through art was a beginning of inner change, of learning to express myself: my body, my identity, and my rage. In my search for wholeness, I came to understand that my first priorities were to heal my inner child and my inner feminine in order to accept and embrace my incarnation.

I attended art college and trained as a theatre practitioner in my mid-twenties. I was passionate about enabling others to find *their* creative freedom. I worked on

projects in a wide variety of environments such as inner-city communities, schools, prisons, and mental health institutions. I further worked as a performer on site-specific projects, theatre-in-education and in more mainstream settings. I also co-ran projects with children, teenagers, and adults with special needs who often lived with profound physical, emotional, and socio-economic challenges. I experienced in myself- and saw first-hand in others- the transformative impact that creative expression can have in even the most desolate of circumstances.

Alongside my theatre work, I had a job in a wholefood shop: a 'holistic' milieu which began my interest in alternative therapies, energy medicine, and new age ideas. Like so many, I experimented with various new age practices which in the nineties were becoming more mainstream. I devoured self-help books and attended workshops on anything from meditation, to chakras, to crystals, to overtone singing. It was opening a whole new world where a more spiritually oriented sensitivity began to stir within me. I increasingly felt this had been the missing part in my being that I was now guided to discover. I trained in several holistic healing modalities which eventually became my main profession. Energy work requires an intuitive immersive responsivity to the moment and a coming into resonance with the language of the subtle body. This suited my sensitivities and innate creativity. However, the focus on clients and the immersive 'flow' states I enjoyed during treatments and trainings deflected from the reality of my personal development. In effect, I was using my intuitive abilities and work with others to spiritually bypass my own inner conflicts.

A spiritual crisis in my mid-thirties began my spiritual orientation in earnest. This was my 'significant life-event': an acute physical, emotional, and energetic upheaval and psychic opening into other-dimensional realities. I understood this opening as an initiation into my soul-purpose and process of deepening incarnation through the mystery of the Sacred Feminine, whose many aspects appeared in visions, intuitions, and dreams, and found expression in clay figurines. During and after my spiritual crisis, I had no context or map to understand what was happening to me. As a result, I became largely reliant on inner guidance to find direction and meaning. As per participants' trajectories, it marked a phase where existing assumptions and beliefs were either

broken down or up for questioning. None of it made logical sense, yet I felt an intuitive surety that this was an intentional and guided process. I felt drawn to Gnosticism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Shamanism and Psychosynthesis: areas I had only superficial interest in before but were now very relevant to my personal experience. I also entered an intense period of facing my inner psychological patterns at a new depth. The extremities of long-term illness which accompanied this process meant I had to let go of every identity in relation to the world. I felt stripped bare on every level: physical, emotional, relational, and societal. In those many years of 'undoing', the only stable part of myself was an inner sense of knowing which was beyond all these roles, like an eye in the storm. As was the case for most of the participants, I encountered a few key people who, due to their own spiritual journeys, could provide healthy mirroring to reflect my newly configuring selfhood. My perspective on reality and my identity became wholly transpersonal, not as an abstract idea or spiritual lifestyle-choice, but because an enhanced connection with my spiritual nature and interconnection with spiritual dimensions had awakened, which felt more real than anything I had ever felt. Whilst my rational faculties remained intact throughout, my intuition became the main driver for my future direction.

Writing was one of the ways through which I was able to ground my experiences. Alongside my creative and biographical writing, I felt drawn to find a wider context in more 'authorized' language. A diploma course in *Psychosynthesis* (Linders in Parfitt, 2009) began the pathway to better understand the psychological-spiritual process and challenges involved in self-realisation. An MSc in *transpersonal psychology and consciousness studies* represented my emergence out of the hermitage imposed by illness, toward what I call the 'topside world'. With my own experience of spiritual emergency and long-term physical illness and energetic instability as my starting point, I explored the role of the body on the spiritual path (Linders & Lancaster, 2013). Subsequently I set out to explore the intricacies of finding one's own spiritual path in life, an inquiry which culminates in this doctoral report. My two major life-themes: spiritual emergency and emergence, and spiritual pathfinding, have now found shared expression in academic research.

Along with my fellow pathfinders, I experience spirituality as fundamental to my life and identity. Whilst the accumulative effects of direct experience, psychological healing and spiritual practice are by now well-rooted in my being, there is no sense of “arrival” but rather, a “continuing to find”. I perceive my identity as a responsive consciousness interacting with life, occasionally getting stuck in the clay, and returning to fluidity through reconnection to my “full-spectrum” triune nature. As I learned to understand my spirituality better through meaningful exchange with participants, I feel less different and more belonging through identifying mutual themes, aspirations, and challenges. I recognize myself as a pathfinder amongst pathfinders, each with our own story to tell. Our encounter providing a mirror to aid self-reflection and self-understanding.

Creative Synthesis



The creative synthesis continues the exploration of how ones' subjective experience is also a shared experience, which in turn may be substantial enough to reflect a new paradigm in spiritual expression. It therefore serves as a more personal representation of what it means to be a spiritual pathfinder in secularized culture: for myself, for others, and for the world. This creative synthesis is a combination of symbolic artwork accompanied by creative insight.

I chose to make a triptych of clay figurines. A triptych most commonly takes the form of a panelled painting in religious art. It is composed of three sections integrated into a single unit, which reflects the dialectic interaction between differing aspects to form a synthesis which is greater than the sum of its parts. Whilst the figurines cannot convey the entirety of the findings, I conceived them as "essences of sympathetic resonance taking form". Drawing on the data as well as on personal experience, they represent three major stages and three vital aspects, integrated through the overarching theme of what it means to be a spiritual pathfinder.

Medium and process

As per a spiritual or transpersonal perspective, spiritual pathfinders experience their incarnated selves as "spiritual beings having a human experience"; an admixture of spirit and matter, temporarily conjoined by "soul" or "Self" consciousness. Clay represents matter, earth, limitation, and the physical side of our nature, whilst the

creative process reflects the “unseen” spiritual and inspirational. Their coming together through my consciousness in relationship with my peers, who represent the collective in this project, results in a symbolic expression of meaning which is both personal and universal.

My choice to work with clay stems from an ongoing relationship with this medium. At many key moments in my life, I have been making clay figurines to symbolically express inner archetypes I am working with as part of my psycho-spiritual process. Working with clay demands an act of physicality: kneading and shaping, and mindfulness of its fragility, which limits the possibilities of translation from idea into form. As such it is an act of grounding and embodying. Time is also a factor, as certain



stages are only possible when the clay is of a particular consistency. Creating the main shape must be done when the clay is wet, whereas applying the finer details such as facial features and hands only becomes possible when the clay is drier ‘leather-hard’ - but leave it too long and the clay will crumble and break. This to me resonates with the process of malleability in formative youth, to maturing and defining ourselves in adulthood, and losing the ability to transform if we were to become too set in our ways. Lastly, sculpting is an act of both creation and co-creation. I start with an overall vision and hold that as my intention as I work, yet the figurine takes on its own life: my hands respond to the shape that wants to appear. A synergy takes place between psyche and soma and between my creative unconscious and executive conscious aspects. These (again) three aspects; embodiment, maturation-time, and co-creativity, for me further symbolise what it means to live an embodied, responsive/responsible, and participatory spirituality.

The figurines

Birth-right...

The first figurine depicts a mother and child. The mother figure is painted in “non-human” colours to represent her archetypal nature, whereas the child is painted



in human colours, such as skin colour for her face and hands, to represent incarnated life. The child represents the purity and originality of child awareness mentioned by participants. Her expression is one of wonderment and open curiosity. She faces outward toward the world, whilst held in unconditional belonging and love personified by the mother. In concordance with themes

around searching for belonging, one’s deeper identity being inherently spiritual, and the restoration of the Sacred Feminine to enable a more balanced spirituality, the figurine primarily symbolises the birth right of any soul to experience the mystery of life unmediated and to receive nurturing in immanence, represented by the Divine Feminine.

The figurine further symbolises the themes of foundation, grounding, the healing of primary wounding, and finding belonging on this earth, understood as fundamental by participants for an



embodied spirituality. According to Psychosynthesis theory, it represents the personal



psychosynthesis which precedes, accompanies, and integrates the life-long process of a transpersonal psychosynthesis. The restoration of the *Divine Feminine* emerged as a major characteristic of the new spiritual paradigm in this study. Particularly female participants mentioned their growing awareness in mid to late childhood of the patriarchal disenfranchisement of women within religious, educational, and societal institutions. Significant

life-events on the pathfinders' path, such as spiritual emergencies, awakenings, and OBE's, in that way symbolise the end of the innocence of spiritual childhood and initiation into a new phase of growth and maturation, marked by challenge and learning.

In-tuiri (to see within)

The second figurine is a symbolic depiction of inner guidance and intuition. The figure is sitting in meditation and/or contemplation as an act of deep listening. Her eyes



are closed because the focus is inward. The figurine represents introspection as the cornerstone for living a spiritually connected life beyond the distractions of the outer world. The abatement of the rational mind in spiritual practices allows the intuitive function to develop, symbolised by the "third eye" on the forehead. The figurine has one hand

on her belly feeling her gut-instincts: her bodily signals, and one hand on her heart feeling the (com)passion of the soul. The heart is coloured gold, signifying the spiritual heart which carries the higher wisdoms of compassion, integrity and agape to guide the human heart. The figurine is painted in colours which roughly represent those of the ascending chakras and to depict the bridge between earth (red/brown), heart (green and gold) and spirit (blue/white) that is created through practice. The figure looks more "other-worldly" than the other figurines to symbolise the transcendence of ego and expansion beyond merely human existence through spiritual engagement.



The image represents the consistent self-development work that pathfinders undertake, each in their own way, to make connection to their authentic being, and/or spiritual dimension. Participants use their spiritual practices as tools to enhance their ability to be present, connect to guides, note somatic signals, perceive deeper feelings, travel between dimensions, integrate psycho-spiritual processes, and witness the workings of the mind. Above all, practice serves the receptivity to inner intuitive



guidance which pathfinders require to discern the deeper purpose and direction of their being. Pathfinders seek direct knowing or “Gnosis” and search to explore experiential opportunities that serve this quest. The figurine represents and acknowledges the role of transcendence to “see” beyond the egoic construct and human-made frameworks onto new horizons. The figurine further symbolises this process of waking up to new ways of knowing and resulting changes in perspective.

Spiritual Pathfinder

The third figurine depicts the synthesis of psychological healing (figurine 1) and



spiritual practice (figurine 2) as the path of individuation or self-realisation. The pathfinder has now reached a level of maturity and embodiment to embrace her incarnation with the self-acceptance, self-awareness, and self-understanding necessary to walk an authentic path. She is not perfect, but wizened to the shadows that live within herself, others, and the world. She has learnt sufficient tools to take

responsibility for her life, her behaviour, her relationships, and her purpose to do what is hers to do. There is growing congruency between her sense of self, her path in the world and her spiritual path. The figurine’s stance is intentional, facing forward, alert and prepared to meet the challenges that life will bring. Her heart is open, her third eye is seeing the path before her, and on her back sprouts a pair of wings, symbolising her spiritual connection beyond the physical realm. The pathfinder is in the world but not of it: a soul having a human experience. Realising her potential, she steps out of the undifferentiated clay.

