Spiritual yearnings: an autoethnographic inquiry

Johnston, Dawn

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master thesis

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Abstract

The following is an autoethnography on the story of the lived experience of renegotiating spiritual identity outside of the Catholic church. Interviews with co-researchers struggling with similar issues were conducted, and used in conjunction with relevant literature, and the author's reflexive look at her own lived experiences, to enhance the meaning of this experience for the author. A literature review, implications for counselling and theory, as well as recommendations for future research are provided.

Findings spoke to the role of the Catholic discourse as new hybrid discourses are negotiated, making room for a more spiritual discourse, and voice to speak it. Conclusions drawn are specific to the lived experiences of the author and how she has navigated her own spiritual identity development in the meaning-making process. Insight is offered into some of the various cognitive and emotional processes that such a negotiation may entail.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my family for their support and putting up with my constant need to ask "why", and also my incredible friends, for believing in me at times when I had a hard time believing in myself.

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Finally, I would like to thank the Catholic Church for whetting my spiritual appetite. I am grateful for synchronicity and all the wonderful gifts it has brought me along this journey.
Dedication

To my grandma, whose faith encouraged me to explore my own.

To my dear friend Reggie, whose common interest in the subject, and openness to life's synchronicities, gave me one of the most meaningful friendships of my life.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Hail Mary full of grace...pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of my thesis defence. Amen"

Launching My Story-Making Journey

This is the part where I introduce me to you, where I introduce my story-in-progress, the significance of my question and how this topic came to be. I have heard that this should be the easy part, but sometimes I feel that I would rather be analyzing data than analyzing myself. Fortunately, however, this is slowly changing. Through a series of synchronistic events, I have found life to be slowly setting the stage, allowing, and almost beckoning me to perform my story as I continue to author it. Chance meetings, conversations, and events have all provided platforms from which I have been able to explore my journey: my search for my new spiritual home.

So far this journey has reconnected me with never-met-before relatives, and taken me from Victoria to Vancouver, Hawaii to Bermuda, Calgary, Canmore, Toronto, Mexico and Florida. My thesis has racked up more airmiles than any frail lap top should have to do. At times, this has felt like me running from my self; but more accurately, it has been searching for my truths—searching for spiritual self, which at times had felt like my whole self.

“I find myself house-sitting with Cecile nestled in the Three Sisters mountain range... Time to face the inevitable. No longer can I avoid this puppy and so I sit at my computer....

Ok, ok, I’m procrastinating already.

Only on chapter one and trying to find a creative way to introduce my
story... arghhh.” (Journal entry, September 19, 2006.)
And so, I will procrastinate no longer...I find myself in the midst of renegotiating
my spiritual identity. To be truthful this is not something I consciously chose, or even
consciously recognized that I needed to do. I would love to be able to describe to you
exactly how I became aware of my need to do this, but am still struggling to find the
words to convey it. This is why I have chosen to write about it, in hope that I will not
only find clarity in this process, but also be able to take meaning from it.

Roughly eight years ago while working on my undergraduate degree at the
University of Victoria, I opened my eyes one morning to find my world a little darker
than when I had left it to sleep the night before. It may have been a gradual process or it
may have happened all at once, my hazy memory cannot recall. My world became bleak;
I spiralled down a dark hole to a place of emptiness and despair. I had no idea how I got
there and no idea how to get out. I was offered explanations of homesickness and
pressure from school, but nothing resonated with what I felt. But what did I feel? I felt
empty, void of “Dawn”.

I tried to pray to God to help me to understand what I was going through, but I
found I could not find Him. Either He was not available to me, or I was no longer
available to Him, I don’t know how it went or why. I wanted so badly to be able to
connect with Him, but the ways in which I knew how, the Catholic ways, did not seem to
be working anymore.

Maybe it was out of fear of facing it, or maybe I simply wasn’t ready, but for
eight years that depression and the exploration of its significance, has been concealed
away on my mental to-do list. This however has changed and I feel that I can not shelve
this experience any longer. That initial distance from God is slowly bringing me closer to a sense of my spiritual self. Moving through the darkness I have seemingly found a brighter light, and I would like to better understand how that has come to be.

Through conversations that have quickly become deep discussions, and beginning to quenching my thirst with literature, I have been able to conclude with certainty, that not only was my experience of depression spiritual in nature, but more significantly though, I have also found that I am not alone in this experience. Slowly with the more I read, and the more people I meet, the better I am able to piece together the thoughts that have spun a tightly woven and suffocating cocoon around the essence of my mind, heart and soul over the past few years.

My hope is that as I continue along this path, I will be able to untangle the webs and re-weave them into something that contains new meaning and implications for growth. I know that I am not there yet, but I am on my way, and with purpose. I am entering a new beginning and in it I will find the “Dawn” I lost years ago, only with newfound knowledge and understanding, I will be able to make her whole, and help guide her to be the person she is becoming.

Maybe it was hearing something in my external world that spoke to my internal voice that had been locked away for years, speechless, or maybe it is just simply time to explore this experience. Something has again stirred inside of me, like a hibernating bear being woken in the spring and shaking off the slumber of a long dark winter. I too awoke from my dark winter of depression. My hungry soul had found its voice, and my purpose is now to find the words to feed it. And thus begins my spiritual journey home.
My Question

My purpose, then, is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of my own process of my spiritual identity development by connecting with others who were also raised within the Catholic church and found a need to renegotiate their spiritual identity. Specifically, by using literature to provide a theoretical understanding, and connecting my experience to those of my co-researchers, I want to understand the experience of individuals who have stopped believing the Catholic identity was a fit for them personally, as they recognized their spiritual connection to be outside of the church.

Central to most people’s views of the world, religion provides a way in which to practice one’s faith (Exline, Yali & Sanderson, 2000). Religion, in general, presents beliefs about the nature of God, life’s purpose, and the possibility of life after death. The Catholic religion in particular, provides specific ways in which to understand and live such beliefs. This is where I believe that, as my own active meaning maker, I have the option, and more appropriately the obligation, (if it is to be an active process) to determine if the ways of the Catholic church, fit for me personally, as I begin to recognize a spiritual self, outside of the church.

While the explanation of existential issues, as offered by religion, can have a profound impact on psychological health, providing a sense of belonging, community, and purpose, the effects can also be devastating if one finds him or herself in a religion that does not allow for expressing his or her identity as it is felt. How does such a person learn to express their beliefs when they were raised in a church that told them what and how to believe? How do I, and others, continue to grow spiritually and develop a spiritual identity outside of the Catholic one in which we were raised?
My Method

The very nature of my research question - more concerned with the what of the experience instead of why - the desire to explore an experience for which there is no readily available theory, and my desire to be an active learner in the process, and not the expert, are tailor made for qualitative research. These very qualities are what this study stands for (Creswell, 1998).

I have decided to invite others to join me in informing my spiritual pilgrimage. I say decided as if it was something I laboured over, when in truth it was more of a necessity. It is through conversations and relationships that I perceive my world and sense my purpose and place within it. As such, it seemed only logical for me that I include the stories of others to complement and inform my own as I begin to understand my experiences. Connecting with others will assist me out of my restricted perspective and confusion, allowing the voices of others to help me make meaning of my own journey. While my spiritual identity will then be informed by others, it will not be them telling me how to be spiritual, as I found the Catholic church to do, but rather it will be them sharing with me how they renegotiated their relationship with their own spiritual selves.

Before moving on, I would just like to make a comment on my use of the small “c” version of church, rather than Church. As I am typing Catholic church, the spell-check on my computer wants to correct it to be Church, with a capital “c”. I find this interesting that the computer is programmed for this as to me it speaks to the authority of the church. Being that this is a thesis where I am questioning the authority of the church
in my re-negotiation of my spiritual identity, as part of my journey, I have opted to use small “c” church.

The research method that I am employing to answer my question is narrative autoethnography, as Berger (2001) argues that narrative autoethnography is the best way to study religious and spiritual experiences. Mathewes-Green (as cited in Berger) wrote, “Some of us may like pure theory, theology, or philosophy, but all of us like stories. It’s where the Spirit sees best” (p.510). In her research, Berger has found that her use of narrative autoethnography provides her informants with tools to share their spiritual experiences, and made them more comfortable and open to sharing when she was willing to share her own stories as part of hearing theirs.

In general terms, an authoethnography is regarded as a self-narrative that describes the self within a specific context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Within that general definition Ellis (2004) recognized over sixty different terms, all with connotations similar to autoethnography. While such a loose application of the word can lend confusion to the classification of different types of autoethnographic work, Ellis contends that the “wide usage of the term represents a move toward recognizing personal narrative as its own genre” (p. 40).

In her discussion on the different types of autoethnography, Ellis (2004) defines narrative autoethnography as allowing for the questioning of self in relation to culture, begging one to ask how they can make sense of and build on their experiences. This lends to a critiquing of the culture in which we find ourselves, which in this case is the Catholic church, and my resistance experienced as a part of it. As an active meaning maker adopting a social constructionist framework, such an approach will help me to make
meaning of my experiences with the culture of the Church, as well as the cultures created between each of my co-researchers and myself as we share our stories. Additionally, it is my desire that by sharing the stories of my co-researchers and myself I can actively engage you as the reader, to locate yourself in the text and think with our stories rather than about them (Ellis, 2004). Through your own self-reflexivity I hope that you will recall your own experiences and find new meaning in them by taking what you will from what you are about to read. What I offer you is not the final word, but rather an opportunity to find your own voice and perhaps lend you a new understanding as you create your own interpretation of our experiences and weave them into your own.

My Overview

In Chapter Two, Baptism, I will admit you, the reader, into the conceptual community of my research. As the sacrament of Baptism symbolizes the introduction to spiritual life, this chapter will represent my introduction to the literature that has influenced my spiritual journey. I will present and discuss some of the relevant literature that has informed how I am beginning to make sense of my own experiences.

Catechism, in Chapter Three, will provide my brief Sunday school teaching of the methodology of autoethnography. This will include how I came to choose autoethnography and what such a method will lend to understanding the stories of my co-researchers and me.

I will offer up summarized vignette depictions of the interviews with my co-researchers in Chapter Four, The Confessional. This is where the truths of their experiences as they shared them with me will be shared and put forth for you, the reader, to examine as you contemplate your own story and truths.
In Chapter Five, I will share my story with you as I have come to know it. I have chosen to call this chapter, *Behind The Confessional Door* as it has been hearing the experiences of my co-researchers that has helped me to make sense of my own. This chapter will illustrate to you how listening to the experiences of others, as well as my interactions with literature in Chapter Two has helped me to make meaning of my spiritual identity development. Using Chapter Two and Four reflectively I hope to demonstrate in Chapter Five a way in which you too can use such informants to also make sense and meaning of your life events.

Finally, Chapter Six will attest to what has been learned from my journey, my *Confirmation*. Just as the Catholic sacrament of Confirmation sanctifies one as a perfect Christian, with the strength and courage to confess in the name of Christ, this chapter will sum up the implications of the stories of my courageous co-researchers, as well as mine, who had the strength to confess our stories and struggles to share with you. This chapter will also highlight counselling implications, ethical considerations and reflections for future research.

Please join me with me now as we start with a review of the literature that will help to inform my lived experience of spiritual identity development outside of the Catholic church.
As a Catholic, I was raised with a collective sense of faith. My faith felt prescribed and regimented. Two years ago, I was introduced to the concept of spirituality and I could not remember ever having heard the word while growing up in my church. Perhaps it was never mentioned, or maybe it was, and I was not ready to go down that path yet. Perhaps I assumed that if I decide to embark on such a journey, it would have to be done in a Catholic way—that I could only explore spirituality in terms of Catholic religiosity.

Something piqued my interest and, as I slowly began exploring the topic, I felt like a weight was lifted off of my shoulders. I realized that although spirituality and religion may connote similar concepts, they were not synonymous. Suddenly, it seemed that it was possible - in fact, it was perhaps even ok - to create my own sense of spirituality outside of an organized religion. Maybe I did not have to believe all things Catholic in order to maintain my inner sense of spirituality. Recalling his own unfamiliarity with the term spirituality while growing up in the Catholic tradition, John Elias (1991) seemed to echo my sentiments by stating that his notion of spirituality felt “ascetical and otherworldly...consisted of adding ‘spiritual’ activities to (his) daily schedule” (p. 457).

I never really saw my religious orientation to include an element of spirituality, but again, maybe it was there and I didn’t know the word well enough to recognize it. Fortunately, even though I was not able to recognize the spirituality in my religion, I was able to recognize it in myself - hence this topic, which got me wondering if I need my
religion in order to be spiritual. Could I take a more active, more personal role in my spiritual development? Zinn (1997) spoke to my question when he said,

Our appreciation for the breadth and depth of the human spirit is diminished if we think of spirituality only in a religious context. And if we think that the tasks of ‘nurturing the spirit’ are best left to religious institutions (p. 27).

So as Zinn (1997) suggests, I am opening myself up to explore my spirituality outside of my Catholic faith. My process now is to nurture my own spirit as I move from the collective identity that I formerly had found in my affiliation with the Catholic church, to my own personal one. This will be a process of identifying my own faith and way in which to live it, which I believe then defines my own spirituality. In order that I am able to digest the solid food of my newly forming identity, I think we must first visit the literature, or milk, that has helped inform this process.