What drives this spiritual wanderlust in secularized culture? Spiritual pathfinders

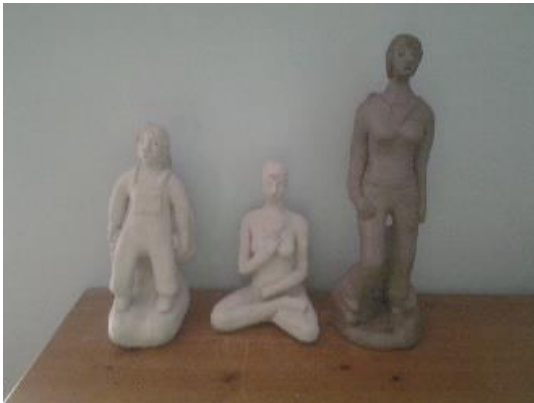


consider themselves bridge-builders, navigating between the religious and secular and between spirit and science to create a middle ground. Many participants found a place of stability, some even committed to a tradition, yet the principles of open inquiry, spiritual freedom and choice remained key. Whilst they feel open to explore established teachings, pathfinders primarily look to experience spirituality without a fixed intermediary or formula. They take a leap of faith in the face of Mystery yet claim self-agency by choosing to trust that, when sourced in intuition, their decisions are congruent with the path that calls

to be walked and co-created. Doubt serves to keep their mind open to questions and new perspectives, and shadow arises to be worked with. The “full spectrum human” that pathfinders aspire to is *both* transcendent *and* immanent. Therefore, spirituality is not compartmentalized away from everyday life nor from scientific inquiry. Life is the mystery which asks to be experienced and explored, and through this, new paths are co-created. Pathfinding is *both* a unique *and* a shared experience, with higher-level transformation of self and world as its aim. In essence, pathfinders are not looking to find a form of spirituality that “suits” them. Rather, they are responsive to an inner spiritual impulse to “in-form” and “full-fill” the purpose of their individual incarnation in service to the whole. Their own unique blend of spirituality is created as a direct result of this process. Self-transformation is an ongoing development as experiences, perspectives, practices, people, and paths interact, synthesize, and inform the whole in active co-creation. When the impulse stirs, pathfinders resume their unique way, incrementally individuating, in anticipation of the next exchange.



The triptych



Discussion

...one of the tasks of science is to find out how things *are*, while another task is to find how they have *become* as they are, and a third task is to discover the consequences of their *being* as they are. Thus the fact that religious beliefs and practices are now associated by large numbers of people less with institutions than with the discovery of a personal spiritual path, and less with a priesthood than with inner experience and a synthesis of ideas from many sources, is of prime relevance to the psychologist of religion. Important questions demand to be answered as to why these changes have taken place, and as to their consequences for thought and behaviour. (Fontana, 2003, pp. 30-31)

The motivations behind the current inquiry resonate with the above statement by Fontana (2003). It explores the “what”, “how”, and consequences of contemporary engagement in spirituality and aims for a deepened evaluation using a qualitative psychological lens. Heuristic inquiry collects multiple perspectives, manifestations, and understandings to unveil the essential nature of a phenomenon. This research project provides the shared container within which relationships can be identified, and from which universal meaning can be extracted (Sultan, 2019). The following discussion brings together the literature review, with the individual depictions (the participants) and composite depiction (the spiritual pathfinder). As the researcher who binds these aspects together, my perspective too is part of the relational field. It is reflected in what is noticed and what is emphasised in the exchange of contributions. The role is not to impose or propose answers, but to invite curiosity and inspiration in the reader as my understanding develops with the unpacking of themes. The evaluation will look at the parameters of definition, the personal process involved, and what spiritual pathfinding looks like in a socio-cultural context in the form of a new spiritual paradigm.

Comparative Profile SBNR and Spiritual Pathfinders

This first area of discussion focusses on whether the *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR) or *spiritual pathfinders* (SPs), as they are referred to in this report, have empirically distinct psychological traits in relation to religiously oriented persons as

proposed by Fuller (2018), Johnson et al. (2018), and Saucier and Skrypińska (2006). This question then concerns personal qualities which either go beyond - or go against - inherited influences of socialisation. The research is framed within the context of long-term personal processes, precisely to identify those internal qualities which endure regardless of external influences. For that reason, the interviews began by asking participants about the nature of their chosen path, and what made them look beyond their inherited influences. This involved looking back along individual timelines at the perceptions of the young pathfinder. As the composite depiction shows, core-features such as feeling different, a questioning nature, and a sensitivity to subtle dimensions, were amongst the shared childhood experiences. In agreement with current research, participants report to have enduring memories of spiritual experience, sensitivity, and curiosity in childhood. The recognition of spirituality in children as an inborn capacity as discussed by King (2009) and Cervantes and Arczynski (2015) is supported by participants' self-reflections, such as describing an awareness of other-dimensional beings, an insatiable curiosity, and a heightened connection with nature. As Edward⁽²⁾ describes: "I've always had...the awareness that there were other energies ... guardian angels...invisible friends, they were real to me" (92-94).

Young pathfinders' receptivity to such subtle or transpersonal experiences concurs with the discussions of Hart (2005), Mercer (2006), and Taylor (2017) on the genuineness and naturalness of children's spiritual experiences, such as an innate sense of awe and wonder, interconnectedness, and alignment with what is 'essential'. Taylor (2017) proposes that such states of awakesness come more naturally to children due to their lack of ego-development. Participants make a direct relationship between self-transformation in adulthood as a qualitative reconnection to their core-self experience, and their childhood experiences of openness and freshness of perception. Participants report such experiences with hindsight, and a measure of nostalgia may be involved. However, the strength of recollection and perceived significance of such memories in later life was notable in most participants. This agrees with King's (2009) formulation as childhood spiritual experiences waning in adulthood but strongly and affectionately

² All names without reference citations in this discussion refer to participants in the research.

remembered. Taylor (2017) further proposes this state as the place we yearn to return to but in a more integrated way, as Niamh describes:

...the essence hasn't really changed...as a child already I had that sense of interconnection, but... it's been a...question of integrating it into all aspects of my life... see that younger self and think 'oh I can really feel that in me still!' That's who I am! (480-488).

Assertions by Cervantes and Arczynski (2015), and Hart (2005) that childhood memories of spiritual awareness can inform adult worldview, provide resilience, and support exploration, are also strongly reflected in the data from this study. In Edwards' words: "...that sensation...I felt as a child...I'm trying to live to that...*that* is my journey" (344-345). As self-proclaimed "fish out of water" and "spirits on a mission", the experiential search for deeper meaning, language, and authenticity is driven by an inner purpose and sense of quest. Participant's narratives in that way concur with the discussion by Piechowsky (2001) on experiences of entelechy being common in children, which can instigate a strong sense of inner direction. It also gives credence to the *Acorn theory* proposed by Hillman (1996): of the "pre-coded" human soul guided by an inner *daimon*. According to Dan: "...something in me...had that...'seeker' drive... I...felt it wasn't around me...and so I had to go and look for it..." (41-43 & 52-53).

Pathfinders describe themselves as living outside the cultural mainstream, literally and figuratively, exemplified by Jane: "...thinking outside...the box, not...the set religions...I can't ever be allowing...a priest or a rabbi or an imam dictate to me what practice I follow, because I follow my own...to me that is...important...there is no dogma attached" (15-20). They self-define as mavericks, pioneers, heretics, and explorers and actively challenge structured beliefs in all areas of their life, which includes spiritual as well as social, political, and scientific arenas. The present data corresponds with the *SBNR* characteristics identified by Fuller (2018), and Saucier and Skrypińska (2006) of openness to experience, eccentricity, egalitarianism and nonconformism.

In agreement with Hill et al. (2000), pathfinders recognise that religion and spirituality share a search for the sacred and related feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviours. Concurring with the finding by Johnson et al. (2018), that *SBNR* do not have a strong negative attitude to religion, it is notable that pathfinders are not averse

to religion in principle and express an open-minded interest in religious mysticism, art, and ritual. They however consider the hierarchical structure and male predisposition in religious doctrine and scripture as outdated and excluding. This aligns with Johnson et al.'s (2018) depiction that SBNR feel they don't 'fit in' which renders the religious perspective irrelevant to their personal experience. In particular, the male bias and lack of representation of women in patriarchal traditions does not sit well with either female or male participants, which accords with principal arguments made by Brooks, Ford, and Huffman (2013), Eisler and Fry (2019), Hanegraaff (2005), and Wright (1995). Parsons' (2018) and Pevateaux's (2018) respective critiques that hierarchical religious frameworks perpetuate gender inequality were strongly represented in participants' perspectives, as Maggie reflects: "...what we were...taught did not chime...particularly in relation to the way women were supposed to behave...good and passive and well behaved...all the priests were male...all the servants were women, etcetera" (19-23). A "feminine" appreciation of spirituality is reflected in the popularity of earth-based, approaches. In addition, the renewed interest in Gnostic and esoteric traditions as identified by Hanegraaff (1998, 1999, 2005, 2013) signifies the impulse to re-discover and reinstate the sacred feminine in spirituality as discussed by Baring (2013), Cox (2018), Eisler (1988), and Matthews (2001). As Florence explains: "...I couldn't make it work...Goddess spirituality...made so much more sense...more inclusive...loving and...nurturing ... I started finding...threads of history and...questioning the teachings of the bible as we have them now" (223-228).

Further deepfelt criticisms echo discussions by Parsons (2018) and Pevateaux (2018) regarding SBNR choices as motivated by negative experiences with church or church representatives. Most participants spoke of disillusionment with the religious institutions they inherited, especially in relation to unhealthy power-dynamics. This was particularly strong in testimonies related to religiously oriented educational settings, as exemplified by Jedi: "...my boarding school...there was a dynamic around people trying to... 'have my soul'" (65-66), and Edward: "...I realised that the priests weren't...the good representatives that they should be...I started to see their realities . . . I was asking questions and the people who supposedly should know...couldn't answer it (132-133 & 172-174)! The negative experiences described by participants contradict the finding by

Johnson et al. (2018) that emotionally damaging experiences with members of religious institutions was not a significant predictor of SBNR. More research would be required to further determine this specific point.

Pathfinders place emphasis on mystical insight and core-values both within and outside traditional pathways. Their interest in the esoteric and mystical aspects of spiritual teachings is grounded in their belief that these transcend the doctrinal truth-claims of religious frameworks and are therefore more authentic. This combines with their intuitive perception that the traditional picture is incomplete, prompting a search of discovery into what that means. Non-conformism is strengthened when traditional doctrine does not meet personal experience, or when the traditional methods and language do not adequately support or contextualize personal processes. According to Dan: "...there was just a sense of there was more...getting missed in the picture ... I needed to make that change...different elements that I needed to find...gather...these bits of the puzzle..." (157-158 & 176-177). The depth of such self-questioning by participants does not reflect an "anything goes" approach as suggested by Bruce (2000, 2006), or a "meaningless vague striving" as discussed by LaCour and Gôtke (2012). Rather, results concur with the observation by Buxant, Saroglou and Tesser (2010) that independent-mindedness, openness, and willingness to change beliefs to encourage self-growth are the main factors why "free-lance (sic) spiritual seekers" decline to join religious groups, as clearly expressed by Jedi: "...realising that ...relationship with God is nothing to do with institutions...with form...with exterior...and actually, there are many different paths of the Sacred" (204-206).

The identification by Saucier and Skrypińska (2006) of key SBNR components being a mystical preference and primacy of subjective experience which includes imagination and intuition, is strongly mirrored in participants. Pathfinders seek mysticism in direct experience, above and beyond belief, and through actively exploring the underlying symbolic meanings of traditional teachings above and beyond intellectual understanding, as Gilbert makes clear: "...by...self-referencing and connecting to that deep space in myself, I can...look at the religions and see what...they were really saying...rather than...on a rational level, I can actually feel and *know* from my

experience” (488-492). Related to the pathfinder’s search for the sacred in every experience, is the concept of *meta-modern mysticism* discussed by Mercadante (2018): as a mysticism grounded in ordinary lived reality rather than a search for salvation or transcendent reality. This reflects Johnson et al.’s (2018) finding that SBNR are more likely to consider the nature of God to be a naturalistic cosmic force rather than a personalised being. The “extra-theistic” spirituality as discussed by Ammerman (2013) which formulates transcendence as “bigger than the self” and “beyond the ordinary”, further reflects the pathfinder’s perspective. In Anoush’s words:

...finding nuance and...the numinous in our everyday living...to see the five-dimensionality of life...allowing ourselves to be open and receptive to other dimensions of consciousness...that is really our essence...a...consciousness...we bring into our everyday life, that doesn't just look at face-value, but... at the dimensionality of whatever...we're experiencing. (135-140)

In resonance with the argument made by Eisler and Fry (2019), that individual capacity for independent thought is impacted by domination patterns, pathfinders deem doctrinal rigidity and pre-set formulae to be contradictory to psycho-spiritual individuation. Moreover, religious traditions do not allow the diversity of spiritual conceptualisation and identity that pathfinders consider primary. As Sarah makes clear: “I've totally seen the concept...and the safety...organised religion can bring... But to ...really get the fruits... you have to step out of it eventually...like leaving your parents. You need to find your own identity” (207-210 & 213). Buxant, Saroglou and Tesser (2010) found “free-lance spiritual seekers” to display a higher tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity in relation to spiritual questions than those in new religious movements (NRM). Whilst NRM members are also “seeking”, they were found to have a heightened need for internal order and to be more insistent on the absolute truth nature of beliefs, practices, and ideas. According to Buxant, Saroglou and Tesser (2010), this contrasts with the openness to experience and alternative perceptions of spiritual freelancers. In relation to the data, their findings concur with pathfinders’ questioning nature, willingness to change their minds and fluid sense of identity.

Whether the loss of religious referents and demarcated values means that accountability and the requirements for self-transformation are underestimated, as discussed by Aupers and Houtman (2007), and Caplan (2009), is acknowledged by

participants as a danger in early-on engagement. However, drawing on their experience of longer-term process, pathfinders consider the lack of demarcation and prescribed guidance as valuable challenges to be actively faced and worked with. In contrast to Carrette and King's (2004) depiction of spirituality as creating a private reality of self-comfort, and Bruce's (2006) assessment of spiritual engagement as shallow, unaccountable, and relativistic, pathfinders consider the self-directed path to be more demanding, requiring enhanced presence and responsibility compared to prescribed pathways. In Jedi's words: "...it's a much harder path because you haven't got anyone to tell...you're doing the right thing... it's about finding your own way and having the trust...to do that alone...not rely on others to prop you up" (356-357 & 362-363).

Pathfinders seek a more flexible and responsive approach to how spiritual engagement is conducted and understood in a fast-changing world, as Maggie reflects: "...we are all equipped with a deep instinct for life...for what is life-affirming and life-giving and where wisdom resides...if we just give up any notion of that it looks like this or that..." (230-232). Non-conformism and openness to new experience is further evident in participants' descriptions of the pathfinding process itself, in which eclectic experimentation, exploration and an ongoing questioning of assumptions and conditioned beliefs are considered fundamental to spiritual engagement. The appreciation by Davis et al. (2015), that one's relational focus and stability of relationship to the sacred is subject to variation depending on individual frame of reference is relevant in this respect. The plurality of expressions pathfinders engage in is primarily due to, or is intended to feed into, the co-creative nature of spiritual regeneration, as Gilbert says: "...they are all talking about that deep space...we need to keep reinventing it...keeping it fresh..." (529-530). Accordingly, the detail of practices is of secondary importance, particularly in long term engagement where the individuation process is more understood and embodied.

Experimentation is reflected in participants' unconventional attitude to spiritual practice. In agreement with Johnson et al.'s (2018) observation that exposure to religious diversity in SBNR represents a co-factor in the formation of their spiritual ideas, pathfinders take a hybrid approach, driven by their keen interest to explore

different perspectives. Most participants travelled extensively to experience the spiritual practices of other cultures directly, particularly those which offer a radically different understanding of spiritual engagement, as Gilbert explains: "...why shamanism really spoke to me: because it's about *me* connecting to my own divine nature and using that as a reference" (538-539). Practices such as work with entheogens, meditation, and dreams, are understood as means to expand awareness beyond what pathfinders consider the constraints of the conditioned self or everyday consciousness and, by extension, the conditioned social and religious sphere. As Theo describes his experience with psilocybin:

...it started to...open up a process that...reconnected me to something that I lost touch with somewhere in my life because of...this culture...I started to feel there was more to life, that was much deeper than the way we were living in the society...a very strong confident feeling...people can tell me whatever they want but this connection...felt like the deepest guidance...possible to me. (38-44)

Pathfinders consider shifts in perspective as positive and indicative of the search for authenticity and self-transformation, rather than an indication of non-commitment or lack of conscientiousness, as expressed by Sarah: "...willing to throw it all out and be completely wrong... Because that's inquiry! Why stay fixed on something ... moving out of that religious mould...we *have* the answers inside us...they're not, I don't believe, bound by cultural instructions" (378-382).

The propensity for magic-mythical thinking, self-absorption, and a reliance on subjective imagination and intuition, as identified by Fuller (2018) and Saucier and Skrypińska (2006), concurs with participants' creative approach to pathfinding. King's (2009) description of contemporary spirituality as motivated by a genuine psycho-spiritual need for new and authentic perspectives from the "inside out", reflects pathfinders' organically unfolding trajectory. The unfixed nature of engagement and looking inside for answers that Sarah expressed, means the next step reveals itself through subjective perception, as Diama illustrates: "...my own journey of working with how life presents to me through synchronicity and...dreams...my interpretation... and...my conscious understanding of what I can gather around me as information that reflects back to me what I need to see" (628-631). Pathfinders perceive reality as multi-

dimensional, both in terms of a deeper identity and interconnected subtle realms. Their practices are subsequently focussed on (re)connecting to these transpersonal realms. Intuition, creative imagination, and inward focus are the main ways to make contact, as Heather describes: "...when I take the time to stop and still myself ... making a conscious effort to make contact with the energy and interact with it. ... then the universe creates for me, with me" (225-227).

The Jungian idea of intuition as a potential conduit for Gnosis as discussed by Vaughan (1997), and Fontana (2003) reflect pathfinders' understanding of the relationship between intuition and spirituality. As covered in the literary review, Jungian ideas are foundational to new age thought. As a result, contemporary spirituality is embedded in Jung's language and philosophy, which is reflected in participants' narratives. Pathfinders consider intuited knowing more meaningful and reliable than external knowledge or logic in determining their choices and direction. As Hillman (1996) explains, intuitions are not constructed by cognitive processes, but arise as a "gestalt" apprehension of wholeness and meaning. Hillman's view is reflected in Rose's comment: ...it comes in divine timing and soul timing...that's my reference...it's truth that has come into me, through me, and it's not come from my mind (425-427).

Results suggest that Aaron's (2003) formulation of highly sensitive persons (HSPs) with heightened empathic and intuitive abilities, apply to pathfinders. Participants either explicitly or implicitly report to have enhanced empathic and intuitive sensitivities. This was mostly relayed as a perception starting in childhood in comparison to the people around them, as Mary describes: "I always felt a bit different. Even as a child, I would feel things that weren't spoken about, or you couldn't see (56-57) ...I was so sensitive: everything... seemed to be charged...I didn't know what to do with it all..." (187-188). For others, an experience of psychic opening in later life, such as a spiritual emergency or NDE, began a new level of sensitivity. An extreme example is provided by Qori: "I was sexually assaulted...it...opened me up entirely psychically...I then became very aware of the other dimensions: psychic and spiritual... like I was shocked into awakening...a 'dark night of the soul' experience..." (34-39). Such sensitivity both reinforces pathfinders' sense of otherness in the external world and

their identification with soul and spiritual dimensions. The journey toward self-understanding becomes a de-facto psycho-spiritual path. As Aron (2003) describes: HSP's learn to use their sensitivities positively in their search for spiritual wholeness and understanding. Likewise, pathfinders come to deeper self-understanding through learning to work with their sensitivities whilst strengthening their psychic boundaries. In Rhiannon's words: "I went through a kind of...transformation and I accepted myself as someone who was intuitive, psychically open...to understand what that meant and how to be with that...to become comfortable in that new identity" (341-344). And Mary: "I've had to learn how to close parts of my being with being empathic, because... other people's feelings hurt so much (276-277) ...as I've...matured...I can be in more control... and I can give back what's not mine" (281-282).

The formulation by Russo-Netzer and Maysless (2016) and Russo-Netzer (2018), of practice as dedicated internal work with transformative intent marked by struggle, doubt, personal sacrifice, self-confrontation, self-questioning, and self-discovery, is strongly reflected in participants' experiences of their personal processes. Pathfinders do not see failure in challenge and doubt, but instead consider these as opportunities for deeper inquiry and an essential impetus to increase presence in all aspects of life. As Heather mentions: "...I'd like there to be no doubt...but...it's...good ...because I'm always...checking and looking and wondering and feeling...whether it's...right" (436-39). The quality of "work" is further reflected in the cultivation of discernment in relation to the practices, teachers, and teachings that pathfinders explore. In keeping with their hybrid approach, pathfinders are open to learning from teachers, teachings, and traditions. Participants overall recognise the shadow side of spiritual engagement and discussed incidents of having been too inexperienced or out of their depth. Two participants explicitly describe their psychic vulnerability to "subtle" influences and needing suitable guidance to stay safe. In this respect, a teacher or guide can provide a necessary compass. As Rhiannon explains: "...you're just trying to stay steady, but you can't navigate...or get any understanding... I have always needed a teacher...who...can make some sense of what goes on when that gets a grip..." (398-405).