Operational Definitions

Widespread use of the words religion and spirituality seems to call for common definitions for each to be found. As Wittgenstein (1981) wisely said, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (p. 149). Though I do not feel my inability to accurately describe my own notions of religion and spirituality is as extreme as the limits of my world, I recognize that they might be the limits of your understanding of my world. I shudder to have to nail down the definitions by penning them to my page, but without doing so, I can not be sure that you and I are on the same page, speaking of things with at least a shared understanding of what such things are.

It is important to me to know the distinction between spirituality and religion so that I can attempt to convey to you the distinction I feel between them. However, in my
attempts I feel it is also important that you know that, for me, my own definitions are a work in progress and may change throughout the process of my writing. In fact, I do hope they change, as that to me would signify growth, which is of course imperative to my spiritual identity development. My Catholic self seems to recognize the Catholic way to be close to God. Somewhere, though, there also seems to be a spiritual self which recognizes and is influenced by other ways. Internally and externally, I am being influenced and now I am recognizing a sense of spiritual self in conjunction with the Catholic self I have always known myself to be. How is it that I bring these two selves to my question and why would I recognize one as more spiritual? In my attempt to understand this dichotomy I have turned to the literature to see how the discrepancy is conceptualized by various theorists in hope that within their work, I may find understanding.

I have read several theorists' definitions of spirituality and religion but had difficulty picking one that I felt was sufficiently encompassing (without being overkill or overly prescriptive). The following definitions were chosen to provide a context and some common ground from which we can endeavour to discuss such concepts.

Religion

In trying to come to a cohesive definition of the term religion, Pargament (1997) offered two ways to conceptualize the differences in definitions. ‘Substantive definitions’ are specific, involving the everyday talk of religion, with the focus on the different perspectives of the sacred; whether it is God, transcendent forces, or deities, and what comes to be related to these higher powers. This is contrasted with ‘functional definitions’, which are concerned more with ways in which to make sense of the
fundamental concerns of existence. The focus is on how the beliefs are put into practice, rather than the significance of the beliefs themselves.

Monk et al. (1998) seemed to resonate with the notion of the substantive definition, defining religion as:

Any person’s reliance on a pivotal value or a group of related values in which that person find essential wholeness as an individual and as a person-in-community.

For that person, all other values are subordinate to this central value (or to this group of values) (p. 4).

While researchers such as Monk et al. have been able to settle on a definition for their use, Pargament (1997) suggested that each definition, of the litany that is available, is reflective of the different elements that may comprise any religion; this, for example, may be seen in the differences of what it means to be Baha’i versus Baptist, Muslim versus Mennonite. While it may be frustrating to not have an agreed upon definition, Pargament cautioned that such a concrete definition may provide clarity and common understanding, yet can also prove limiting, missing the essence of religion. These thoughts echo my own as I feel that although language is useful to convey sentiments, its use can at times also seem to be like caging a bird that is meant to fly free, rather than sit static and beat its wings against the walls of its confinement.

For some reason I am less concerned about the use of a definitive definition of religion, as much as I am about spirituality. A restrictive use of religion perhaps makes me think that if someone does not like a particular use of the word, they can simply shop around until they find a religion whose definition and related practices they do like. Religion, it seems to me, is more appropriately confined and enclosed within the
parameters of a definition. By this I mean that a precise definition of the term would, as suggested by Pargament (1997) reflect the elements that are essential to the specific religion. The definition then could more concretely lay out the ways in which to traditionally practice the religion for those who are followers of it.

**Spirituality**

In my eyes spirituality is different as I don’t believe it has specific ways to be practiced and therefore may not lend itself to being easily confined within the walls of a definition. A tightly bound definition of spirituality seems to be the antithesis of what spirituality is, or at least to what spirituality is to me. Unlike particular religions which offer certain pathways to practice them, spirituality (to me) does not equate itself with this as easily. As such, it would seem that a looser definition might be more appropriate. This is perhaps reflective only of my current and still developing views on my own religion, though this may be expected I suppose, being as I am only now beginning to explore my relationship with it. Here is where I was at a few months ago,

before launching into the task of defining spirituality, I have a bit of a confession I must first share. I am adverse to the word. I am not sure what it is, but for some reason, the word spirituality conjures up a picture of a new age crystal and rock bookstore, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it is just not what I have in mind when I use the term. (Journal entry, October 14, 2006)

**Spirituality** has proven to me to be as difficult to define as religion; however, there does appear to be somewhat of a consensus that spirituality is a highly personalized search for a sense of connectedness and transcendent force (Pargament, 1997; Wink & Dillon, 2002).
The definition offered by Koenig, McCullough, and Larson’s (2001) resonated with me as it seemed to fit for my experiences, because I believe that my involvement in the Catholic faith has, and continues to contribute to, and shape, my spirituality. To them, spirituality is:

The personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community. (p.18)

Elsewhere in my reading I came across William James. Gillespie (2003) gave a beautiful introduction to the work of William James, a pioneer in the field of the study of psychology of religion. Initially, James (1902/1958) came across as a bit of a dry and rather cumbersome read; however, upon finding Gillespie’s synopsis I found myself craving more. While James’ title, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, might imply a religious undertone, upon further inspection, it appears that James might have been more of a spiritual man. In his writings on the conversion experience, James identifies the distinction between someone born once and someone twice born. I prefer to liken such a distinction to my experience to having been born into Catholicism, yet choosing to be born again, into my own spiritual identity.

James (1902/1958) restricts the experience of the first born to those who are born happy the first time, expanding that those needing to be born twice are souls, born sick, needing to be born again in order that they be born happy. He describes this as:

In the religion of the once-born the word is a sort of rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just the
values, which naturally they appear to have, and of which a simple algebraic sum
of pluses and minuses will give the total worth. Happiness and religious peace
consist of living on the plus side of the account. (James, 1902/1958, p. 140)
James (1902/1958) continued that life is not as simple for the experience of the
twice born who must first go through the experience of being unsatisfied with their first
faith, before being born into their second:

The religion of the twice-born, on the other hand, the world is a double-sided
mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and
elimination of minuses from life. Natural good is not simply insufficient in
amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being. Cancelled as it all is
by death if not by earlier enemies, it gives no final balance and can never be the
thing intended for our lasting worship. It keeps us from our real good, rather; and
renunciation and despair of it are our first step in the direction of the truth. There
are two lives, the natural and spiritual and we must lose one before we can
participate in the other. (p. 140)

As Bob Dylan (1965) famously sang, “he not busy being born is busy dying”. I
do not want my newly emerging spiritual self to die, but do I need to give up the Catholic
identity I was raised with in order that I am able to take up a more personalized spiritual
one? Is it possible to mediate between the two and come up with some sort of hybrid
Catholic-personalized spiritual identity? Or does the adoption of one necessitate the
renunciation of the other?

The work of James Fowler (1981, 1991), who came years after William James
(1902/1958) seems to speak to the questions I just raised. Not speaking to religious
development specifically, Fowler forged his way to also become a pioneer in the study of religion, through articulating his stage model of faith development. Although I do not see faith development as equivalent with spiritual development, I do think that a brief discussion of Fowler’s (1991) ideas can lend to an understanding of how my Catholic experiences may impact and intermingle with my spiritual development.

Fowler (1991) contended that religion is a tradition built up from the expression of faith from people of the past, which then informs the faith of persons in the present. Further to this, he regarded faith as possibly, but not necessarily, independent of religion, defining it as a human universal, a “way of moving into the force field of life...a person’s way of seeing him-or herself in relation to others and against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (1981, p. 4). Faith, therefore, provides a sense of connectedness and purpose.

Fowler (1991) seems to be speaking to some of my questions and bridging the gap between my Catholic and spiritual selves. Although my faith was afforded to me by the Catholic church, as I move away from the church to a more personalized spiritual self, Fowler’s insights suggest that I may be able to maintain my faith outside of the church. Up until now my faith has come from the Catholic church, which as Fowler suggested, is built upon the faith of those who lived before me, both in the sense of the traditions of the church, and the traditions of my own family. If I can have a faith independent of the church; then, while it may have been influenced by those who have come before me, particularly in the church, I choose now for it to be personalized by me, through developing my own spiritual identity. For the reasons that Fowler suggests, my spiritual identity needs to provide me with a sense of connectedness and purpose. I want it to be
something that I have chosen and personalized and not just adopted from my family as a
result of the expectation that we would go to church on Sunday. I want my own
relationship with my beliefs.

At this point I am reminded by Wittgenstein’s (1958) recognition of the difficulty
in language and that its use is not always because it best represents the thing that is being
spoken of, but because it best conveys the thing. Bakhtin (1981) also seemed to
recognize the constraints of language when he said, “each word tastes of the context and
contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated
by intentions’’ (p. 293). My intention with the preceding discussion on operational
definitions was to give you some of the literature’s uses of the words, in an attempt to
capture and convey some of the contexts of my own experiences with religion and
spirituality.

In sum, when reviewing the literature and speaking with people on these issues, it
appears that the only commonality found amongst the various definitions of spirituality is
that the definition is dependent upon the purpose for which it is being defined. Bean
(2000) said it well by recognizing that, regardless of how inadequate our labels may be
the point is that we have a need for meaning and finding our purpose in the bigger
picture. This need for purpose and wholeness sends us on a search for deeper truths as
society continues to change and fragment. For me, this search will be that of looking for a
vibrant spirituality, in contrast with a spirituality or religion based solely on received
wisdom. Rather than receiving the words of the church and simply adhering to them, I
want to examine them, see how they fit for me. I want to choose what to incorporate into
my own spirituality, based on what the words mean for me, rather than on what they
mean to the church. Regardless of what we want to call it, there seems to be an increasing interest in things of a spiritual nature (Bean).

On my own search, and in my interactions with others, I felt I needed to clarify my understanding of religion and spirituality, as it would hardly seem appropriate to ask others for their thoughts on a subject, when these are not really clear enough in my mind to share my own. While my understanding is by no means complete, I did need to start somewhere in order to open up the dialogue. With this purpose, then, for me, the distinction comes with what one *does* with their faith. Religion, to me, implies a way in which to practice one’s faith, a prescribed and somewhat specific way in which to carry it out and express it. Spirituality, on the other hand, is more of the lived expression of faith and how it is embodied. Further to this, I believe that spirituality can, but does not necessarily have to, be influenced by the prescriptions of religion.

Identity Development-Spiritual Identity Development

I mentioned earlier that I believe that spirituality can have, but is not limited to influence from the experiences of belonging to a religious orientation. If religion can, but does not have to influence spirituality, what are the other ways it can develop? What are some other influences on how a spiritual identity takes shape and how can I better understand the creation or development of my own spiritual identity?

Fortunately, theorists such as Myers et al. (1991) have endeavoured to answer questions such as these, through their research on spiritual identity development. Myers et al. regarded spirituality as an imperative facet of being, suggesting that spiritual development is fundamental to identity development, and self-knowledge as the base of all knowledge. Recognizing the imperativeness of spiritual and self knowledge to identity
development, the authors suggest that spiritual and identity development are the processes by which people recognize themselves more fully, as the spiritual-material beings that they are. Teasdale (1999) explained:

...the relationship that spirituality has on our personal inner development and its daily existence in our lives: Being spiritual suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality. Spirituality is a way of life that affects and includes every moment of existence. It is at once a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging. The spiritual person is committed to growth as an essential, ongoing life goal. Spirituality draws us in to the depth of our being, where we come face to face with ourselves, our weaknesses, and with ultimate mystery. (pp. 17-18)

This way of looking at spiritual development rings true for me in that I recognize that this process I am engaged in can not be contained within the purposes of completing a thesis, or even achieving a satisfactory spiritual identity. Rather, it is something that is ongoing, and affects me in my totality. I need to bear this in mind as I attempt to write about it, as the successful completion of my thesis will not mean that I have attained my goal for a spiritual self, instead it will mean that I have better understood my process. Most importantly though, it will hopefully signify my appreciation and recognition that this process is ongoing and will continue as long as I continue to grow and develop.

Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, and Wagner (2006) also observed the ongoing nature of spirituality and contend that spiritual development should be incorporated into the developmental sciences along with the study of cognitive, moral, social and emotional
development. Continuing along this vein, they suggest that the theories that have influenced identity development have inevitably had influence on the study of spiritual identity development, and that a lack emphasis on spiritual development, renders human development theories incomplete in their understanding of humanness (Roehlkepartain, et al., 2006).

Theories of Development

*Psychoanalysis-filling a need*

From psychoanalysis, Freud’s (1961) famous words identified “religion as a universal obsessional neurosis” (p. 43), claiming it to be an illusion from the wishes of infantile humans. Fortunately, however, not all psychoanalysts saw religion in this light. Carl Jung may have agreed with Freud that religion was a delusion; however, he also believed that Freud’s psychology was one of an unhealthy mind (Jung, 1933). As such, Jung preferred to view religion as playing a facilitative role in a person’s development.