Consistent with discussions by Bogart (1992) and Caplan (2009), participants see engagement with teachers and guides in the wider context of developmental process. Teachings are predominantly engaged with as precursors or aids to individual spiritual inquiry as advocated by Heron (2006). Pathfinders generally ensure they are well-informed, and balance their openness to ideas and experiences with critical questioning, as Bert illustrates: "...it had to feel congruent...if...an expression of my understanding, and I could feel somewhere that it wouldn't be true...I would have gone there and look at 'why is it not true in that circumstance?'" (200-202). Participants acknowledge that working with teachings and teachers involves a level of surrender as part of the developmental trajectory. On this trajectory, the pathfinder aims for direct experience to make what they are taught tangible, as Sarah describes: "I was very inquiring...if they say to me: 'you've got 7 chakras'...I would...meditate until I feel them...I have to experience it otherwise...it's just a concept, it's not real" (49-52). Ultimately, the spirit of pathfinding means that teachings and frameworks are assimilated to the extent they are in resonance with subjective intuitive recognition of meaning and truth. As Florence mentions: "...what I am learning ...about shamanism... these are very well-defined traditions...[a] roadmap of how to work with spirit...to be shielded in a safe way...that appeals to my structural moral sense of there is a right way to do things..." (288-292). This perspective corresponds with findings from the *Kendal project* by Heelas (2008) that, regardless of whether values and insights are acquired through socialisation, these must resonate internally from the heart or inner conscience to be accepted.

Pathfinders' psychospiritual work is aimed to undo inherited conditioning and egoic patterns, to enable internal resonance to come to the fore. The necessary discernment of what is truly aligned with their inner process is regarded as a developmental skill that matures with longer term engagement. Great value is placed on signals to determine authenticity of guidance. This is variably expressed as a heart-connection, sense of alignment, intuitive knowing, body sensations, and synchronicities. In Niamh's words: "I feel it in my body when something is really not right...it's an inner knowing ...The spiritual freedom comes when I feel that sense of alignment...a physical sense of...I feel comfortable. Because I feel expanded...in myself" (400-401 & 418-420).

This further concurs with findings by Russo-Netzer and Mayseless (2016) and Russo-Netzers (2018) of SBNR using intuitive attention to signs and synchronicities for validation and critical questioning in relation to teachings and teachers, and the formulation by Mercadante (2018) of personal journey and process validated through self-reflectivity and self-accountability. The pathfinders' primary principle is that final authority lies with the individual, as illustrated by Jane: "...it is really helpful to find a map, but...the map isn't you...I've learnt...reaching out to many different teachers, most of whom teach me that I know more in myself than they can teach me..." (228-230).

The depiction of the spiritual seeker as a self-serving consumer and self-improvement addict who engages with practices and teachings "cafeteria-style", as discussed by Carrette and King (2004), Bruce (2000) and Rindfleish (2005), is not reflected in the data. Rather than 'discarding' traditions, teachings, and teachers because results are not forthcoming, pathfinders "move on" from sources of guidance in response to a sense of saturation of learning or growing dissonance with personal process. Dan gives the following example: "There was a dynamic...I felt uncomfortable with...I think that is normal with guru/teacher relationships, but...also something of: 'I feel I am shutting some other parts of me down to be part of this!'" (115-121). Some pathfinders will commit to specific teachings or traditions, either periodically or more permanently. However, within this commitment, they assume a high degree of self-responsibility. Therefore, being part of a tradition is not considered contradictory to spiritual self-agency, as Maggie illustrates:

I have chosen to meet and explore a relationship with spirit through the narrative of Christianity ... I had to find the freedom...and really hold fast my embodied relationship with spirit, to navigate what could be very tight little alleyways in the church. (433-434 & 440-441)

To summarise this section, the experience shared by the participants seem to align effectively with what has been described through existing research in this area. The results suggest that the key psychological traits of the spiritual pathfinder include non-conformism, a mythical sensibility, an intuitive and empathic sensitivity, an inquiring nature, a capacity for complexity and critical thinking, a tolerance for doubt

and ambiguity, and openness to experience and multiple perspectives, in the context of a personalised search for the sacred.

SP in transpersonal theoretical context - selfhood and self-transformation

In line with Schermer's (2003) psycho-spiritual paradigm which holds spirituality as defining both our essence and our existence, pathfinders consider their spirituality to be fundamental to their sense of self. The definition of self-spirituality by Davis et al (2015) as a search for authenticity, congruence, self-acceptance, and connection with a core-self, is an accurate representation of participant's understanding and approach, as Edward illustrates:

...it's the essence of life, there is no other reason for being. Anything...not associated with our internal nature is just a distraction... (8-10) ... it's something that you *know*...probably since...earliest awareness...when you move away from that, there is ...a 'lack' that you end up searching to re-discover. (14-16)

Participants understand themselves as multidimensional "spiritual beings having a human experience". To reflect this understanding, participants make a clear distinction between the everyday egoic self and the self beyond ego or transpersonal Self as defined by, amongst others, Daniels (2003) and Fontana (2005). Corresponding with formulations by Friedman (2013) and Walsh and Vaughn (1993), this deeper identity is experienced as an expanded, boundless, and timeless self-sense. In addition to what is relayed in current literature, the timeless nature of this identity is for some participants explicitly related to a belief in reincarnation and in there being a continuum over multiple lifetimes. The perceived memories from these lives further inform their perspective, as Qori explains: "...I definitely have...Gnostic past life memories, so therefore...the access to the Divine is...through the divinity which is intrinsic...that awareness that we ourselves are...responsible for the nurturing and the development of that" (423-428).

The portrayal by Russo-Netzer and Mayseless (2016), and Russo-Netzer (2018), of SBNR as a non-linear and ongoing process of self-expansion and self-transcendence, provides a faithful representation of pathfinders' experiences. Participants consider

their sense of self to be both responsive to developmental changes and subject to transcendence. Transcendence in this context is understood in an “inner” psychological sense, as a dissolving or going beyond all identifications, or what some participants call conditioned “patterns”, as similarly discussed by Vaughan (1986). Pathfinders’ perspective also concurs with Ammerman’s (2013) formulation of “extra-theistic” spirituality which is not God-defined but rather, understands transcendence as bigger than the self, in the core of the self, and beyond the ordinary. Participants aim for congruency in all areas of their existence and understand the necessity for psychological work. In Mary’s words: “...part of my spiritual path is...to acknowledge all the bits that need working on, and actually doing something about it ... I’ve chosen to learn from them rather than hold them as...wounds...” (535-536 & 565-566). The oscillation between deepening psychological exploration on the one hand, and transcendence of psychological patterns on the other, leads to an increasing self-understanding in transpersonal terms. In Rose’s words: “...it's ever ongoing...from identifying with a personal being...to something...eternal and infinite...moving from the personal identification to the transpersonal or beyond personal...and then back into...okay I'm doing the dishes...” (541-544 & 549-553]. Accordingly, participants describe their identity as fluid, unfixed, evolving, and interactive “beingness”, as Jane illustrates: “I...have an incredibly strong sense of self. But that self is incredibly malleable...and continuously connecting to others and so I can recognise when there is something I need to learn...” (502-504). The above statements reflect the dynamic between what is constructed and what is deemed to be a-priori in relation to self-identity which informs spiritual engagement. Pathfinders do not claim to be without assumptions or socio-spiritual conditioning. Rather, it is the willingness to question such conditioning in self-inquiry that increases non-attachment to construct and the ability to let go of what no longer resonates.

As discussed by Eisler and Fry (2019), Eisler (1988), and Fontana (2003), the psyche internalises the dominant archetypes of (religious) culture through socialization. Participants recognise that their conditioned understanding of spirituality has largely been focussed on the transcendent aspect of the sacred. As most participants were brought up in a Judaeo-Christian environment, this would be a male Godhead. Sharia is

one example: “The only model I had was nuns bowing in reverence in churches...you *had* to surrender...I was trained... to have all those Christian principles...a big programming ... that a human being is 'less than' God” (219-222 & 25). Pathfinders consider this an imbalance reflected in humanity’s alienation from the natural world. In accordance with Ferrer’s (2003) assessment, the “masculine” spiritual focus on the transcendent at the expense of the immanent has affected the immediacy of the Divine, which pathfinders are actively seeking to rediscover. As Niamh reflects:

...I am here...to bring a balance in masculine and feminine energies, both in myself and in the world...we are faced with the urgent necessity to bring the Sacred Masculine into harmony with the Deep Feminine...to restore... relationship with Gaia the Mother who sustains us all. (551-555)

On a personal level, this imbalance is experienced as negatively affecting mental-emotional health and impairing relationship to the physical body. Pathfinders set about healing this existential “wounding” from within and access more “feminine” qualities within themselves, as expressed by Pablo: “... to discover myself in spirituality is to discover my more feminine side, things like compassion, service, selflessness; ...qualities which you're not...asked to attain in a consumer culture which is competitive and about goals” (585-588). The reinstatement of feminine principles and values coincides with a renewed popularity of Goddess-oriented spiritualities, where particularly women are finding their spiritual empowerment, voice, and identity. As Rhiannon explains: “...finding new pathways ...Women...leading that ...because...women are wanting to find something that is authentic to them... archetypes that reflect them” (592-595).

Whilst pathfinders understand and engage with inner masculine and feminine energies as interdependent and complementary archetypes in the psycho-spiritual process, most participants’ psycho-spiritual development has been marked by a shift in focus toward an appreciation of the immanent aspect of the sacred and embodied presence. Aside from understanding embodiment as a deepening psychological engagement which enables living and acting from a place of integrity and inner truth as discussed by Welwood (2002, 2016) and Masters (2010), embodiment is primarily understood as a coming into sacred relationship with the somatic self as advocated by

Ferrer (2008b, 2017). Participants express their process of embodiment in various terms, such as: “whole person integration”, “embracing the immanent aspect of life”, “a deepening into life”, “being at home in oneself”, and “grounding” or “anchoring” of spiritual experience. Some participants attributed a disconnection from their body to be causal to existential and physical crises. Their spiritual path of self-transformation subsequently involved an intentional practice of growing relationship with the body as sacred vessel. As Edward explains: “...I took responsibility for ‘I need to inhabit this body’ and live this life and use this vehicle that I have been given and be grateful...and find out what I need to do” (504-506). In sum, embodiment is regarded as key to an integrated, fully engaged, and authentic spirituality.