*Stage theories-linear progression*

The work of Erik Erikson stemmed from the tradition of psychoanalysis and he articulated the notion of stage theories (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). I appreciated Erikson’s (1980) definition of identity as a phenomenon of both social and psychological constructs: “It connotes both a persistent sameness with oneself…and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others” (p. 109). This definition spoke to me as it highlights another tension I have to navigate as I recognize that my spiritual identity is internally shaped by my own psychology, and my own experiences and integration of them. Additionally though, I have also been externally influenced by social interactions including the views and ideas of others, as well as my Catholic education. Erikson’s
contribution was important to helping me to understand the influences and contributions to my identity development. His work later went on to influence James Fowler in his work on the stages of faith development (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

Fowler (1981, 1991) defined faith as broad assumptions or understandings about the nature of connection between the self and the world in which the self lives. His six stage model asserts that faith development is a sequential and linear process whereby progression from stage to stage is roughly equated with a particular time period in life. The resulting faith at each stage is then consistent with the demands of life at each age, up until the sixth and final stage (universalizing faith-feeling at one with God, investing in life on the greater scale, in spite of individual costs, i.e. Mother Teresa), which not everyone reaches (Bee & Bjorklund, 2004).

The critiques of the stage theories resonate with my own perceptions in that they are often too narrow, breaking religion - and by association, spirituality - into nothing more than reason, simply put, they are too cognitive (e.g., Scarlett, 2006). The problem is, as mentioned earlier, that both concepts are often hinged on faith and are far too vast and personal to be reduced to reason and logic. I have yet to find the words to describe my own faith, so how could someone else be able to measure it? This being said, however, Fowler’s (1981, 1991) contributions are still highly regarded and credited as invaluable to the increased consideration that the study of religion, spirituality and faith has been given (Roehlkepartain, et al., 2006).

Developmental systems-the influence of religion

The developmental systems approach offers a new lens from which to explore spiritual identity development. Crotty (as cited in Patton, 2002) contends that such an
approach lends more to this field of inquiry as it respects and appreciates the transaction between individual and the context. I know that my prior context (the Catholic church and my family’s relationship with it) has undoubtedly been influential in my spiritual development. Scarlett (2006) exemplifies a developmental systems approach to measuring spiritual identity development by breaking it into two different domains: 1) development through the acquisition of specific skills or knowledge, and 2) development reached as one leans toward the attainment of perfection.

Scarlett (2006) furthers this with the recognition that development toward perfection would be different for each religion based on people’s own notions of perfection. This way of looking at spiritual identity development is instrumental in understanding how others may view it, based on their own concepts of perfection. I found it curious to realize that while I am striving to attain a more perfect, and truer spiritual identity, I may possibly be driving myself further from a ‘perfect’ Catholic identity as seen in the eyes of the church-perfection then is relative.

Collective Identities

I need to sit and think about this for a moment. I’m not sure that I like the idea that to create a more perfect spiritual identity, I may need to be a less perfect Catholic. When I initially began exploring this topic my mom struggled with the idea that I would question the church. My thoughts were that I would rather sit in the church knowing I belong because I have questioned it and chosen to be there, and not just to appease her or live out a family tradition. But I guess that would only make me a truer Catholic (as defined by the church) if my new spiritual identity fits more closely with what the church declares as perfection. This is where I get confused, but maybe it doesn’t matter as much
to what I call it. Maybe I should focus more on creating a truer relationship with God and less about whether such a relationship is regarded perfect as defined by the Catholic Church. This might lend one to ask 'how will you know Dawn, when your relationship is truer? What defines truer?' These are good questions and ones that are a work in progress for me to answer as I find words to fail what it is I mean. I will know when my relationship is truer when it feels right for me, when it comes from within and isn’t me just trying to fit into a Catholic way of knowing God.

Templeton and Eccles (2006) also seemed to recognize the impact of a religious upbringing and note that collective identity in a religious group can strongly influence spiritual identity development. In making a distinction between religious and spiritual identity, the authors recognized spiritual identity to be a personal identity, as it includes spiritual characteristics specific to the individual rather than to any group. The authors recognize that individuals in a religious group may be more likely to share characteristics specific to their religion, whereas the characteristics of spirituality are more personally defined. An individual’s personal and collective identity could be either religious or spiritual in nature, or it could be both. This would depend upon how the individual has been influenced—whether their identity was assigned by affiliation with a church, or personally chosen. Finally, Eriksonian theory suggests that the conscious evaluation of, and commitment to, a particular religious group will also impact the development of an individual’s identity.

Identity Renegotiation

While a particular collective identity may influence spiritual identity development, so too can the need for negotiation between conflicting collective identities.
This is particularly noticeable at the time of adolescence when Templeton and Eccles (2006) suggest that, as an individual develops new reasoning skills, they may begin to question beliefs that were once taken for granted, such as the assumed authority of their assigned religion. This conflict can be reconciled to create a spiritual identity that reflects an amalgamation of the differing parts, or a mosaic of differing parts without a strong identification with any one part.

Permission for an amalgamation of identities might be what I need in order to mediate between my Catholic and emerging spiritual identities. Is it possible to negotiate your spiritual development from the different spiritual identities you have grown to develop—Catholic included? As I previously cited Fowler (1981/1991), the faith in which I was raised may inform my creation of a spiritual self, which according to James (1902/1958) may result in me being born into a truer spiritual self, than the Catholic self I was first born into. As suggested by Scarlett (2006), the influence of my church while growing up does not necessarily have to be in competition for perfection with my spiritual self. Perhaps as Crotty (as cited in Patton, 2002) recommends, my religious background can play an instrumental role in informing my emerging spiritual self as it develops. It is my wish that the latter situation is the case, and rather than having my emerging sense of spiritual self contradict my Catholic self, that the two work together to provide me with a stronger sense of self, one in which I feel closer to my beliefs.

Role of Religion

So now that I’ve come to a place where I can more readily interweave the influence of religion into my spiritual identity development, I need to explore the ways in which religion can impact it. One friend kindly commented that this would best be done
by exploring the theology of the church, and that not addressing Catholic theology in my thesis would be akin to not addressing the elephant in the room. I had to stop and think about this. Was I purposely avoiding theology? Would addressing it help me to answer my desire to understand what the lived experience is for individuals finding their spirituality outside of the Catholic Church? And so, after much debate, I will endeavour here to give a brief discourse of the theology behind of the Catholic Church.

Hopefully at this point you have either given your head a shake, to ensure you have read correctly, or asked me to shake mine. A brief discourse of the theology of the Catholic church,...is such a thing possible? Better yet, would it help me to answer my question, or help you to understand what has gotten me to this question in the first place? I struggled with this, I have to admit. I struggled with the “necessity” of including theology in my literature review, and I decided against it. I, perhaps naively, do not believe that the Catholic theology has led to the conundrum that I find myself in now. I do not believe that the theoretical underpinnings of the church led to my emerging sense of spiritual self, nor do I believe that a discussion of such will help me to make sense, of my emerging spiritual self.

So if Catholic theology has not been that influential on me, what of the Catholic faith has? I asked myself this in attempt to find out where in my past I began to experience the doubt or uncertainty that the Catholic Church was sufficient in quenching my spiritual thirst:

I’m trying to look up doubt in the bible and I’m so embarrassed; I don’t even know how to use the bible!! Do I have the right to write on a topic such as
spirituality and my Catholicism when I don’t even know how to use the bible?

This feels crazy. When was the last time I even looked at the bible?

(Journal entry, July 5, 2006).

The truth is out. I am not that well versed in Catholic theology and Bible use. This sends me into a series of doubtful questions and a seemingly never ending dance with guilt. This enduring sense of guilt, however, is seen by some as par for the Catholic course. The role of confession in the Catholic Church is to forgive one of their sins and guilt by obtaining a pardon from God and the church. By calling it confession, it is also meant to remind one of the holiness of God and the mercy that he extends towards humankind in times of sin (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994).

In tracing the sacrament of confession in Christian faiths, Smith (1985) confirmed its therapeutic value in the atonement of guilt. Jung (1933) also acknowledged the value of confession, recognizing that through the development of the psyche to the level of self-awareness, the mind also develops the ability to keep private the functions of its actions. Confession provides a way in which to liberate the conscience from such secrets, and through the forgiveness of God, one can learn self-acceptance and lend itself to further growth (Jung, 1933).

I’m not sure that I ever felt liberated or self-accepted as a result of confession. At the age of ten I entered the confessional for the first time and was petrified to leave lest I tarnish my freshly whitened soul with my mere humanness. At the age of twenty, again in the confessional, questioning my faith and searching the priest’s face for answers to explain my very existence, I was asked to hurry up as there was a line of people waiting. I
think that was a rather pivotal experience for me, and again, did not leave me feeling the beneficial experience of a liberated conscience.

Foucault (1981) seems to speak to the discrepancy I felt where confession did not help me to feel free and rather left me more frustrated. According to Foucault, confession is a means by which the church maintains a position on how we are to conduct our lives, and when we go against this way of being we must confess our sins. Interestingly though, Foucault also notes that the power differential between confessor and priest moves the need to confess from an internal place of wanting freedom from sin, to an external one, whereby the confessor seeks to avoid consequences as told by the church.

What I needed from confession however was being driven from an internal source and yearning and not from the need for exculpation from my sins. I wanted explanations from the church that they were not able to give and it seemed I could either submit to what they offered me or leave it. Submitting would of course require me to play the role of the Catholic penitent in the narrative of the Catholic church. However, by choosing to examine the act of confession and its meaning to me, I am able to write my own Catholic narrative as I choose which parts of the church’s narrative I wish to weave into my own, and which to leave alone. This in a way seems to level the power differential somewhat as I determine how I wish to practice and live my own Catholic story.

I didn’t find the answers to the questions of my spiritual search sitting in church and attending mass. I also didn’t find them by talking to my priest when he asked me to hurry up, or by asking my family who didn’t see why I needed to question my Catholic faith. This left me a little dismayed, but research by Coopman and Meidlinger (2002) exploring the use of narrative within religious organizations lent me some clarity, as they
discussed the role of narrative to convey values and beliefs and ways of being. Perhaps I was just looking in the wrong narrative, or trying to include my own story, complete with questions, in one that has already been written, and doesn't have room for my quandaries. Maybe my spiritual narrative just does not fit within the narrative of the Catholic Church. In a sense, the Catholic Church’s theology is a story, one which is received by the parishioners to live out as their own. This thesis, however, is a story of my own narrative, as I establish my own spiritual identity. As such, my focus is more on the narration of my own story, than on the one handed ‘down’ to me by the church.

I would like to add that by not wanting to focus on theology, I by no means want to diminish the importance of organized faith on spirituality, and as mentioned previously, religion has been found to have a significant impact on the development of spirituality (Templeton & Eccles 2006). Extensive research has also been done on the effects of religion in addressing mental health concerns and the results have shown religious involvement correlates to an increased sense of well-being and decreased psychological distress, increased longevity, and decreased drug use, etc, (Gartner, Larson, & Allen, 1991; Lukoff, Francis, & Turner, 1998, Pargament, 1997).

Emmons (1999) echoed the discussion of the benefits of religion sharing that it provides meaning, spiritual and social support, ultimate acceptance, and hope. Ultimately, he stated that the objective of all religions is the transformation of the person, by providing goals and value systems, and helping to make sense of the existential questions of life that are experienced but otherwise difficult to understand.

I am not sure that religion has transformed me, as it was a part of me from my very beginning, but it has helped me to make sense of things that are at times difficult to
comprehend. An understanding of Heaven is an example of something that my religion has given me and perhaps eased my fear of death as a child. With age, though, came a wider circle of friends, one that includes people who have broken wedding vows, had abortions, acknowledged their homosexuality, and done other things considered sinful in the eyes of the church. Suddenly, the idea of Heaven (in my Catholic sense of the word) held less comfort when I realized that even if I was lucky enough to get in, some of those I care about won’t. This doesn’t appear to be a concern for some people with whom I’ve spoken; however, it is definitely one for me.

The ways in which religious involvement impacts personal growth is dependent on individual characteristics and personality types (Bunker, 1991). The interaction of individual traits and religious involvement was of particular interest to me. I am the only one of my three sisters who seems to be struggling with my Catholic upbringing being somewhat incongruent with an emerging sense of spiritual self, and I always wondered how our personality differences may play into that.

Using James Marcia’s notion of identity development, Hunsberger, Pratt and Pancer (2001) looked at church involvement and identity. Doubts about faith and the church were handled differently based on identity type. Those with “identity achievement” have, through experience of a crisis, re-evaluated previously held beliefs and achieved resolution, feeling free to act (Marcia, 1966). When these individuals were faced with uncertainty, they were willing to look at both sides of the coin (Hunsberger, et al.). This contrasted with those in identity foreclosure status where they have not yet been faced with a crisis, have not had to examine their beliefs, yet are strongly committed to
them (Marcia) When faced with doubt these individuals only looked for evidence that supported their belief (Hunsberger, et al.).

Accordingly, I would be of the identity achievement status group as I am definitely willing to look around for answers, rather than keep trying to find them in the church. But is that wrong? Is it wrong that I don’t know how to use the Bible? Is it wrong that I am not well educated on the theology of the church? Is someone with a foreclosed identity a better Catholic, by not examining the beliefs of the church, except to find ways to support them? Am I wrong to not want to have my identity foreclosed and wanting to question my faith, in response to a gnawing sense of spiritual connection outside of the church? And if such things are wrong, who is in the right to judge them as wrong? Thoughts such as these have led me to question whether or not I still have the right to retain the title Catholic.

Apparently however, I am not the only one with questions around the use of the title Catholic as even amongst Catholics there appears to be different defining criteria for those who get to retain the title, and those who do not fit the description. A study completed by the University of Notre Dame (Leege, 1989) found three different ways in which to answer the question, “who is a true Catholic”. Answers ranged from the inclusion of a theological, ecclesiastical, and social stance, each providing different ways in which to determine who is a true Catholic.

In the social sense, Catholics seem torn. Some regard anyone who wants to hear the Gospel and be a recipient of the Sacraments as welcome in the church. The more restrictive Catholics feel that only those who live their lives in a certain way are eligible to the title (Leege, 1989). Both groups are criticized, whether it is for being too lax and
permissive, or too judgmental and elitist (Leege, 1989). If the answer can not even be
determined within the church, who best to decide? Again, to me, this speaks to the need
to create my own sense of spiritual identity.

I feel it is imperative that I am clear that I do not intend for this paper to be in any
way disrespectful of the church. When speaking with others about what I intended to do
for my thesis, there were some remarks that indicated that it was about time someone
took a stance against the church. This is not my intention.

While I am exploring my sense of spiritual identity outside of the church, I am by
no means turning my back on the church. My hope is that through such explorations I
will be able to renegotiate my relationship with the church, ideally in such a way that I
am able to nurture my emerging sense of spiritual self, while at the same time preserving
my sense of Catholic self. Questioning my faith could be seen as blasphemous to some
people. Others may view my questions as making me a more thoughtful Christian, by
questioning my beliefs rather than just accepting them. These differences are based on the
different definitions of what it means to be Catholic, and what it means to be spiritual.

Perhaps my questions will result in strengthening my relationship with the church,
as I have a stronger sense of who I am, and if or how that sense fits into the church. Just
as possible, I may find that my new sense of self no longer has a place in the church. I am
open to either possibility, and furthermore I recognize that while I may conclude my
paper with one stance on my relationship with the church, just as my spiritual identity is
an ever evolving entity, so too could be my relationship with the church. This is the
beauty of development.
Identity

Identity Development

Establishing the identity I desire is my goal, but how do I get there and what must I go through first? I used the word identity in a collective sense, to refer to an overarching sense of self that will encompass all of the sources of self that make up my entity. Gergen (1991) speaks to my recognition of multiple selves and suggests that our sources of selves may be fed by relationships with others and the influence of organizations such as religion. This is referred to as the “populating of self, the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being” (p. 69) which “opens new relationships to new ranges of possibility...Each of the selves we acquire from others can contribute to inner dialogues, private discussions we have with ourselves about all the manner of persons, events, and issues” (p. 71).

Fortunately, my research method, autoethnography, recognizes, allows, and almost beckons for including multiple selves, permitting me to articulate and maintain them within my writing (Ellis, 2004). Identity needs to integrate multiple and sometimes contrasting senses of self so that even though they may be separate, they can be organized meaningfully into a coherent whole (McAdams, 1996). My multiple selves are being informed by my interaction with the literature in the present chapter. Chapter Three will exemplify how including others as co-researchers in my spiritual search will also contribute to my meaning-making journey. While Chapter Four will share the stories of my co-researchers, in Chapter Five I will invite you into some of my inner dialogues to share the internal workings of the discussions between my heart and mind, which are
contributing to the renegotiation of my spiritual self, through interacting with my other sources of self.

Identity Crisis

Realizing one’s different sources of self may present a crisis when at some point in our development the identities we constructed for ourselves as children become barriers to further growth (Welwood, 2000). The battle then becomes one of recognizing that a current way of being restricts an emerging sense of self, and yet also represents a sense of security and familiarity. My experience with this type of crisis came in the form of a depression, when I realized that the Catholic ways in which I knew myself no longer fit with my emerging sense of self. Though rationally one may know that life is in a constant state of flux, this does not necessarily prepare one for the pain wrought when watching their identity, who they knew themselves to be, deteriorate before their eyes (Welwood).

McAdams (1996) recognized that identity needs to integrate the multiple and sometimes contrasting senses of self so that even though they may be separate, they can be organized meaningfully into a coherent whole. For me, this loss of my sense of self came through the gift of an experience with depression in my late teens, when I first recognized an inconsistency between my actual and idealized self. In order to articulate, reconcile, and find meaning in such differences between selves however, I needed a language with which to express them. Fortunately, McAdams noted a growing interest in personality psychology which recognizes the usefulness of narrative and story to express the meaning of people’s lives. In his work, McAdams regarded life stories as reflective of what is important to individuals, as they coauthor their own stories in conjunction with
their environmental contexts, which can include conversations with others. This speaks right up the autoethnographic alley, which also welcomes using narrative for expressing relationships between self, other, and environment (Ellis, 2004).

*Development through depression.*

Through using autoethnography I hope to re-author my spiritual identity and perhaps shed some light on my experience with depression as well. Although the gifts that were hidden in that black period of my life were not visible at the time, I am now grateful for that period as I believe the darkness of my depression brought about my awareness of another sense of myself, my spiritual sense. My hope is to connect with others to see how they too, experienced and made sense of an emerging spiritual self outside of the Catholic church. This differentiation of self can be understood by some in terms of conflicting goals, resulting in a fragmented sense of self and purpose, with correlation to psychological distress (Emmons, 1999). The distress for me came through depression, and the fragmentation between sense of self and purpose was certainly clear as during this time I felt I had no purpose.

Csikszentmihalyi (as cited in Emmons, 1999) noted that the self is a hierarchy of goals which have been built up over time, and from this, conflict between such goals can lend to a fragmentation of self. The disconcerting effects of a fragmented self can be evaded if one can view their current actions as relating to a representation of who they would like to become (Emmons, 1999). Although I was not necessarily always able to see that for myself at the time of my depression, I am now able to appreciate my differing senses of selves in that ultimately honouring them will be imperative in forming my
newer, stronger spiritual self. Again though, in order to do this I will first need to find a language with which to articulate and understand that self.

*Development Through Multiple Selves.*

Does this necessarily have to mean an entire loss of ourselves as we were, in order to be the self that we are becoming? In discussing identity crisis, Fowler (1981) presented an emerging identity that speaks to my perception that “one’s sense of self—one’s felt identity—must try to fit together images of a personal past and its continuities with the images of a personal future and its possibilities” (p. 76). I see this process as one more of amalgamating different selves rather than of letting go of the old in adopting the new. Through this, and with conversations with others, I will re-author the story of my relationship with the church and my place within it.

Recognizing identity conflicts, Griffiths and Griffiths (2001) propose that in communities individuals act with dual identities, partly as oneself, and also as a member of the particular community. When the community is one of a religious faith, McBride (2005) discussed how religion, as with other institutions, can lead to shutting down oneself, or becoming entrenched in behaviours and attitudes that are somewhat mechanistic in nature.

I do not want a mechanistic relationship with the church or a mechanistic spirituality, so this drives my search for something more personal and meaningful. While I am looking for a new spiritual self, I mean it in the sense of an overarching sense of self that will include my newly forming spiritual self and the Catholic self I have always known myself to be. While these individual selves will be changing as a result of experience and development, my goal is to try to reduce as much friction between them
as possible. This, too, will be an ongoing process and the story I am re-authoring will continue to be written as long as I am around to author it.

Although my depiction of the Catholic church may take on a character that at times has less of a role than others, I believe that my Catholic experiences will undoubtedly be instrumental in solidifying the story of my spiritual self. Rather than playing the role of Catholic that the church assigned me in their story, I will now be determining which roles the church will play and with how much emphasis it will have as I author my own spiritual story. Emmons (1999) suggests that a personal religious motivation helps to establish a unified sense of self by providing an overarching, all encompassing, framework from which to work. While Emmons relates the notion of a personal religious motivation to Allport’s concept of mature religion, for my experiences, I regard the nature of it to be akin to my personally crafted spirituality.

Templeton and Eccles (2006) resonate with the need for a unified self and believe that humans are intrinsically motivated to develop a spiritual identity in order to stratify their need for connection, for some, this may be referred to as wholeness. However, often creating a new and unified self is birthed from the breakdown and inadequacies of the old self. They believe that the disequilibrium between the old and newly becoming self creates an opportunity for development and change (Templeton & Eccles, 2006, see also Dabrowski, et al, 1970). This notion is supported by Wellwood (2000) who regards the untangling of defence strategies from inner resources as essential to becoming aware of one’s inner resources. Through such a process the individual awakens to the hidden intelligence of their own defence mechanisms.
Using the breakdown of identity structures to bolster oneself in creating a stronger, more purposeful sense of self, has been studied across many domains such as personality development (Dabrowski, Kawczak, & Piechowski, 1970), and mental health experiences, such as depression and psychopathology (Armentrout, 2004; Coe, 2000; Davis, 2000; Elkins, 1995; Karasu, 1999; Miller, 1990). This literature supports my notion that my depression, my breakdown of self, was perhaps meant to help build me up again, but this time with a stronger sense of self.

Development Through Internal Conflict

Depression as internal conflict has also been studied as a means to personal religious and spiritual conversion (Armentrout, 2004; Coe, 2000; Emmons, 1999). James (1902/1958) defined conversion as “the process, sudden or gradual, by which a self, hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities” (p.157). These emotional occasions are seen as enormously influential in “mental rearrangements (1902/1958, 163), and result in the religiousness of a person moving from the periphery of their consciousness, to a more central role in the “habitual centre of his energy” (1902/1958, p. 162). Perhaps that is what I am doing, I am housecleaning, rearranging and converting my mental space in order to create room for my spiritual self which came knocking at my door disguised as depression. Doing this has meant questioning what was taken for granted while trying on new ideas.

Pargament (1997) suggested that the convert can play an active role by seeking a change upon realizing that the old self is no longer adequate. The actual conversion experience can be categorized by differentiating between spiritual conversion via a
gradual increase in religiousness and conversion in which there is no religious change at all. Another way in which this can be conceptualized is as more of a slow and developmental process (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998).

\textit{Development Through Language}

Whether conceptualized as developmental, and with or without change in religiousness - Emmons (1999) observed that conversion narratives, as personal testimony, add a powerful source to consolidating and strengthening new religious and spiritual identities. Extending this, McAdams (1996) drew attention to using metaphor in identity construction while Emmons (1999) highlighted the use of metaphor in religion. Further, Emmons emphasized that metaphor, because of its common use in religion, spirituality, and the construction of identity, appropriately warrants story-based inquiry.

The idea of finding identity in story, specifically in using a story-based methodology in my thesis on creating my spiritual identity is like a breath of fresh air! Identity crises so far have been discussed in general terms to shed some light on how they may come to be, however such an understanding of crises seems to jump to conclusions without considering another vital element to the crises, namely that of how they are experienced. How can constructing meaning from these experiences occur, and what is the lived experience like for the individual in the crisis? This is where a methodology of using stories can offer a more encompassing way in understanding the experience of identity crises.

Griffiths and Griffiths (2002) also found that using metaphors, stories and beliefs offers meaningful ways to convey such experiences. For them, these conceptual resources can provide new meaning to once confusing experiences "because language also
constitutes religious experiences, new meaning that arises out of the dialogue of
[conversation] can transform reflexively the experience itself” (p. 56). Although
language often fails to sufficiently convey religious and spiritual experiences as
individuals grasp for words, “people often seem driven to speak of important encounters
with the sacred even as their words fail them” (p. 56). This was certainly true for my
experiences as often times I would find myself discouraged, groping for words to convey
an experience for which I felt there were none.

This is not to say that there are no words for my spiritual experiences, but that I
have yet to find them. While reviewing the literature has helped to shed light on my
experiences I have not found the voices of theoretical discourse to offer the final say
anymore than I found the religious discourse in church to render a compelling and
complete understanding. Morson and Emerson (1992) paraphrase Bakhtin by saying that,,
“the word is only half ours” (p. 129). I have heard the words of the church, but now it is
time for me to assign my own meaning to them.

As a result, I am using autoethnography to turn to conversations with others who
have shared similar experiences, as well as the voices of relevant literature, in attempt to
assign meaning to my spiritual language. Denton (2005) recognized that
autoethnographies on spiritual experiences are rare, and appreciated that such work
provides a place to close the gap between researcher and the researcher which without so
doing “cannot possibly access interior experience without co-implicative participation”(p.
757). It is for these interior experiences that I search for words to explain.

Not wanting to use words that fail to do my experience justice, combined with my
yearning to understand my experience by relating it with others, has left me frustrated
and confused. This tension that I have found myself facing has been acknowledged and appreciated by Griffiths and Griffiths in their book, *Encountering the sacred in psychotherapy* (2002). In working with their clients they recognized the difficulty individuals experience in balancing a desire to maintain the intimate nature of spiritual experiences, with “the desire for community, for sharing them with others, and for hearing other’s experiences” (p. 57). I have tried on my own, so far, to make sense of my experiences and have come up short. I am not yet sure how to understand my own conversion experience from religious to spiritual self; however, I do know that given my personality, it is essential that it include interaction with others.

I am not alone in having conversation and relationship as my method of choice to make meaning out of my religious and spiritual experiences. Fowler (1981) also noted the importance of conversation suggesting it “helps persons bring their own meanings to expression with sensitive, active listening” (p. 37). We “hear out of each other things we needed to bring to word but could not, and would not, without an other” (p. 37). Through conversation we are able to find the words that alone we can not. Fowler further suggested that one carries “master stories” through which one makes sense of the happenings of their lives. These stories are the “characterizations of the patterns of power-in-action that disclose the ultimate meanings of our lives” (p.277). Through the sharing of these stories one can find the words to help make meaning of experiences that often times leave one feeling isolated and alone. As Charles Taylor (1991) wisely said, “no one acquires the languages needed for self-determination on their own” (p. 32).