In accordance with Ferrer (2008b, 2017), participants recognize the somatic aspect as a reflection of the sacred and a valid source of insight. Concurring with the formulation by Linders and Lancaster (2013, p. 16) of “the body as receiver and transformer of transpersonal energies in the process of increasing integration”, pathfinders consider physicality as a vehicle for direct experience and instrumental in making spiritual engagement tangible. In addition, the body is experienced as a doorway into the spiritual dimension and/or deeper self. As such, somatic signals can serve as a source of guidance and as a manifest reflection of spiritual interconnectedness. Participants report an increasing responsivity to body signals as their psycho-spiritual path advances. As Rose illustrates: “...A whoosh of sensation in my arms, legs, sometimes whole body...a wave of energy...goosebumps...sometimes the heart will start racing...quite strong sensations in the body...like ‘wow, pay attention!’...that's infallible” (249-252). Such intimate relationship between body and selfhood on the self-realisation path as reported by participants reflect a shift from “having” a body to “being” a body as discussed by Masters (2010), and Caldwell’s (2014) notion of “bodyful” realisation. The understanding of women’s spiritual identity as a “fullness of self” as discussed by Anderson and Hopkins (1991), and Wright (1995), particularly resonates with female participants’ descriptions. In Jane’s words: “...to allow our bodies to flow as much as our being...the sexual energy is as important as the spiritual...there's no separation...we've just chosen different words for the same thing...that's how I embrace...being human and divine” (335-339).

The understanding of spirituality as a developmental and transformational psycho-spiritual journey as proposed by transpersonal theorists such as Jung (Edinger, 1972; Stein, 1998), Assagioli (1965/1975), and Schermer (2003), is reflected in participants' experience of their ongoing process of self-integration and maturation. As Bert illustrates: "I am on a path which is growing wisdom and understanding and... of...more than knowing... to empty my mind and become present ... to places that would otherwise be just unconscious patterns running" (8-12). Spiritual practices are used as explorative tools for self-knowing and self-transformation. These concepts are broadly understood as an alignment with an authentic core identity which goes beyond the psychological patterns of the everyday self or what Walach (2015) terms the limited interpretation of the egoic self. In accordance with the hybrid approach which typifies the SBNR, participants draw on both psychology and spirituality to facilitate expansion of awareness, and the integration of that experience of expansion to inform all aspects of one's life. In Anoush's words: "...developing an awareness through the model of psychotherapy...creating a meta-position...witnessing what you're experiencing and developing a vocabulary around imagery and symbolism from a psychological but also a Soul- level" (126-130).

All participants report to have had either one or multiple significant transpersonal experiences which made the transpersonal dimension an undeniable reality for them. These experiences provide a radical shift in spiritual perspective and direction, as illustrated by Sharia: "...I received the calling from Goddess...she showed me visions...drawing me into this perception of the real meaning of life..." (335-337). Participants however understand self-transformation to be an ongoing process rather than an event. They therefore recognise the importance of psychological integration of spiritual "peak"-experiences. Pathfinders are in that respect aware of the dangers of spiritual bypassing as discussed by Humphrys (2015), Masters (2010), and Welwood (2016), as Florence explains when talking about her use of psychedelics and her near death experience: "It's like the end destination, and then your spiritual practices are the...hard work and dedication and... discipline, that take you to that place...those... experiences are great as snapshots, but that's not the path" (258-260). The process of self-transformation is experienced as challenging, involving shadow work and a

stripping away of anything that is not aligned with the emergence of a deeper authenticity. Vaughan's (1986) formulation of self-change as a breaking through restrictive conceptualisation and inner separation to reach a more authentic way of being is echoed by Mary:

I was coming to some kind of balance in my life and everything that didn't fit ...was falling away...It was really quite painful, and I ended up losing everything and had to build myself back up again...I knew then if I didn't have that greater awareness and higher self and trust, that I would never survive. (442-446)

In their search for authenticity and alignment with a core-identity, pathfinders understand the value of consistent practice as similarly discussed by Schlitz, Vieten and Amorok (2007). Participants describe practice as involving effort and commitment, and the ongoing questioning of assumptions and beliefs. The purpose is to remain vigilant in the face of distraction and to maintain spiritual connection in everyday life. As Theo explains: "...it's a huge challenge...to...stay connected...you lose consciousness of it all the time but...you become aware of it and you go back to the process...the more I cultivate that, I feel the more I'm aligned...with my deeper self..." (398-404).

Participants formulate their ongoing self-transformation in various terms, such as: "a healing of inner distortions toward wholeness", "integration of masculine and feminine aspects", and "moving from disconnection to connection". Wholeness is understood as a dynamic balance between immanent and transcendent aspects, also formulated as feminine and masculine. Related is the formulation by Russo-Netzer and Mayseless (2016) and Russo-Netzer (2018) of transformation as a change in meaning system held as basis for self-definition. This change is marked by a sense of interconnectedness with others, cosmos, and world, as well as a change in self-identity based on a qualitative discernment of intrinsic values, inner truth, and deeper knowing. Pathfinders experience the process of changing and expanding perspectives as a shift in the meaning, values, and motivations on which their sense of identity is based. Qualitative indications of self-transformation mentioned by participants are a heightened capacity for empathy, responsiveness and responsibility, confidence, groundedness, and self-acceptance. As Mary describes: "When I stopped...searching

...through written knowledge and I sat...bare naked on the earth and let myself sink into this and actually *feel* physically...*this* is what's real; *that's* just somebody's opinion, *this* is what's real" (409-412).

Responsivity to inner wisdom received through intuition and somatic awareness guides the pathfinders' choices in life. Responsivity also represents the ability to remain present with not knowing and ambiguity, making space for mystery. As Gilbert says: "...there is some intelligence...that's creating everything...I find that quite a relief...I can...surrender to that and know...there is some dynamic that knows what's going on" (635-637). Self-determination and surrender are as such understood to be on a continuum. Enhanced self-awareness, encouraged by psycho-spiritual practice, determines the response to doubt and challenge as an expression of resilience and active self-trust. Formulations by MacDonald (2009) and Masters (2010) of self-transformation as the unification of spiritual experience with one's sense of self and the emergence of a core-identity, strongly resonates with participants' experience of their process. As Bert explains: "...because I'd had those experiences of falling apart, plus quite strong sense of centeredness...built up...I knew that I could always come back...whatever is happening, I can feel the central core of my being" (448-450).

Overall, participants discern their self-transformation as an enhanced self-authenticity and self-agency, variably perceived as inner freedom, self-empowerment, freshness, embodied trust, inner stability, and clarity of purpose. In Dama's words: "...*me* trusting *myself* in every single moment that I'm making decisions..." (503). Participant's experience of inner empowerment reflects the sense of unified selfhood as discussed by Welwood (2002) and the Jungian (Campbell, 1971; Edinger, 1992; Stein, 1998) notion of individuation as an increasing dialogue between inner and outer experience. Frankl's (1952/2004) formulation of self-agency as the ability to take responsibility for one's life according to one's conscience, resonates with the themes of enhanced self-awareness and self-trust. Spiritual freedom according to the pathfinder does not mean "doing what you want" but rather, represents a liberation from personal and collective patterns to enable the fullest possible spectrum of direct relationship to the mystery of the sacred, as expressed by Sarah: "...spiritual freedom is...where I

feel...I trust the unknown...it's wild and rocky and unlinear and linear, and makes sense and makes no sense, it's like having my mind wide, opens me up: the vulnerability of that..." (388-390). Also relevant are findings by Schlitz, Vieten and Amorok (2007) that the skills to self-reflect and to direct attention and intention toward self-expansion are fundamental to self-agency. In Rose's words: "...a more evolved approach is...to go in and...trust what shows up and not give away our power...a deeper trust and a deeper surrender and...refining of the ability..." (173-177). This further corresponds with the classification of self-spirituality by Heelas (2008) as denoting a shift away from outer authority and certainties, toward inner agency and responsibility, as Gilbert illustrates: "...rather than...from culture...you're learning to trust and connect to that inner source and rely on that...there comes a transition whereby you don't have to swing from one to the other, it...becomes...normal to be in that space" (132-134 & 139-141).

In sum, pathfinders consider their spiritual path as a holistic developmental process where psychology, spirituality, and embodiment, are profoundly interrelated. Their perspective largely concurs with current transpersonal theory, which can be attributed to pathfinders' interest in exploring both the mystical traditions and the spiritual psychologies that transpersonal studies are founded on. According to the characteristics identified in this report, foundational theorists in transpersonal psychology such as Jung and Assagioli would themselves be considered spiritual pathfinders. The circular interchange between transpersonal theory and spiritual pathfinding is therefore acknowledged in the current appraisal.

Psycho-spiritual practices serve to explore a dynamic continuum between self-deepening immanence and self-expanding transcendence. Consequently, identity is experienced as increasingly fluid and responsive. Through this process, the pathfinder finds growing self-authenticity, self-agency, and self-trust. These are qualities which provide resilience in the face of ambiguity and challenge which accompany the self-directed path.

Spiritual pathfinders in social context

Hybridity

In accordance with Walach (2015), the psychological hygiene that psycho-spiritual practice provides by way of undoing patterns, encourages greater discernment and respect for diverging perspectives. Psycho-spiritual practice in effect facilitates a process of de-socialization, as a breaking down of the inherited interpretive lens through which the self and society is experienced and understood. As Gilbert describes: "...processing psychological 'shit'... your whole 'bubble-dynamic' that you experienced when you were younger... breaking out...and bringing in some kind of freshness... through meditation...going through...release of old patterns and thoughts..." (124-127). Participants seek an openness of mind, and actively challenge narrow cultural, spiritual, and religious assumptions which dominate and exclude. These motivations are in resonance with the discussion by Eisler and Fry (2019) that the undoing of mental rigidity clears the way to reveal a core nature of humanity as pro-social, caring, creative, and capable of change. In Dama's words: "... truth is ...human contact with another, without all these agendas... because they know they experience it and they want to be there...with you. And that really touches my heart" (292-294).

Participants' pluralistic approach, self-led search, and openness to direct experience, further resonates with Ferrer's (2002, 2008a) participatory ethos depicting spiritual pathways as a plurality of vehicles enabling connection with the Sacred. Spiritual pathfinders actively explore and apply multiple perspectives which make up their individual path. This emphasis on a plurality of engagement reflects their hybrid approach and respect for diversity. As Jedi describes: "...exploring the world and other cultural spiritual contexts...go to those sacred places and do my own thing; not *their* ceremonies...being free and...getting a world-context view in terms of experience" (550-555). Pathfinders consider their engagement with the practices of other cultures to be in alignment with the ethos of sharing wisdom. Learning from other perspectives is justified provided this is done with integrity and respect. Rather than a "copying" practices from other cultures which would amount to cultural appropriation, pathfinders seek to apply the underlying principles in a way that is meaningful to them

and their own community. As Pablo explains: "...learning about...these practices...how can we use them in our own country to remember who we are... Without being too overtly Celtic or pagan...falling into those archetypes...the practical: Can I use this in my life...to engage with my community?" (425-430).