While autoethnography may be my inquiry of choice let us first examine how others have set about understanding the experience of spiritual emergence.
Relevant Research

I have found some longitudinal studies which were undertaken to understand the nature and trend of spiritual concerns. In 2003, Johnson and Hayes reviewed a data base of over 5,000 American university students in effort to identify the prevalence and predictors of spiritual and religious concerns. On the other side of the border, Reginald Bibby, (2002) wrapped up a twenty-five year longitudinal study surveying the religious trends of youth and adults in Canada. Both studies exemplify a genuine interest in capturing and comprehending the public’s experience with spirituality and organized religion.

While spirituality and religion are not necessarily new foci in the research arena, Hill and Pargament (2003) found a shortage of both under study in psychology. This was particularly evident in the mental health literature where such studies were the exception rather than the rule. These authors proposed that this may be due to the faulty impression that there has been a decline in interest on these matters as a result of the rise of science. This, however, is not reflective in the self-help literature as there appears to be a growing interest in issues of a spiritual nature. Books like Thomas Moore’s *Dark Night of the Soul*, (2004) and Eckhardt Tolle’s, *The Power of Now* (2004) spoke to me on my journey, and are climbing in popularity suggesting that people are looking for ways in which to feed their growing spiritual appetites.

Other researchers have acknowledged that research is complicated by conceptual issues such as how best to define spirituality constructs or how to measure intangible and subjective concepts like spiritual maturity (Gorsuch, & Walker, 2006; Winks & Dillon, 2002). Their acknowledgment speaks to my earlier discussion where I indicated I have
not yet been able to find a way to define spirituality and the constructs that comprise it. Miller and Thoresen (2003) however, are of the mind that not only can spiritual matters be studied scientifically, but that they should be. Assessment tools are being created and critiqued as researchers endeavour to find ways to hone in on spiritual experiences (e.g., Ledbetter, Smith, Vosler-Hunter, & Fischer, 1991).

This last thought, that of wanting to hone in on spiritual experiences so as to capture and measure them, is a little disheartening. While I am still trying to figure out what exactly my own spirituality is, I so far have recognized it as being a very beautiful and private experience. Reducing it down to something quantifiable seems to detract from the very spontaneous and personal experience that it is. I do not know that anyone can plan their spirituality in such a way that it can be developed in a measurable manner.

Perhaps attempting to speak to both the public’s growing interest, as well as that of the academic world, some books present empirically supported ways to help people struggling with spiritual and religious matters. Living faithfully with disappointment in the church, by J. LeBron, McBride (2005), and Could you ever come back to the Catholic church, by Lorene Hanley Duquin (1997) both offer coping strategies for the people who find themselves struggling within organized religions, as well as for therapists working with such individuals.

I have to be honest and admit that while reviewing the literature I found myself most drawn to the narratives of those who shared their spiritual journeys. These stories were far more compelling than statistics, such as in 1991, only 15% of Catholics in my age group were attending church weekly; or in the mid-1970’s, when 54% of Catholics stated that their unhappiness with what goes on in organized religion as why they were no
longer active in the church (Bibby, 2002). The numbers and percentages passed across my eyes like water off of a tongue, too dry to take it in. They left me with questions like what specifically made these Catholics so unhappy, and what was the decision making process like for them to have to decide to walk away from the church? How do they experience and express their faith now that they have no church is which to practice it in? And what, if anything, changed in their relationships with others when they made the decision to leave?

This experience of reading these dry statistics starkly contrasted with my experience of reading a book like Karen Armstrong’s *The Spiral Staircase: My climb out of darkness* (2004). Courageously, Karen shared her experience of leaving the convent and finding her faith outside of the church sharing that, “in the past, my own practice of religion had diminished me, whereas true faith, I now believe, should make you more human than before” (p. 271). While in the convent she recalled feeling that she could not pray properly, her meditation lacked focus, “my mind, heart, and faculties remained scattered” (p. 43). Upon sharing her concern with a superior nun she was quickly brushed off and told she was extreme and exaggerating. Confused and dismayed, she left the convent, only to understand that while she felt done with God, she recognized that at an unconscious level, she still had unfinished business with Him. A bit of a sigh of relief! Karen, it appeared, understood my struggle, and perhaps the 54% in Bibby’s (2002) study did too, but in their questionnaires they were never given the opportunity to say so.

**Research Rationale**

Fortunately, the value of narrative exploration is being recognized as contributing to understanding how individuals process changes in their spiritual identity, much like
McAdams' (1996) view that identity is found in story. Ellis (2004) acknowledged the usefulness of autoethnography for spiritual discussions and Denton (2005) elaborated on the usefulness of autoethnography in such discourse. Such a research method would allow for the story of one's spiritual identity to be told, creating room for providing and including influential and contextual factors that contribute to the spiritual development process (Poll & Smith 2003). Templeton and Eccles (2006) also recognized this gap in the literature, resonating that there is a need to know more about contexts that promote spiritual identity development, as well as the processes for searching, forming, and negotiating spiritual identity.

Attempting to understand the influence of a religious upbringing on spiritual development, Wink and Dillon (2002) completed a longitudinal study of spiritual development across the adult life span, and found that early religious involvement may serve as precursor to later spiritual development. However, they concluded by acknowledging that spirituality is as difficult to measure as it is precarious to define and capture in words; thus, the associated personal and intimate experiences are often difficult to describe. Neither of these conclusions surprises me. My experiences in the church have provided a platform from which to jump as I delve into the realm of spiritual identity development. Had I not have been exposed to the notions of the church I might not have been as inclined to question them and long for more. I guess it’s almost like not craving something that you’ve never tasted. The Catholic church whet my spiritual appetite, though at the time I didn’t recognize it as such.
CHAPTER 3: CATECHISM-A METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

“For though you should in fact be teachers by this time, you need someone to teach you the beginning elements of God's utterances. You have gone back to needing milk, not solid food” (Heb. 5:12).

“I'm frustrated and annoyed. The words won't come and I doubt each sentence that I write. I don't know what to share what to leave out, what is self indulgent and what is necessary. Having the literary freedom of autoethnography should prove liberating, to let my creative juices flow. It was to start…but now I want rules, a formula, and an outline. I want this done!!” (Journal entry, May 15, 2006).

“Patience grasshopper” rings through my head as I read the above journal entry. I find it rather ironic that as I am breaking away from the organized approach to religion and spirituality, I am craving an organized approach to my method. Not to say that autoethnography is not organized, but it does allow for room for creativity (we’ll get to that in a moment) and I guess right now I am looking for a little more structure, boxes that I can tick off in order to know that I have addressed everything that needs to be addressed and in the way it needs to be addressed. OK, with all of that out of the way I'd like to start with an introduction to the method itself--more of the milk, before I can feed you the solid food in Chapters Four and Five when I invite you into the stories of my co-researchers and me. I would also like to offer to you why I think that this method lent itself well to my topic, and finally share with you the way in which I used this approach.

There are many stories to be told of spirituality and many selves to tell them; furthermore, they are all historically situated. My emerging spiritual self is the author of
the present story, which would be quite different if told by my more familiar Catholic self and would be equally as different if told at a different point in my spiritual development (Philaretou & Allen, 2006). However in order to share my story and those of my co-researchers I must first share with you how these stories came to be, through the use of autoethnography.

Choosing Autoethnography

An inner experience stands in need of outer criteria

Wittgenstein, 1958b aphorism 580

I chose autoethnography as a vehicle by which to present some of the outer criteria-namely words and stories, necessary to understand the inner experience of spiritual development. Acting as a tour guide, autoethnography will take us to all the necessary stops in order to render a more complete picture of the landmarks (i.e., components) that have helped shape the landscape of my spiritual story. In order to explicate autoethnography, as well as demonstrate the landmarks that have gone into and influenced my use of it, I have decided to break it into its three parts, and explain how each term shaped my use of it. This will encompass an overview of the auto (i.e., the self), the ethno (i.e., the culture), and the graphy, (i.e., the description or written account) (Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Before breaking it down into its various parts, let’s start with an overview of what the term in its entirety represents in the qualitative research field.

Autoethnography’s history within qualitative research is a rather short one. With roots in anthropology, Hayano (1979) traces its evolution to the nature of today’s world.
It is not always feasible to study tribal people who live isolated from the political and economic forces on the global level, as was once done in anthropological study. Ellis (2004) recognized the use of this form of research in education, nursing, social work, and psychology, to name a few. Acceptance is also being gained in the fields of social constructionism and other research endeavours mindful of reflexivity (Ellis).

Within the widespread use of autoethnography comes the litany of names by which it is called. Patton (2002) identified close to thirty different terms used to explain the same methodology, and in her work with husband, Art Bochner, Carolyn Ellis (2000) came up with over sixty literary terms with meanings similar to autoethnography.

Despite the varying differences in the schools of thought using autoethnography, and the numerous names by which it is called, Ellis (1999) defined autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness" (p. 673). Looking at the personal influences of society and culture, and then turning the focus on the self to reveal how it is affected by such external variables expose these layers of awareness.

Autoethnographies are also distinguished by their different approaches. Personal ethnographies, reflexive ethnographies, systematic sociological introspection, narrative inquiry and biographical method, are but a few (Ellis, 2004). Ellis suggested that the different ways in which autoethnography is conceptualized, written and analyzed, may be a reflection of the postmodernist emphasis on the fragmentation of life, and the idea that there is not one true narrative. A methodological approach that appreciates our fragmented selves, such as autoethnography as offered by Ellis, seems most fitting as I attempt my identity renegotiation recognizing my different spiritual and religious selves.
This approach will enable me as the writer to invite my co-researchers to take an active role in authoring their own stories as I check in with the my co-researchers, and allow them to change, add, or subtract from the final piece what they feel is necessary in order to render a proper account of their experiences (Ellis, 1999). Additionally, you, as my reader, are invited to take on an active role and take what you read to reflect, understand, make sense of, and apply to your own life (Ellis, 2004).

The Auto

Craving clarity and structure, I find that the more I read on autoethnography the murkier the waters get. Its application is diverse, spanning from the conservative shores, such as by the application of Duncan (2004) to the more evocative and experimental expressions given by others, such as Ellis (1999, 2000, 2004), Spry (2001) and Holt (2003). I’ve been told it’s a process of finding one’s voice and this has not been clearer than what it is now, as I try to navigate these waters to find my way. As I delve into the autoethnographic depths and begin to wade through, making sense of it for myself, I have already noticed that my voice has changed throughout this process and though still shaky, is stronger.

The strength in my voice has recognized that the dichotomy within the story of my spiritual development is inescapable--I do not want the structure of the church to influence the creation of my spirituality, yet I do want the structure of a methodology/method by which to share my story. That, however, was only part of the struggle I faced as I began this process. Not only has this methodology been challenging for me to wrap my head around, so too has been my topic.
Recognizing my emerging spiritual self has not been an easy process and at times it has crossed my mind to stuff her back down and maintain the Catholic identity I have always outwardly expressed. The recognition of an emerging self and a Catholic self has made me realize the different selves that make up my entity, further highlighting the need for a renegotiation of selves. Ellis (2004) appreciated this dance between my intellect, emotions and my senses of self, recognizing that "sense making and identity often are entangled with religious and spiritual beliefs" (p. 98). This also brought about my awareness that sometimes we need to choose to stress one aspect of self in favour over another.

Gergen (1991) suggested that this multiplicity of selves is fed by the proliferation of forms of communication. He was referring to the advancement of technology, diversifying us by providing new ways in which to experience and express relationships, such things as email, text messaging, constant cell-phone connection, etc. By using autoethnography, I am intending to use communication to facilitate an understanding of my multiplicities and to find a way to make more sense of them. I hope to engage with my co-researchers in my renegotiation of spiritual identity by becoming "a participant in a social process that eclipses one's personal being" (p. 156). As such, I hope to create a "living out of the multiplicity of voices within the sphere of human possibility" (p. 247).

Autoethnography has been criticized at times for having too much of a focus inward on the researcher, which does not provide enough focus outward, thereby defeating the purpose of connecting the author's experiences with those of the culture under study (Goodall, 2000). Therefore, a balance will need to be maintained as I share with you the experiences of my co-researchers and myself. Sampson (1993) also spoke to
this, expanding on it to remind that careful consideration must be paid as “asymmetry occurs whenever one of the parties has more power to determine the nature of the other’s identity, and thus their own identity reflected through another’” (p. 107). I do not wish to create my own identity through those of my participants, nor do I wish to create an identity for them by use of my own. Rather than using our own stories to create the identity of others, these stories will be used to inform our own identity creation.

Ellis (2004) used the term, reflexive dyadic interviews to refer to the more conversational form of interviewing I did with my co-researchers. Rather than responding to a co-researcher’s answer to a question with another question, the reflexive dyadic part of the interview allowed for me to “tune in to the interactively produced meanings and emotional dynamics within the interview” (p. 62). In Chapter Five I will present you with my reflections on how hearing the stories of my co-researchers (shared with you in Chapter Four) helped influence the meanings I am making of my experiences. The use of my story is not to create a focal point in my work, but rather to enhance the understanding of the lived experience of spiritual identity development.

The Ethno

In addition to the interviews providing a new way for me to make meaning of my experiences, interviews in autoethnography can also provide the means for the co-researcher to see things in a different light (Chen, 1998). Further to this, they can also have therapeutic value as they often tend to approach topics not traditionally covered by other methodologies in such an intimate way (Baker, 2001; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Spry, 2001). This is particularly facilitated by the inclusion of the researcher’s
story; the discussion is then more of a conversation rather than an interview, as the researcher joins the researched on a more personal and meaningful level.

Gergen (1991) argued that the *auto* in autobiography, and by the same token, autoethnography, is anything but autonomous and lends itself better to the notion of *sociobiography*. His idea of sociobiography brings us to my understanding of the *ethno* part of autoethnography.

The *ethno* is where the *auto* of the researcher meets the *auto* of the co-researcher and together through an “ongoing process of constructing meaning” (Berger, 2001, p 508) there results a dynamic interaction and growing understanding of the shared experience under study. This underscores the importance of relationships in my life. Relationships are integral to my being as I find that I know more about myself through my interactions with others. Different relationships draw out different aspects of myself and as I reflect on this I understand myself more completely as the entire person that I am. With such a great emphasis placed on the rapport between researcher and co-researcher, autoethnography creates space for, emphasizes and necessitates relationship (Ellis, 1999, 2000, 2004). This then opens the door for more honest communication as my co-researchers know that I am one of them, and not just there to study their experiences from an objective outsider point of reference (Philaretou & Allen, 2006).

My co-researchers self selected in response to a recruitment poster I placed at various spots on the University of Calgary campus (see Recruitment Poster, Appendix A). Co-researchers were given the opportunity to contact me via email (see Email Recruitment Script, Appendix B), or by phone (see Telephone Recruitment Script, Appendix C). Additionally, I used the snowball method of sampling. All co-researchers
identified as having been raised in the Catholic church but feel challenged by creating a spiritual identity outside of the church. Each co-researcher was over the age of eighteen, able to communicate fluently in English and was willing to share their experiences of spiritual identity formation (see Letter of Consent, Appendix D). For an overview of all co-researchers, please refer to Co-Researcher Overview, in Appendix E, and for an overview of Sample Interview Questions, please refer to Appendix F.

Autoethnography appreciates that, "relationships between people are jointly authored, incomplete, and historically situated" (Ellis, 2004, p. 71). Further to this view, such relationships are seen as a process of constant renegotiation as the views and actions of each party affects the other (Ellis). This highlights yet another reason why I believe autoethnography is supported by my research topic. I value relationships and the new insights they can offer me as different people elicit different memories, and in effect draw forth different aspects of my selves. Through hearing the stories of others I found new meanings that were hidden in my own as each co-researcher had different experiences opinions that they brought to the table.

In our sharing of stories, I noticed that my different selves, for example my counselling student self, or my Catholic sense of self, wanted to respond in different ways. Elaine Bass Jenks (2002) also noticed the contradiction between responding as a researcher and responding as someone with the shared experience. Ellis (1999) noted that the researcher may experience contradictory feelings when in the field, but that this provides to the richness of the work. As this tension is acknowledged and written out, I will place it squarely in front of you so that you are privy to my processes in trying to understand the experiences of others as I reflect upon my own.
My purpose is not to provide you with a collective sense of how spiritual identity is formed as this would go against my belief that it is an individualized process. Rather, I hope to lend you an understanding of how others, my co-researchers and myself, have come to make sense of it for ourselves. Through this I invite you to be a part of the ethno as you engage with us in this dialogue and use it as an opportunity to reflect upon your own processes and experiences. You are welcomed into our study and encouraged to remember that as Wittgenstein wisely said, “our investigation does not try to find the real, exact meaning of words, though we do often give words exact meanings in the course of our investigations” (1970, aphorism 467). Thus, our words are chosen not because they are the most real and exact words to speak for our experiences; rather, they are the words that were chosen for the purpose of trying to best convey our experiences to you.

*The Graphy: The Storied Account*

In order that I am able to convey my experiences I must first find a voice with which to speak them, and in the case of my thesis, a way in which to write them. As I find strength in my voice I am starting to wonder that perhaps all of my concerns and questions about how to do autoethnography may mean that I am in fact doing it right. Wall (2006) also acknowledged the difficulty in getting used to writing autoethnographically, with the use of I, not regularly seen in traditional research. The concerns Hall articulated were a hesitation about stepping out of the realm of traditional research and writing, and that her work be regarded as reputable. Apparently we are not the only ones to have had difficulty with using our own voices in research. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) found that “for many, especially for women being educated as researchers, voice is an acknowledgment that they have something to say” (p. 423).
If I am to recognize that my story has something to contribute to the academic world, I must find a way in which to do so. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) believed “humans are storytelling organisms, who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). This is not far off from my own beliefs and makes me think that my story itself must be a good way to convey my spiritual identity experiences, again another reason to use autoethnography.

The use of story or narrative in matters of a religious or spiritual content is nothing new. Fowler (1981) suggested using narrative to give context for the experience of faith. He terms master stories as those that we tell ourselves in our interpretations and responses to the events that impose on our lives, “the characterizations of the patterns of power-in-action that disclose the ultimate meanings of our lives” (p. 277). In discussing interpersonal stories of Catholic parish staff, Coopman and Meidlinger (2002) explored the use of narrative as key to organizational life, particularly in religious organizations.

So, while using narrative for this subject is not new, how does one go about writing it? In discussing the transformational power of narrative research, Hones (1998) suggested that in order to understand the Other, we must first understand our self. I believe that these two have a reciprocal relationship and that the more we know ourselves, the more we can understand others, and vice versa. Through exploring the use of the auto, and the ethno, I have given you an understanding of how I have conceptualized the self-which in this thesis is myself, and the other-which entails both the contribution of my co-researchers, as well as the relationship between myself and my co-researchers. But, “relationship cannot become the reality by which life is lived until there is a vocabulary through which they are realized” (Gergen, 1991 p. 160). Well spoken, Gergen! This is where the graphy of the process comes into play.
According to Ellis (2004), the *graphy* is the means by which the research is described and written. Goodall (2000) contributed that this must ensure balancing the inward and outward focus, so as to establish the connection between personal experience and the experiences of others.

Hones (1998) not only appreciated the reciprocal understanding of Other, by first understanding self, he also emphasized that such an understanding is never final. Here he speaks to an autoethnographic premise, namely that the final interpretation is never the author’s. Rather, it is the one picked up by each reader as they individually interpret the text for themselves (Banks & Banks, 2000; Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Philaretou & Allen, 2006).

As mentioned, it is through relationships that I make sense of the world and my place in it. Relationships are an instrumental and essential part of my being, and through the invitation of the *ethno*, I found I could maintain this sense of self through my conversations with my co-researchers. The ongoing nature of interpreting the *graphy* extends the notion of relationship by engaging the reader in the conversation.

Applying new meaning each time an autoethnography is read also suits the nature of the topic, being that of development. Just as the words I write on these pages are not the final say as they can be interpreted by the reader, so too will they not be the final say in my spiritual development. By its nature, spiritual development invites “questions about the nature of spiritual change, transformation, growth, or maturation, as well as life phases and stages” (Roehlkepartain, et al., 2006, p. 9) none of which can be pegged down with a single interpretation as given by words on a page. Bakhtin, as shared by Morson
and Emerson (1992), supported this notion too referring to it as the unfinalizability of the word.

While the final word can never be given to this ongoing process, Gergen (1991) seemed to further emphasize its ever evolving nature by suggesting that the relevance of stories and narratives are influenced by history and culture, which thereby decrees how the past will be understood. Hayden White (as cited by Gergen) furthered this awareness by saying that our understandings of the past are grounded in narrative traditions that are bound by the growth and decay of time passing. As a result, the writer then has to choose accounts of the past that will accommodate the “cultural demand for proper narrative” (p. 109). I found myself thoughtfully moved by this and a weight that had been resting on me was finally lifted. At last, it occurred to me that until now, my spiritual identity had been narrated through the dominant discourse of Catholicism. Perhaps I had been trying to fit the story of my identity into what the Catholic church would regard as ‘proper narrative’, and by so doing, I was denying the parts of myself that don’t fit within those narrative guidelines. This proved a further reason why autoethnography, for appreciating narrative, would be the best vehicle in which to drive home my new spiritual self (Ellis, 2004).

Unfortunately, though unavoidably as Gergen (1991) contested, the object of self and author are somewhat evaded as words can only circle in on the real subject at hand, without ever fully or correctly capturing it in all of its elements. According to this logic then, I will transform my thoughts into a language to communicate them to others and with you, the reader. The contributions of social constructionist theory offers the notion that as I prepare the words to best present myself, the language I choose may not be because it best depicts my experience, but rather because it best conveys my experience
to you (Gergen, 1991). As such, I may only be able to provide a glimpse of my experience, and not the final word. This will also stand true in my depictions of the experiences of my co-researchers. As I use 'my' words to express my new found spiritual self, these words will not be enough to convey all that I experience in this self. This will perhaps only provide you a glimpse or gist of who I find myself to be, or more precisely, who I found myself to be at the moment that I committed myself to the written text.

This also sits well for me and my purposes as I do not endeavour to be an authoritative voice in the discourse of spiritual identity development. My narrational journey is part of the unique and individual process I believe spiritual development to be. Should I be looking for an authority to say how this process should unfold I could have stayed within the walls of my church. This, however, did not suit me at the time and will therefore serve no purpose for me now. Just as the church did not serve me as being a formal (final?) voice in how my spiritual self should develop, I do not wish to try to be that voice for you. So, as you read our stories, take from them what is of use to you, question yourself on why the rest is not useful, and integrate what you wish into your own story as you make meaning of your own experiences.

Comprehending Co-researchers' Contributions

Unfortunately, our lives and stories do not fit into neat little boxes that have been scientifically calculated and calibrated (Philaretou & Allen, 2006). This is a common critique of those questioning the validity and reliability of autoethnographic studies, which Ellis (1999) argues is dependent on which definition of valid is being used. Acknowledging the concerns of legitimization and representation of autoethnographic writing, researchers have been establishing ways to account for their claims (Holt, 2003).
Duncan (2004) used her own self-reflective journals to provide themes, which then guided her understanding of the processes of her co-researchers, and Baker (2001) transcribed her interviews and coded for theological themes throughout.

Thematic analysis as exercised by Duncan (2004) and Baker (2001) does appear to add some rigor to this line of research; however, a conversation on thematically reducing human experience by Carr (1986) caught my eye. Carr added that:

What is basic or irreducible is more complex than a mere sequence. While there is necessarily a sequential order underlying our experience and actions, this is not an order than can figure in our experience by itself, apart from the configurational organization represented by events and actions (p. 44).

I appreciated this contribution by Carr as I also do not believe that our lives can be chopped into themes independent of the stories in which they are lived and told. Freeman (1998) reminds us that Carr believed reality to be free of organization and that any such organization claimed to be found is in fact fiction and imagined. Our experiences do not “narrate” themselves, but rather it is through the understanding that is imposed upon them by our brains that we come to make sense of them (Bruner, 1992).

Carr (1986), Freeman (1998) and Bruner (1992) highlighted yet another tension that I faced in my work. How best could I find structure in the stories that my co-researchers have shared so that you can make sense of them, without reducing their stories to contrived themes? Baker (2001) shared that in her research, her themes depended upon the purpose of her study, implying that a different researcher studying the same topic may code differently, or observe different themes based on what their specific interests are.
I struggle with wanting to maintain the integrity of the stories my co-researchers have courageously shared as I don’t want to reduce them into themes that suit my research needs, or that see me impose my order on their realities (Freeman, 1998). For Freeman, using narrative provides a more humane, appropriate, and interesting way to make sense of human lives, providing “form to the flux, to make it all seem like there is a point, a purpose, a meaning” (p. 29). Ellis (2004) seemed to resonate with that idea, extending it to say that a narrative itself is theoretical and analysing it is to think with the story, rather than about it: to “experience it as affecting your life” and finding a truth within that story (p. 197).

With all this said, in Chapter Four, I will present a summarized version of each of my co-researchers’ stories. I will not organize them into themes, but will demonstrate in Chapter Five how these stories stimulated new meaning for my own story as I reflexively engaged with them. Certain quotes were chosen from what the co-researchers shared, again not because they fit prescribed themes, but rather because use of their own words better conveyed their expression than any summary written by me could do.
CHAPTER 4: THE CONFESSIONAL

Recently in a course I was taking on yoga therapy, someone shared that they believe that we value relationship because it gives witness to our experiences and ensures our lives don’t go unnoticed. I really had to think about this. While I do not believe I necessarily need a witness to my spiritual struggles, I do value the understanding they are lent, when discussed with those who have had similar experiences, and can appreciate them more fully. This was why I decided to include the stories of others in my thesis, as I know that my spiritual pilgrimage has not happened in isolation, different relationships and perspectives draw out different aspects of myself. This thesis will be reflecting the stories of those who I had conversations with in the context of my thesis, after receiving ethics approval.

The others that I have referred to are those whom I have chosen to call my co-researchers. I think this term is appropriate as they are a part of my process as they inform it by sharing their stories with me. I have really struggled with how to present my co-researchers to you. Having read other autoethnographies, I was initially drawn to the narrative approach, presenting each co-researcher as if one were privy to a conversation between them and me. Such an approach seemed to put me in a bit of a fictional role, calling me to adlib certain details of the encounter, and this for some reason did not sit with me. I wanted you to meet my co-researchers as I did, so that when you take meaning from their stories, they are offered to you as they were offered to me. As such I decided to present them to you as just that. Using a pseudonym of their choice, I have written each co-researcher’s story as I heard it, summarizing their story from the interview transcript. Each co-researcher was given the summarized depiction of their story to
review and ensure its accuracy, and all co-researchers approved of their vignette
depiction, except for Christina, who was unavailable.