Related to the pluralistic and open-minded approach to pathfinding is the receiving of, or search for, guidance from a diversity of sources: to involve the personal, relational, and transpersonal dimensions as discussed by Ferrer (2015, 2017). Inner guidance is a creative and intuitive engagement with dreams, altered states, synchronicities, and symbology, as well as relationship with what pathfinders consider to be other-dimensional beings such as angels and spirit-guides, as explored by Schlitz, Amorok and Vieten (2007). The restoration of relationship to the earth and the acknowledgement of consciousness in non-human realms came up frequently and is reflected in the popularity of indigenous and earth-based approaches. As Anoush describes: "...we went into the jungle...and we prayed... teaching us Westerners around valuing the earth again and our relationship to plant-life that also has a consciousness; that we are all consciousness" (291-293). The pathfinder's approach concurs with the formulation by Sutcliffe and Gilhus (2013) of new spirituality as dynamically co-created through the mutual association between peoples and cultures, and the promotion of egalitarian dialogue between approaches and traditions as advocated by Ferrer (2008a, 2009).

Belonging

Intentional engagement with likeminded others is understood to support the individual process through "mirroring" and challenging blind-spots. As Rhiannon explains: "... when you realise that these themes are not just personal then it is much easier...to explore them ... it has to happen within groups...it's very hard...on your own, because we need those reflections..." (546-547 & 552-553). Intentional relationship can take place in a therapeutic context, in workshops, in friendships, through general societal interaction, and in community settings. The shape of interpersonal engagement is circular, both in symbol and actuality. The ethos is egalitarian, ground-up, inclusive, sharing, and inquiring, reflecting Eisler's (1988; Eisler & Fry, 2019) partnership model of social organisation. In Heather's words: "...people taking responsibility for managing

themselves and the community ... it's a people-driven movement, and it's all connecting...it is really positive" (503 & 507-508). Gatherings can be transient or happen more consistently in dedicated spiritual community. The focus is on nurturing relationship based on the ethos of shared humanity, as reflected by Mary: "...what I'm looking for...is to share wisdom with other people...I don't think we ever stop learning about ourselves, about life, about other people...interacting with other people is my teacher..." (14-17).

Results confirm that the primary shift made by participants is from the "etic" exoteric mediation of church-tradition to the "emic" internal subjective autonomous self as identified by Heelas (2006) and Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000). In other words, from faithfulness to a single path to a faithfulness to inner process as further proposed by Sutcliffe and Gilhus (2013). As a result of expanded connectedness through inner process, belonging is not limited to a specific group or place but is more globally perceived as an awareness of a shared transpersonal consciousness. The reframing of contemporary seekers by Main (2008) as a diverse community of individuals on a sacred quest appears to be an accurate assessment. Tacey's (2004) formulation that "spirit within" is intimately connected with "spirit everywhere", is similarly echoed by Anoush: "...Spirit helped me find that sense of belonging in the greater picture...in a more transpersonal unity of consciousness... to flip that question of not 'where do I belong', but that 'I belong everywhere'" (15-19).

Results support assertions by Possamai (2000), and Berghuijs, Bakker and Pieper (2013) that to fairly evaluate the search for the sacred in the "spiritually mobile", the definition of social engagement and cohesion needs to expand beyond institutional affiliation. The description by Kripal (2018) of social identity in SBNR as based on shared seekership and values, as well as the identification by Heelas (2006) of a shared purpose of increasing self-authenticity in SBNR, accurately reflect how participants view their interrelationship to like-minded others. Pathfinders may be nomads, but they are also bridge-builders: finding and forging connections between paths, perspectives, and people. As Maggie explains: "...the future of our planet depends on the bridges; ...seeing we really *need* each other...I am more me because I've met you...*your* path teaches *me*,

informs *me*" (485-489). In sum, participants understand their spirituality as profoundly relational. Spiritual pathfinding is fundamentally about finding connection in all areas of human experience, as eloquently expressed by Theo: "Whether it's connecting to the emotions or...lost memories or...connecting on a social level with your family or your friends, or...with nature or...cosmic universal or spiritual connection, for me it's always about moving from disconnection to connection" (421-424).

Service

Participants contradict the claim that individualised spirituality gives rise to spiritual narcissism as discussed by Lahood (2010) and Carrette and King (2004). They emphasize their spiritual journey is essentially about higher purpose and the greater picture. As Anoush explains: "...knowing that you're connected to everything...a radical responsibility...comes with that...it's not going to change by you sitting...with your legs crossed...it is how you live that out in the world and take responsibility by...your action..." (384-388). Pathfinders see societal contribution as an integral embodiment of their spiritual development. It is notable that all participants mentioned a heart-felt desire to be of service to the greater whole by being "part of the solution". This would explain why many work, or aspire to work, in vocational professions, and do not shy away from challenge in pursuit of their inner purpose. Qori, for example, went on to work with sex-offenders following her own experience of sexual assault: "...what happened to me is purposeful...this is my life purpose. And there is this stubbornness...no matter how dark the behaviours, the dark as in 'operating in and around an individual', I refuse to not see the light in them" (Qori, 176-179). Similarly, Jedi describes his work running a night shelter as: "... love in action...in as dark and difficult places as I can possibly find, because that's where the juice is and...truth is...when it's actually really difficult to maintain love and compassion for someone" (629-631). Participants are often pragmatic in the enactment of their inner purpose, as Maggie describes her choice not to proceed with her priestess training and become a vicar instead:

...interactions that have been brokered because I am known as this thing called 'Rev'. I can occupy a space that is safe enough for people to enter into. If I turned up as a priestess, I wouldn't have even got through the door. (334-336)

These results support the summary of psychological traits in SBNR by Fuller (2018) that their personalised spiritual focus does not indicate a dysfunctional narcissism, but rather, the openness and receptivity related to their transpersonal identification often lead to forms of empathy and concern.

Walach's (2015) formulation of spiritual awareness as phenomenological experience of holism resonates with participants' perspectives, as Heather explains: "...to me, spirituality is a whole way of life and it's about looking after our bodies and about looking after the earth and about looking after each other" (525-527). The framing of spirituality as transformative interconnection between self and world and the responsibility to be positive catalysts for change as discussed by Main (2006, 2008) and Puttick (2000), reflects the pathfinder's emphasis on cultivating conscious relationship. This starts in the personal and close interpersonal sphere, which in turn supports responsivity to the wider world and planet. Spiritual pathfinders believe in universal interconnectedness aim to contribute to this collective field of consciousness in a positive way. Sheldrake's (2011) notion of morphic resonance was mentioned by two participants in that context. As Edward reflects: "...the wider world is the accumulative result of all of us... an interaction ... my responsibility is...to be as giving in a positive energetical sense...I am one being...I can't change the world. However, I change myself, the world is different" (547-553).

In agreement with Fox (in Bucko & Fox, 2013), King (2009), and Kumar (2005), pathfinders recognise the current world predicament as a spiritual crisis which requires a spiritual response, as Theo states: "...our society is so sick...because we are very disconnected ...it's hugely important to help people reconnect...to take more responsibility for...their actions...that they're part of something...bigger and alive...to act from that connection...the clock is ticking" (424-432)! Ferrer's (2002, 2008a) participatory emphasis on qualitative diminishment of self-centeredness and dissociation in all areas of human functioning, as well as an openness to participate and transform both self and world, is resonant with pathfinders' aspirations.

Path vs construct

The juxtaposition of “authentic pathfinding” versus “spiritual-cultural construct” appeared as a strong theme in this project, particularly in relation to the new age phenomenon. The term new age, according to participants, has come to represent a philosophy and cultural construct rather than a spiritual path. As Sarah explains: “...people who live in the spiritual ideals or...new age, are going into the construct of culture...that bubble...feels bigger when you're in it, and all your friends are talking the same way” (511-513). Related is the issue of hidden socialisation in self-spirituality as explored by Aupers and Houtman (2006). Participants acknowledge the wish and sometimes pressure to belong, which can make them vulnerable to judgement sanctioned by new age philosophy. One such example is given by Florence: “New age guilt...feels like a continuation of Catholicism...that we're being punished somehow, that if you are just spiritual enough...do your yoga...meditated more...insert whatever new age practice...then you wouldn't be suffering...we've created our own reality... 'it's your fault'” (504-508). As suggested by King (2009), the label *new age* with its reputation of having ungrounded and narcissistic tendencies does appear too uncomfortable for use and it is notable that none of the participants identified with being “new age”. Pathfinders resist being pigeonholed, and labels are of minor significance. They stress that their experience is of an inner spiritual impulse to experience the sacred within themselves and the world around them in a meaningful way. As Diama explains: “...*new age* is...so narrow...my life is not new age. My life is life itself. I'm just an ordinary human being living my life being spiritual...connecting with who I am and expressing myself and my understanding of the universe” (647-651).

In agreement with York (2001), the move of spirituality into new arenas such as the commercial sphere is generally welcomed by participants as providing a positive influence in society. They however report to feel ambiguous about this widened accessibility and recognize the dangers of commercialization represented by the spiritual marketplace as proposed by Hanegraaff (2013), Carrette and King (2004), and Aupers and Houtman (2006). Pathfinders recognise that with mainstreaming comes a loss of spiritual connection, diminished critical engagement, and lack of skilled support. These factors identified by participants concur with the argument made by Hylland

(2017) that the simplification and standardization of spiritual practices in the marketplace causes them to lose their ethics and transformational potential. As Bert explains: "...spreading out into institutions is...positive, but how to deeply self-question...to apply critical thinking to oneself is not being taught...how not to be...spiritually lazy...when you have strong spiritual experiences you can't do that" (532-536). Spiritual narcissism and spiritual bypassing, as discussed by Welwood (2016) and Masters (2010) is explicitly recognised as an individualistic, as opposed to an individuating path, marked by a superficial and immature approach which lacks integrity. Yet in the context of a developmental continuum such experiences can represent a useful lesson, as Rhiannon explains: "...there are parts of the New Age...informed by the culture of individualism...what's offered...is...a prescription...to get what you want" (626-628). "...they will start with all of that, and they'll keep failing ...then will start questioning..." (644-645).

Participants display an informed awareness of the shadow side of the individualised path and are aware of abuses perpetrated in the name of spirituality. Unquestioned authority such as in a guru relationship as discussed by Bogart (1992) and Humphreys (2015), and an imbalanced focus on transcendence at the expense of immanence typified by a lack of psychological integration and embodiment as discussed by Welwood (2002, 2003, 2016) are identified as problematic. Participants relate this to an outmoded spiritual paradigm still rooted in patriarchal values as similarly represented by Eisler's (1988; Eisler & Fry, 2019) dominator model. In accordance with the pathfinder's ethos that all experiences serve a learning process, such examples can ultimately aid discernment, as Niamh reflects: "...these so-called spiritual leaders being revealed to have committed...egregious acts and being abusive...are...a reminder to stop using that information to avoid your psychological development" (451-456).