While each interview was different for both the co-researcher and me, it will also
be read differently by each reader. Banks and Banks (1998) note that autoethnographic
research provides readers with opportunities to discover and create their own roles and
meanings; rather than take those dictated by the author. It is my hope that as you read
how my co-researchers and I came to make sense of our experiences - both on our own
and from our conversations - you too can make meanings from your interactions with our
words, as you engage with us in ours. So without further ado, please allow me to
introduce to you, my first co-researcher, Christina.

Christina’s Story

Christina and I met when she responded to a recruitment poster I had placed in the
female change rooms at the university where I requested co-researchers for my study. For
Christina, church is a way of bringing people together, providing a sense of community
and a way to teach people how to get along. Her experiences in the church had also
impressed upon her a strong desire to help others, which was one the reasons why she
had agreed to do an interview; “that” and the nature of the topic itself.

At the beginning of her teenage years, Christina began to question things in
comparison to her family in an attempt to understand what her own beliefs were. This
questioning prompted her to feel self-conscious when taking communion at mass as she
knew she didn’t agree with certain things the church said. She shared that she also felt
self-conscious praying to God unless it was in thanks, and even now she would rather
think such thoughts than actually pray them. Eventually she decided to quit attending
mass, stating, “I knew that going to church was not necessarily going to make me a better person”.

A few years later she found that she “saw more of the ills of the world”, as school friends were abused by their Catholic parents, and Catholic priests were found molesting young boys. She began to question why she would want to be a part of a church that she felt, “Had bad men as their spiritual leaders”. This spurred on her questioning the role of the Catholic church in her life and she decided that, although she still wanted to be Catholic, she found herself saying, “I don’t want to be that Catholic”. She began to work on her own version of Catholicism within herself, one where she could still attend church if she chose to, but where she could also experience her spirituality outside, in nature.

An experience with depression after an abortion left her feeling devoid of spirituality, and scared to reflect on herself. During this time she wasn’t looking at her spiritual self and believed that this pulled her further into the downward spiral of depression. As a Catholic who had an abortion, Christina felt distant from the church and from herself. Ironically though, it was also through the church that she found herself when she woke up one day feeling renewed and refreshed, and began to think about spirituality again. When discussing the role of the church in this awakening to spirituality from depression she said, “I think the Catholic church was familiar to me... and I liked myself”. Although the church teaches some morals which she does not agree with, there are some morals that she would like to maintain and shared, “Now I’m ready to reconfirm my spirituality and determine it for myself, reconfirm... if all Catholicism is right for me or not”.
Relationships with others have not gone unaffected as Christina has negotiated the role of the church and spirituality in her life. How spiritually confident she feels in a particular moment will determine how accepting she is of the differences in beliefs between her and her friends. Conversations with those whom she would consider to be strict Catholics are something that she avoids for fear of judgment, or getting into a heated conversation about something that she either feels very strongly about, or has not yet formed her own opinion on.

Being out in nature and constantly reflecting on her actions is where Christina finds her spirituality. The growing role of spirituality in her life has made church now a place that she goes to, “Get back to myself, like just to reconfirm my own confidence and my own morality and spirituality”. However, this being said, she also recognizes that, “Even though I’m feeling more spiritual and just being a better person, it’s so tied to the Catholic church that I don’t think that I can [separate them]”. Christina recognizes that she probably doesn’t realize how much a part of her the Catholic church is, and how it has shaped who she is. As such, she wouldn’t say that she is or isn’t Catholic anymore, sharing that she feels she is “kind of still in that middle ground”.

Christina appreciates that her spiritual identity negotiation will be an ongoing process and said, “It’s always when I’m not looking at it that I’ll have an experience that will kind of make me think about it again”. Perhaps our interview was one such experience because at its conclusion, Christina shared that our conversation had helped clarify things for her. Being able to talk about such issues had made it clearer to her where she is at with the church and with her own spirituality.
Jessica replied to my recruitment poster with some hesitation, unsure if her story would be a good match for my topic, defining herself as a “pissed off Catholic”. I wanted to be able to speak to Catholics in all stages of their relationship with the church, and with their own spirituality, so we decided to meet and see where the interview took us.

Jessica attended Catholic church regularly until grade 10, at which point she quit going as most of her peer group had done. Attending a non-Catholic school for the first time for grade 12 served as an "eye-opener" where her peer group began to include friends of other religions. She had likened being raised in the Catholic faith to being brought up in a box. Meeting people from other faiths took her out of this box and opened her eyes to the possibility of other religions and other beliefs. She shared that, “It was just so refreshing and I was just so excited, because these were major religions just like mine”. To Jessica, this experience provided the opportunity, as she said, “to doubt and expand my mind and permission to say you’re not agreeing with this stuff, and there are other options”. Further to this, she added that she didn’t feel that God would punish her for not being loyal to just one religion.

In her teenage years she began to see the church as hypocritical as it stated sex before marriage was a sin, yet behind closed doors some priests molested young boys. Questions about the church’s stance on birth control and premarital sex seemed to be met with unjustifiable answers, which conflicted with her personal beliefs. In addition to this, Jessica felt that she couldn’t relate to the priests and that they couldn’t relate to her, saying, priests are, “Supposed to be somebody that we are modeling ourselves after and respecting and looking up to, and how do we do that when they live a completely
different life than we are?” Jessica felt that mass became meaningless when it was said by priests who she didn’t feel were fluent enough in English and were unfamiliar with the societies and cultures where they said mass. The Catholic church, Jessica feels, is “prehistoric and outdated”.

Jessica regards spirituality as having a religious connotation yet she also says that exploring her spirituality has taught her that she doesn’t need to go to church to be spiritual. This statement seemed contradictory to me and Jessica attempted to clarify it by saying that exploring her spirituality has meant to her that she does not need to believe in just one God and this has taught her to be more open minded and accepting the views of others, as she determines how they do or do not fit for her. It also seems to Jessica that almost everyone believes in a higher power. This was a realization in which Jessica found comfort because she felt with that many people believing similar things, hopefully it meant that it was true.

Jessica felt that within the church she had a place to belong, but this place didn’t turn out to be what she thought it was. She still believes in some sort of a God, although it is not the God that the church “structured for her”. This has left her looking for somewhere to feel uplifted, enriched and supported, a place that she knows can be found in church, but in her experience, was just not the Catholic church. The questioning of her place in the church strengthened her relationships with others who were also raised Catholic, and found themselves not wanting to attend church, but wishing they had some place to belong. Jessica shares that these people are looking for, “A place to be with people who believe what you believe and live the way you live”.

Although Jessica has done a lot of thinking and concluded that the Catholic church does not have much of a place in her life, she recognizes that it maintains an impact. Decisions and choices that are not necessarily in accordance with the Catholic church can leave her feeling guilty if she chooses something that goes against what she was taught. She qualifies this guilt however, to say that it is not necessarily Catholic guilt, and shares, “We don’t just owe it to a Catholic God, but in a spiritual sense that maybe we owe it to really everyone”.

When Jessica became dismayed by the Catholic church she shared that, “I wanna be a good person and have some form of spirituality and I don’t want to let the Catholic Church have destroyed all that for me”. Feelings like this led her to explore other faiths although she has not found one yet, her reason being that she didn’t want to get up early on Sundays to explore new faiths. Just after saying this, however, she shared what seemed to be a deeper reason, saying, “It’s intimidating to walk into a room of people that already belong to this community and then to say hi, I’m here, and I’m religiously lost”.

Toward the end of our time together, I asked Jessica to share with me what the experience was for her to talk about this topic with me. Jessica’s reply was that our conversation reinforced how angry she is with the Catholic church for turning people away. However, a response though that seemed to come less from a place of anger was offered at one point when Jessica shared, “I have just hoped that God doesn’t think I have turned my back on him, or it, or Buddha or whoever or whatever it is”. This dance between being angry with the church and not wanting to turn her back on God was nicely summed up by Jessica’s final words when she articulated, “I guess it’s complicated I mean
because I’m in limbo, I mean I know what I’m saying but I don’t know what I’m saying...so it’s depressing”. While turning her back on the institution of the Catholic church, she is not abandoning all of her Catholic beliefs and continues to look for a place that will replace the sense of community she wished she had gotten from the Catholic church.

Angela’s Story

I was introduced to Angela by a mutual friend and she showed immediate interest in my topic when I shared it with her. What struck me the most about Angela was how sensitively and thoughtfully she answered my questions, and it seemed to me that she was quite passionate about her relationship with the church.

Angela is a single mother of two children and works as a therapist, often working as a supervisor and mentor for others in the field of counselling. She grew up in a town in England where she was raised Catholic and regularly attended church with her father. This regular attendance suffered however when she moved to Canada and suddenly found it weird to go to another church where things were done somewhat differently. This was part of her initial reason for why she quit going to church. However, she also shared that as a teen she found herself to be a feminist, and recalled, “I didn’t see how I could be a feminist and part of the Catholic church,” an organization she feels is run mostly by men. These original reasons for not going to church prompted her to question why she wasn’t going, and what role the church played in her life. The questioning continued when she chose to marry a non-Catholic, outside of the church: “If you’re making a decision not to get married in it, why are you making that decision? I guess it (the Catholic church) mustn’t mean that much to you”.

Although marrying her husband prodded her to think about the role of the church in her life, it was while contemplating separating from him that she felt she got some more clarity. In her words, “My divorce is connected to my spiritual identity because it’s all about...taking ownership of my own life, and not relying on something or somebody else to make me happy”.

Angela struggled with making the right decision about whether to end her marriage or not and found that she was angry at the church for telling her what she could or couldn’t do. Suddenly she realized, “there is no reason for me to be angry at the church because the church isn’t what dictates my spirituality...I don’t care what the church says about this, I need to do it.”

Her marriage and subsequent separation were not the only defining moments that she credits with her awareness of a spirituality she saw as separate from the church. After a “rollicking” in confession for not having enough sins she seized the experience as an opportunity to start thinking about what role she wanted the church to have in her life.

Angela believes her experience in the church was met with mixed messages which told her how she should behave, told her “to be good”, and to feel guilty if she was contrary to those expectations. She felt that she needed to be responsible, and take care of others, to the point that she believes this upbringing lead her to the field of psychology where she could help others in professional capacity. Yet even though she did what she could to help, she never felt that what she did was enough, sharing that, “I still didn’t feel like I was good enough...like God good enough”.

A turn came for Angela when she decided that this was not how she wanted to live her life. Explaining how this came to be she shared, “I would say that I connected
myself with who I am and then started looking at why the church wasn’t fitting with me”. While she enjoyed being a helper, she did not want to feel the guilt if she did something that the church did not agree with. Recognizing her spirituality allowed her to accept herself as she is, and allowed her to explore things with herself as her internal guide, rather than it coming externally from the church. These changes include allowing herself to struggle with dilemmas and to find the answers for herself, rather than shut down and passively accept the answers offered by others. With this shift came a stronger sense of self esteem, though she realizes this may not be directly related to her relationship with the church and could also be a natural part of maturation.

Realizing she was spiritual was a gradual process, one where she began to question herself about things, asking why she wasn’t going to church and what it was that she didn’t like about it. Conversations with others were also facilitative and helped her to realize that her morals weren’t just a result of being a part of the church, but wanting to be a good person, and part of creating a better world. Her passion in sharing this was so intense that she was moved to tears, sharing, “I think it’s a very powerful thing to be best that you can be”.

Angela now enjoys going to church but doesn’t see the priests as her spiritual directors, rather she knows that she is. For her, spirituality is a way of um, appreciating life... thinking about why you live and why you do what you do and why you have the morals that you do and the ethics that you do and what’s your purpose in being here ... whereas religion to me is more prescribed.
Her current relationship with the church seems to come in phases, cycling between causing her to be very angry, to its providing her a space to meditate. By meditate she says it’s the opportunity to be “consciously engaged in what’s being presented and exploring for myself how that fits for me.” She regularly takes her children to church as well because she believes “it’s important for them to explore their own spirituality and their own beliefs”.

Angela believes that further developing her spirituality will be facilitated by her being more consciously aware of her spirituality and always learning about it. She plans to stay open to conversations that before she would have been too angry to have, or wouldn’t have been of any interest to her. Conversations will be particularly important when she is prodded to think about spiritual beliefs and hearing what others have to say, perhaps expanding her thoughts based on their beliefs.

_Tanya’s Story_

Tanya and I met by working a shift together at a non-profit agency. My initial conversation with Tanya was intriguing. We had grown up in the same faith, read similar books and were both contemplating our place in the Catholic church; or rather, more in her case, the role of the church in her life. I shared with Tanya my thesis topic and she quickly agreed to complete an interview with me. When asked about her current relationship with the church Tanya shared, “I don’t feel like I have a relationship with the Catholic church”. So, figuring out her place in the church was a snap, she doesn’t see herself as having one. However, realizing the role that the church had played in her life was what we were to discuss.
Tanya was raised in the Catholic school system from kindergarten to grade twelve and attended church regularly until junior high. Her initial reasons for not going to church were simply because, as a teen she just didn’t want to get up early on Sunday mornings; however, her real departure from the church however was more gradual as she grew up and learned to question things. During school she had felt that she was part of the church because she was going to Catholic school where our religion was a regular part of her day. This, however, changed and she began distancing from the church when she went to a non-Catholic post-secondary. There she found that suddenly she was able to express herself freely without worrying about upsetting the teachers if she wrote about something that the church may not have agreed with.