Overall, pathfinders consider the offerings of the spiritual supermarket useful for experimentation, as Dan explains:

I wouldn't call myself 'new age'...but...like many people in this time, I've explored lots of different things, and we've had the freedom to do that...criticizing some quarters and...in other ways...It's opened up a whole system of possibilities

which is positive I think. But then it's navigating through all those things. (404-408)

Pathfinders however emphasize that reliance on pre-packaged methods must be outgrown in the search for authenticity and spiritual maturity. This point further relates to the discussion by Puttick (2000) around critiques of the spiritual milieu as partly due to terminological and contextual misinterpretation. "Shopping around" for courses and practices is embedded in the wider social fabric of our time and part of the developmental trajectory. It is however not what typifies longer term engagement. Some participants expressed concern that due to the explosion of perspectives on offer, discernment is becoming increasingly difficult in the contemporary spiritual milieu, as Edward explains: "in our society, there are perpetual messages being put out to maintain a particular form of belief...to keep us from really connecting" (566-568). The necessity of a non-dogmatic spirituality to provide an antidote to the psychological distractions and insecurities disseminated by consumerist society as proposed by Walach (2015), is aligned with pathfinders' understanding. In Theo's words: "it's very easy to back into...old patterns and to get...disconnected again from the depth . . . if you don't...practice in your daily life and don't pay attention to the process then ...most of it...will evaporate" (318-319 & 324-325).

Whilst the potential downsides of individualized spirituality are acknowledged, pathfinders feel that spirituality in the 21st century is becoming increasingly embodied and grounded through the application of psychological process alongside spiritual engagement. They report to see improvements in the crucial areas of accountability, whole-person integration, and a preparedness to work with shadow, which one participant aptly termed a 'post new-age' spirituality. Although pathfinders stress that this needs to be an ongoing "living" process, their overall assessment is that contemporary spiritual engagement is gaining maturity. This concurs with the observation by Mercadante (2018) that the phenomenon of SBNR is still in its relative infancy. In Jane's words: "...thankfully...there's a recognition of the psychological...of the spiritual growth path" (256-259). "The language is changing... a definite level of maturity, but...not to adulthood yet" (386-387).

A new paradigm

Participants' perspectives concur with the argument made by Kripal (2018) that SBNR must be evaluated on its own terms, rather than be subject to like-for-like comparison. Participants are less concerned with validation in terms of social construct or religious equivalence. Rather, it is the crises facing humanity and the planet that necessitate people's organized cooperation as a spiritual act, as communicated by Bert:

...our civilisation is...at a point where it's fracturing quite severely ... the ecology of the planet is in massive crisis...there's a lot of pressure...to be resilient through this process, a lot has to come together! ...I...believe that this new spiritual consciousness has a role to play...as a sort of 'gathering some core and form', but that's still very much in process.... (540-544)

Pathfinders consider themselves as harbingers of a new paradigm brought about by a transformation of consciousness. This is variably described as a shift from the exclusively rational understanding of the mind, to include the expanded intuitive understanding of the heart which transcends the limitations of a solely materialistic view of reality. It is also understood as a return to wholeness by honouring the immanent aspect of the sacred and the primary sanctity of life alongside the transcendent, as discussed by Heelas (2008). In Rhiannon's words: "...the paradigm that exists...it's not working on so many levels...part of my purpose is to help a change...for there to be more care...consciousness...community...a shift in values...in perspective" (515-518).

In agreement with, amongst others, Eisler (1988; Eisler & Fry, 2019), Ferrer (2002, 2008a), and Heron (2006), pathfinders view the root cause of current world crises to be the dominant patriarchal paradigm underpinning religion, science, politics, economics, and culture. They strongly feel the existing paradigm has severed human connection to the earth and has actively suppressed the feminine-oriented and partnership-focussed values such as of embodiment, creativity, and caring for self, other and planet. The reinstatement of the sacred feminine principle is therefore a key component of the new paradigm, as Sharia reflects: "...we are...birthing...a new understanding...coming through the divine feminine...humans coming back to realising

the importance of caring for the earth, for their lives, for each generation” (638-642). Pathfinders’ understanding of the new paradigm further concurs with King’s (2009) depiction of the contemporary quest as an experimental search for a more open, dynamic, and transformational spirituality which reflects a lived experience of a personal, responsive, and responsible relationship to the sacred.

In reference to the core-criterion shared by spirituality and religion: of “a search for the sacred” by Hill et al (2000), spiritual pathfinding signifies a pro-active journey of discovery and renewal. It symbolizes a search for intimacy, personal integrity, and multiple expressions of sacred relationship. Rather than representing the antithesis of religion as discussed by La Cour and Gôtke (2012), pathfinders seek to provide a bridge between the religious and non-religious, the global and the local, and strive for a free-flowing responsiveness to a changing world and its needs, as similarly proposed by Horie (2013). Hanegraaff’s (2013) assessment that secular spirituality reflects a reform and renewal process in response to social and historical processes which can be understood as a profound transformation of religion, chimes with the pathfinders’ perspective. In Sharia’s words: “...religions...are of human creation and they can...be converted from within, it's all about the people's consciousness inside them” (620-622). As advocated by King (2009), this dialectic perspective offers a constructive way to resolve the sharp polarization between the religious and the SBNR.

Berghuijs, Bakker and Pieper’s (2013) redefinition of social engagement which distinguishes between what is and is not driven by egocentric motivation, rather than affiliation to a fixed framework, aligns with pathfinding principles. Pathfinders’ enduring social impact can be attributed to their ethos of inviting, finding, or seeking, the sacred in every experience and interaction. This ethos contradicts Carrette and King’s (2004) portrayal of an individualistic spirituality insulated against wider political and social issues and Bruce’s (2000, 2006) depiction of impotence and infirmity due to lack of authoritative reference point outside the individual. The data is more in alignment with Heelas’ (2006) depiction that social interconnection rests on shared values which embed participants in their shared spirituality. Furthermore, participants maintain that their spiritual path must not be confused with the social construct related to the

spiritual marketplace, elements of which they themselves recognise as needing more grounding, integrity, and substance. Whilst participants are pragmatic about the value that constructs can provide, as reflected in Sharia's words: "...there need to be forms that people can work within" (619), they however look toward existing structures to explore enduring mystical insight beyond the frameworks that were built around them. As Florence puts it: "I don't want to go through another version of 'church'" (251-252). Pathfinders' critique of pre-established pathways concerns the negation of spiritual freedom when such structures become enmeshed with the dynamics of power, in Qori's words: "...anything based on hierarchy is spiritually suspect..." (328). When external authority operates at the expense of inner experience, the integrity of spirituality as living process is lost. Participants recognise this can equally happen in the contemporary milieu, mentioning the commercialized self-help formulae promoted in the "spiritual supermarket" as example. In agreement with Heelas (2008), pathfinders insist appraisal of social impact must therefore focus on the values and ethics born from inner process and how these are subsequently enacted in the world.

Pathfinders are seeking an authentic relationship with the sacred in a way that is meaningful for them. They see their spirituality as an applied quality of engagement, over and above a constructed set of beliefs or code of conduct. As Anoush explains: "...everything is spirituality, or everything has a sacred element to it... it's a sense of presence that you bring to what you do that makes it a spirituality..." (573- 575). The primary focus is on transforming the quality of consciousness in self and community. To do this, pathfinders experiment with multiple perspectives and discard elements they feel are no longer relevant for this time, this culture, or not resonant with their personal experience. They adopt constructs to contain and contextualize their personal process, yet do not allow predetermined lenses to override personal experience and self-determination. In alignment with Ferrer's (2008a; 2009) participatory ethos of enabling new expressions to be born and the inclusion of previously underrepresented expressions to be validated and included, pathfinders are also co-creatively hybridising pathways and creating new ones. With this wider perspective, the understanding, boundaries, and applications of spirituality are flexibly expanding to meet the human experience in contemporary times. In Dan's words: "it's all awareness...becoming more

familiar with all the different multifaceted manifestations of the way people express their spirituality ... it's getting the balance...traditions have a history and...knowledge that is really important...but also...acknowledging that people have...experiences... without any of that” (589-590 & 607-610). Results corroborate the argument made by Huss (2014) that SBNR constitutes an alternative category of cultural significance and provides a credible alternative to religion in a secular world as additionally argued by Ammerman (2013), Heelas (2006), Moore (2015), and Puttick (2000). It is the dynamic and co-creative nature of spiritual pathfinding as the core activity of the SBNR that marks a significant qualitative difference from spiritual engagement in more traditional contexts. Pathfinders would argue, this “living and lived” approach ensures the relevance and endurance of the *spiritual but not religious*.

Conclusion.

The intention for this research project was to provide a comprehensive depiction of contemporary spiritual engagement outside of religious tradition from the “inside out” as a direct and longstanding experience. The field of sociology has provided valuable research which places SBNR as a socio-cultural trend which has its shadow-side yet shows endurance and cohesion when considered on its own terms. Scholarly research of religious history has further placed SBNR and its previous manifestations within the context of a rich esoteric tradition. However, the appraisal of contemporary spirituality remains incomplete until both “lived” experience and “living” process is explored and added to the mix. The field of transpersonal psychology provides the contemporary language and container to effectively evaluate these vital aspects. Qualitative research methodology offers the correct tool for in-depth appraisal of diversity and nuance. Personal experiential connection to the subject provides the passion to keep exploring in-depth and beyond what is already known. The following section provides a summary of what the data adds to the current narrative.

The primary finding of this report is that considerable psycho-spiritual process is, or can be, involved in the choices made by the *spiritual but not religious*. As the literature reveals, SBNR is a general term that denotes a social movement and shift in spiritual-religious orientation. It therefore covers a broad range of people, expressions, and engagements. Whilst useful as a sociological term, it does not represent a quality of spiritual engagement, for which a psychological appraisal is required. As discussed, SBNR is influenced by the counter-cultural “new age zeitgeist” of experimentation and nonconformism and is supported by the opportunities provided by the spiritual supermarket. These are contextual factors that need to be taken into consideration. The data however suggests, that when looking at engagement in the longer term through a psychological lens, SBNR is more than a lifestyle choice and not imposed through hidden socialisation. The missing ingredient in such limited appraisal is the core-activity of enduring and consistent psycho-spiritual process referred to as “spiritual pathfinding”. More research would be required to determine whether spiritual

pathfinding is indeed a consistent core-activity in the SBNR, or whether spiritual pathfinders represent a subset within the SBNR phenomenon.

The marriage of transpersonal psychology and spirituality which typifies contemporary engagement is a dialectic that facilitates a path of psycho-spiritual individuation. Ongoing self-inquiry and purposeful exposure to multiple perspectives develops both necessary discernment and openness to support authentic self-agency and maintains fluidity in identity. Whilst the pathfinding journey is a highly individual experience there are corresponding themes which have been explicated in this report. The current research reveals that the pathfinding process is subject to developmental stages moving toward relative maturation. These are interweaving phases having a shifting focus which correspond to the archetypal depictions of the three major stages and three vital aspects portrayed in the *creative synthesis*: “birth-right”, “in-tuiry”, and “spiritual pathfinder”.

- The first stage can be described as a search for answers in response to a feeling of restlessness, something “missing”, “not belonging”, or the pathfinder has experiences for which they can find no language or context in their immediate environment. In this early stage, pathfinding is highly experimental as teachers, teachings and pathways are sampled. This experimentation can be non-committal, or with committed “beginners’ enthusiasm”, until saturation is reached, or disillusionment occurs, and the restless feeling of missing and not belonging returns or persists.
- In the second stage, the pathfinder learns to accept ambiguity and develops the skill of discernment. Although the “quest’-ioning” continues, they learn that finding answers in the exterior can only take them so far, and that not all questions have answers. The pathfinding focus shifts towards understanding the inner world, and the undoing of what is in the way of authentic self-experience, namely the psychological patterns of conditioning and inner wounding. In this phase the hybridisation of spiritual perspectives together with psychological process truly begins. The pathfinder does the inner work of self-exploration and self-questioning, combined with spiritual practices which resonate with their

personal process. The discomfort of “not knowing” is reframed as a state of openness to self-transformation.

- The third stage of pathfinding is marked by an incremental sense of “flow”. This can be understood as a dynamic interchange between self-experience and the mystery of life itself. The focus is on responsiveness to intuitive knowing, conscience, bodily signals, and synchronicities. The erstwhile “fixed” identity is experienced as increasingly fluid, whilst the sense of self as a multidimensional “beyond the self” comes to the fore.

In sum, the pathfinding trajectory identified in this report spans from mental questioning to psycho-spiritual understanding, to incremental embodiment where life itself becomes the path and a balance between “doing” and “being” as a spontaneous responsiveness is realised.

The second finding concerns the changing meaning of *transcendence* in contemporary spiritual engagement. As discussed, the traditional meaning of transcendence refers to a reality or deity which is wholly independent from the material universe. Contemporary understanding of spirituality bears relationship to a more naturalist stance: that “religious truths are derived from nature and natural causes and not from revelation” (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Naturalism>). With the understanding of the *transpersonal Self*, the meaning of transcendence shifts to a process of ever deepening alignment with one’s spiritual essence. This meaning rests on the premise that the human being is a multidimensional consciousness in co-creative relationship with Mystery. The state of separation between the transpersonal or “sacred” Self and the personal self can be abated in what transpersonal theory refers to as the process of *individuation*, *self-realisation*, or *self-actualization*. This may occur temporarily in so-called “peak experiences” but is mostly experienced as a gradual process of integration. Either way, considerable inner work, integrity, and dedication is involved to establish and maintain a transcendent connection within.

The third finding is the growing emphasis on the body on the spiritual path. As pathfinders mature in their engagement, they increasingly rely on bodily signals to

navigate their response to life and shape their unique spiritual pathway. Participants stress their need to feel “grounded” in their body for transcendent alignment or connection to manifest. In other words, they perceive it is the multidimensional Selfhood that is incrementally coming into embodiment, interconnecting the natural with the spiritual, and harmonising the polarity between immanence and transcendence.

Fourthly, results suggest that contemporary spirituality as a collective phenomenon is seeded from the “inside out” and supported “ground-up”. Whilst the influence of socialization within the spiritual milieu must be acknowledged, participants’ narratives begin with the individual process and their trajectories reveal a more independent and “pioneering” tenet as their primary impetus. The incremental attunement to one’s transpersonal dimension in turn expands into a collective field of consciousness which interconnects the personal and the shared. An inner impulse to forge meaningful relationships based on communal values, inclusivity, and equality, arises as a natural consequence of this realisation. This is experienced as a sense of personal responsivity and responsibility towards the whole. The settings and forms for relationship are fluid and varied, responsive to circumstances and needs.

A fifth theme concerns the meaning of spiritual freedom in contemporary spirituality. This involves a freedom *from* hierarchically prescribed constructs, aims and formulations, and a freedom *to* co-creatively share and explore spiritual expression and experience. As participants attest, the contemporary spiritual milieu is as vulnerable to the danger of dogmatism as any other construct. It is therefore important to emphasise that the need to (re)claim spiritual freedom relates to *any* pathway that has lost its qualities of fluidity and “aliveness”. Spiritual pathfinding represents a living holistic experience and dynamic continuum, with personal sovereignty and self-authenticity as primary principles. As outlined in the literary review, this personal sovereignty must be understood within the context of individuation rather than individualism. Spiritual pathfinding does not eschew predetermined pathways but claims the freedom to supplement, hybridise, and re-evaluate both traditional and new pathways in synthesis with personal inquiry and process.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

Qualitative research aims for an understanding of the multifaceted complexity and meaning involved in a particular human experience or phenomenon. It relies on the personal statements and self-assessment of those who have direct experience of the subject under investigation. This provides a strength of depth but a limitation regarding breadth of the enquiry and the scope for generalisation. The meaning that is constructed from subjective experience is always primarily related to the experienter. As discussed in the methodology section, the value that meaning has to others depends on the degree of resonance it evokes. In other words: whether the meaning “rings true” and is useful to the receiver in their own quest for wider understanding. This resonance may be limited due to socio-cultural differences such as of gender, ethnicity, age, location, and economic circumstance. This is a small-scale study with mostly white European participants. It may therefore be that spiritual pathfinding outside of institutional frameworks is predominantly a white western, secular culture, phenomenon. Further research which widens the socio-cultural range would make a valuable addition to the current inquiry.

Related to the question of self-authenticity is the tension between what is original and what is constructed in people’s narratives. In other words, to what extent is there a circularity between what participants encounter by way of teachings and models, and how they subsequently interpret or shape their experience to fit that narrative. Which precedes which, is the philosophical “chicken and egg” conundrum. The current study accepts that, as social beings, a cross-pollination between constructed and essential experience inevitably exists. Transpersonal theory holds that we are multidimensional beings interconnected by a collective field of consciousness. Therefore, this crosspollination happens on multiple levels. The psychological inquiry concerns how aware a person is of this cross-pollination, how authentic resonance is discerned, and how this is subsequently worked with. Transpersonal literature on self-transformation cited in this report is focussed on changing identity and worldview, often involving significant events, a process of maturation, and growing discernment. Further longitudinal studies on people’s changing relationship with spiritual constructs would add another facet to current research. Qualitative research on the perceived difference

in experience between the transpersonal phenomenon of collective consciousness and the interpersonal phenomenon of socialization, would provide an additional angle.

What cannot be drawn from the data is verification of participants' experiences and perspectives. To repeat the argument made by Heelas (2008), researchers can neither prove nor judge the ontological truths of people's spiritual claims. Both religion and spirituality are founded on the existence of a divine reality or sacred dimension. The how's and why's of contemporary spiritual engagement cannot be fairly appreciated unless this context of the multi-dimensional human is respected. In scientific inquiry, this aspect needs to be bracketed and the focus shift to a psychological appreciation of human experience and action. Accordingly, the heuristic approach does not seek to determine objective fact but offers a qualitative evaluation of meaning and process and has principles in place to ensure optimum integrity. This report seeks to identify and understand the complexity and dynamic which underlies an emerging human spirituality in all its shades of light and shadow. Research must be ongoing to follow the changing nature of human spiritual experience and engagement as it unfolds.

On a further note, although SBNR has become a recognised label to identify those in a growing movement, the term implies a polarized stance which my research aims to dispel. The results show that contemporary spirituality has, and is continuing to develop, its own language and identity. I would therefore suggest that future research should look towards defining the distinctive characteristics of those in this category by what they *are* rather than by what they *are not*. My hope is that by distilling a distinctive range of spiritual and psychological features of those engaged in contemporary spiritual expressions outside of institutionalised pathways, my research has gone some way to define their positive qualities, notably as captured in my term *spiritual pathfinding*.

Transformational impact

We live in precarious times. The longstanding violation of nature and life, underscored by divisive ideology and opinion masking as truth, represents a human psychosis that threatens to destroy our very existence. To find genuine answers for real change, humanity must come into authentic embodied relationship with self and world. This means going beyond the personal and collective psychological patterns or level of consciousness that brought us to this point. These levels of consciousness are represented in all human constructs: be it religious, spiritual, scientific, cultural, or political. Such structures must be open to change to stay “alive” in the symbolic sense of the word and remain relevant to the needs of our time.

The results from my research lead me to propose that the choices made by the *spiritual but not religious* are motivated by a genuine search for new solutions to bring positive change. The pathfinding principles of self-inquiry, self-responsibility, inclusivity, interconnectedness, discernment, and doing no harm, offer an alternative to entrenched modes of functioning and, it is hoped, enable collective transformation.

For pathfinders themselves, the narratives provided by the participants and the researcher, reveal that having experiences and insights outside the norm can pose considerable challenge and crisis of identity. The search for understanding and language to contextualize such experience becomes a primary motivation and steers the personal trajectory. Like any journey into uncharted territory, one can feel temporarily lost going around in circles, then find sudden vistas which show direction and encourage confidence. Participants emphasize the role of self-understanding and self-acceptance in their ongoing psycho-spiritual maturation. It is intended this report will be a resource to serve this transformational process.

As a closing observation with which to encourage the ongoing “quest-ioning”, spiritual pathfinding widens the parameters of what spirituality is or can be. By making the intentional relationship between psychological process, embodiment, and spiritual engagement, something “new” is allowed to take form. Pathfinders’ identification as “spiritual beings having a human experience” flips the traditional focus of “human beings having a spiritual experience” on its head. Spirituality is considered inseparable

from selfhood, not dependent on an external referent, institution, instruction, or grace bestowed. Human consciousness is understood as an integral part of the greater mystery called life. The “search for the sacred” is focussed within, symbolised as a transpersonal Self which provides a compass with which to navigate outward in search for sacred resonance in lived experience. A fully responsive, co-creative, and embodied engagement with life itself becomes the path. Perfection is not the aim but rather, the cultivation of self-accountability and discernment in the face of increasing subtlety and complexity. The pathfinding ethos is to be fully engaged with the world and learn from every experience, however messy, difficult, or seemingly unsuccessful. Perhaps even the term “spirituality” is becoming defunct, as it suggests a separate domain of human experience. As contemporary spiritual engagement matures, maybe a new language will emerge to convey what it means to be a full-spectrum, multidimensional human being. It is hoped that the results of this project provide a comprehensive contribution to this emergence.

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