Controversial issues such as abortion got her really questioning how much her beliefs differed from the church. She’s even thought the church to be hypocritical at times, stating “I feel like sometimes they make rules that are convenient to them”. Her example given was where the church takes a stance against homosexuality yet there have been several cases of priests found to be molesting young boys.

In her late teens, her mom’s best friend introduced her to spirituality by giving her books to read. She credits this as her first taste of spiritual thinking. Books such as the Celestine Prophecy encouraged her to read more, and the more she read the more open minded she became. In time she began to feel better about life recognizing it as a journey and when she found herself thinking certain ways that were not working for her she’d realize “no, that’s the religion, I don’t need to follow that, I can do whatever I think is right or necessary, not because they say it is or say it isn’t”.
She would define spirituality as a "kindness, positive energy, you know, karma, wanting to do good upon others, as well as yourself...living a really decent lifestyle". Spirituality is not one way or another, "you can pick whatever you want out of it, whatever you want, whereas religion is more rigid".

When she was more actively involved with the church she thought of spirituality as having a religious connotation, but now she sees it as more open, without a right or wrong answer. She describes this as,

there is no right or wrong really like say you take a piece from one of the books just because I don’t believe in that doesn’t mean that you’re not spiritual or more spiritual than me and I’m not, or vice versa, just very very open, which is what I like.

Tanya had the perception that for some people being Catholic was about being more Catholic than somebody else, but she doesn’t see that with spirituality.

For her spirituality is very individual some person might consider them spiritual, themselves spiritual and I might not but that doesn’t mean that they are right and I’m not and they are wrong. It’s not at all about that, it’s more about being your own individual person and believing what you want to believe and doing what you want and stuff like that.

Tanya’s response to the questions on guilt was that she had a strong relationship with it which she credits to the Catholic religion. While in the past she used to feel guilty for everything, she is slowly learning to disregard guilt. Her changing relationship with guilt is also credited to spiritual literature as she believes it has taught her that it is ok to
learn from her mistakes. When asked if the church could have taught her this lesson too she shared, “I don’t think they would have said well just learn from your mistakes and move on”. Her first experience with confession, as a middle-grader as well as her last experience as a teenager, were both very negative. “You came to what, the confessional thinking you were going to unload and maybe feel good about it sort of thing”; however, she left the confessional feeling like she was a terrible person, even though she knew she wasn’t.

Toward the end of our conversation Tanya shared, “I still believe in God I don’t attach it to Catholic religion like I believe in God but um in my own way, I don’t need some fancy religion”. Part of this is because she regards religion as “more rigid” whereas with spirituality “you can pick all these other pieces and no one is going to shun you”.

I asked Tanya if she felt that her own self identity was not coinciding with who the church said she should be. Her response was “I would have to say yes because there is a reason why I am not going there or wanting to be there, so I guess, yes. I just never thought of it in that sense”. Driven by her interest in learning and her open minded nature, Tanya continues to search for answers and doesn’t want to be told what she can or can’t believe. She would rather find her beliefs and the reasons for them on her own.

Gonzolos’ Story

My conversation with Gonzolos unfolded quite differently than those with my other co-researchers. This could in part be due to the fact that he was my final interview, but I think it was because he seemed to need my initial interview questions less than some to guide the sharing of his story.
I met Gonzalos through a course that we took together. We became interested in each other’s research as we both were researching experiences related to the Catholic church; mine focusing on being inside the church but finding a more compatible spiritual self outside, and his almost the opposite. Gonzalos was raised in a strict, traditional Polish family, one that attended church weekly and during some liturgical seasons, almost daily.

Gonzalos served as an altar boy for most of his youth; and upon turning 18, with little perceived pressure from his family, he entered the seminary, on his road to become a priest. He shared that he had left home to get out of that controlling environment, and quickly found himself in another one. Ironically however, it wasn’t until he was in the seminary that he was able to do some of the things he would have liked to have done in high school, such as socialize more and play soccer.

Life in the seminary did not meet with Gonzalos’ expectations, and he found himself interested in life outside of the seminary, sometimes more so than life on the inside. A particular summer break found him enjoying the pleasures of a social life that the seminary could not offer. Finally he realized that he was participating in some of the functions in the seminary out of obligation, and that he avoided what he could. He felt that this awareness forced him to look at why this was. He recalls this as, “a process of identity exploration kind of re-discovering who I am and part of that involved kind of re-evaluating kind of my relationship with God”.

This relationship with God that he speaks of is how he defines his spiritual identity. I want to share with you how he has defined spiritual identity as I believe it
captures the development piece of such an identity, and how it is one that is never fully formed. In Gonzolos’ words,

for me spiritual identity speaks about the relationship between a person and God and... how deep is my relationship with my God, Christ and... questioning, the relationship its relevance in my life, re-evaluating that relationship, coming to a point where I feel that ah the relationship is going in the right direction where its with each day becoming stronger, even though there are some days where I might question why are certain things happening in my life.

For Gonzolos, this questioning came shortly after entering the seminary. All of his life he had enjoyed serving in his local parish and suddenly he was faced with a part of himself that did not coincide with the person he thought he was when first entering the seminary. He describes this as,

a process of formation where you’re trying to develop your spiritual identity where you’re trying to develop intellectually and pastorally and you know as an individual you’re trying to develop your identity as well and you know all this is kind of not working out, at least in my case.

This emergence of a new sense of self was something that Gonzolos was aware of earlier on in his seminary years. However, it wasn’t until almost seven years in the seminary and three years served as a priest, that he accepted this new self, and realized that by doing so, he must leave the priesthood.

Deciding to leave after being ordained a priest is not a decision that is taken lightly and has launched Gonzolos on a new journey as he seeks to get dispensation from the Catholic church. Until this is made possible for Gonzolos, and he is welcomed back
into the church, he has chosen to refrain from receiving any of the sacraments. He has chosen this for himself as he said, “The church teaches that a person should be in a ‘state of grace’ to receive the Body and Blood of Our Lord”. For Gonzolos, his state of grace will be received upon reception of dispensation and until then he has chosen not to partake in the sacraments as his cross to bear.

For some, this may seem like a small price to pay, but for Gonzolos the sacraments are, “the outward signs of what is happening on a spiritual level in ones personal faith and spirituality and relationship with Christ”. As such, not being able to participate in the sacraments feels somewhat like a limitation on his relationship with Christ. This period of waiting allows him to hunger and pine for Christ which will allow for a greater state of appreciation for His love and grace when Gonzolos is finally in the state of grace required to receive Him.

In our discussion it seemed to me that this process has brought Gonzolos closer to God. Throughout our conversation Gonzolos placed great emphasis on his relationships, not only with Christ, but now, by leaving the priesthood, the one he is able to have with his wife and children. Not all relationships however have gone without consequence as his family still struggles understand his reasons for leaving the seminary.

His constant spiritual identity renegotiation also had significant impact on another relationship, as he shares, “it has become less about me, and more about Christ…because in my sinfulness I have understand better than at any other time in my life how much I am loved by my God.”

While Gonzolos is still awaiting permission to once again participate in the sacramental life, he continues to be as active in the church as he can. Church, to
Gonzolos, is a meeting place where he can be in communication with Christ. In light of the struggles that he has experienced, he has appreciated the periods of questioning in his life as it is through these that he believes he has found his answers. In closing he shared that,

Sure, there are imperfections, because the Church is made up of individuals, but in the end, it is also the Mystical Body of Christ, therefore, we can rest assured that Christ is at the helm. What else would have ensured its existence for more than 2,000 years? The Church is far more than just a human institution.

Interview Reflections

Reviewing the transcripts, my words caught my eye as I reflected to a co-researcher that “I think once you have these conversations you can’t go back to the way you were because something has changed.” This couldn’t be much closer to the truth. Speaking with my co-researchers changed me, and changed the fluid meanings that I was assigning to my story.

Each co-researcher was in a different place in their spiritual development, each maintaining their own relationship with the church. Some were regular church attendees while others shared not wanting to get up early on Sundays as parts of their reasons for not attending. While some stories were told with more passion and others with more anger, it was clear that each co-researcher had their own story to tell. Despite the sometimes obvious similarities or differences between their stories, it was clear that they all shared at least one thing in common; the influence of their relationship with the Catholic church on their spiritual identity development. In some segments of their stories I heard my own truths ring true, and in other parts I could not relate. The pieces of their
stories that I could not share prodded me to reflect further and deepen my understanding of my own experiences. Hearing their stories helped shape my own as I came to find meaning in my experiences through relating them with theirs. Allow me now to share this with you as we turn to Chapter Five.
CHAPTER 5: BEHIND THE CONFESSIONAL

This chapter is titled, *Behind the Confessional*, because while Chapter Four provided you with the stories of my co-researchers as I heard them, this chapter will show you how in listening to those stories, I found ways to make sense of my own. This however, is not the only way my story has been informed, so additionally I will also discuss the influence of my interactions with the literature on my spiritual identity development. Therefore I am offering a sort of a ‘behind the scenes’ look at how I took what I heard and read, and integrated those experiences into my own story.

Our Roles-Yours and Mine

By inviting readers into the space ‘behind the scenes’, autoethnography bids you to discover and create your own role, rather than take the one that is dictated by myself, as the author (Banks & Banks, 1998). That is my hope for you, that as you have read Chapter Four, you will find your own place within my co-researchers’ words. I am also locating myself in the text, which according to Pullen (2006) will include myself as both an authorial voice and research subject. While I am exercising my newfound authorial voice, oftentimes wishing it came with authorial training wheels, I do not want it to be confused with an authoritative voice. When citing Bakhtin, Morson and Emerson (1991) share that,

> it is clear that dialogue so conceived involves the constant redefinition of its participants, develops and creates numerous potentials...it is clear that no single interaction could exhaust the potential value of future exchanges. Both dialogue and the potentials of dialogue are endless. No word can be taken back, but the final word has not yet been spoken and never will be spoken. (p.52)
This thesis is neither the final word on how my spiritual identity developed, as it is still developing, nor on how spiritual identity develops in general. It is only reflective of my dialogue with certain theorists, and certain co-researchers, at this time in my life.

**Multiple Senses of Self**

As Bakhtin (Morson & Emerson, 1991) said, the potentials for such dialogues are endless, and I have chosen the qualitative method of autoethnography to present my current understanding of the conversations I have had with the literature and my co-researchers. Clegg et al., and Martin (as cited in Pullen 2006) note that qualitative research, as an alternative to objective and scientifically rigorous quantitative methods calls for an increase in reflexivity and more specifically self-reflexivity. However, this notion of self knowledge and expression is complicated by a multiple sense of self. The outward conversations I was having made me more aware of the internal ones that take place in the theatre of my mind. In these conversations I have become conscious of the different players or roles I may take, in position to the different voices of significant others I hear in my mind. Whose voice I hear, and what role I take, is dependent on the particular topic at hand.

I have always been aware of my inner dialogues as different parts of my self battle out decisions and share their opinions, but for some reason during my interviews this plurality of perspectives seemed to rise forth and make me aware of my polyphony of voices. *Polyphony* is a term lent to us by Mikhail Bakhtin (Morson & Emerson, 1991) to account for how our interactions with others foster voices with whom we sustain inner dialogues depending on the subject.
My Selves

This story then is not one written by an authoritative self, but rather is one that is polyphonic, thereby allowing my multiplicity of voices speak (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). We all have a cast of characters with whom we are in inner and outer dialogue that make up the embodiment of ourselves. These characters can be influenced by the different roles that we take on during our lives, or the influence of those around us who have significant impact on our lives. During the interviews I recognized my counselling student voice, who wanted to respond to some of the co-researchers' responses as a therapist would, and my nurturer voice, who wanted to wipe tears and ease pain as stories were told. Neither of these voiced selves, however, seemed as significant to me as the awareness of another sense of myself, my Catholic self.

I was flying to Hawaii today (yeah, I know, lucky me)...standby. Looking out the window at the cloud formations I silently said a prayer asking God to please help me make connecting (also standby) flight so that I could arrive when expected and still have a full nine days on the island. Suddenly at this moment of prayer I consciously became aware of the Catholic discourse in my head. Interrupting my prayer was the voice of self-doubt, the voice of the Catholic church, where I was raised to believe there is a certain way to have a relationship with God, that of being a part of the Catholic church. If I am not currently an active member of the church, then what right do I have to pray to Him?

This planted that seed of doubt, which I suppose on some level I knew was ridiculous but nonetheless, I quit my prayer and decided to hand it over, let it be His will, with no interruption of prayer from me. Silly. I know that there is a God,
and that He is not just a Catholic God with ears reserved only for the prayers of those that attend His Catholic church. I also believe that there is more than one way to get to Him. Yet somehow this knowing, is not enough to suppress, or preferably, do away with thoughts such as the one that the Catholic voice instilled at that moment of prayer (Journal Entry- February 19, 2006).

This Catholic voice is one that represents the influence that the church has had on me. It became more recognizable to me that day on the plane, and was noticeable in my internal dialogue during the interviews with my co-researchers. During one interview a co-researcher shared an experience she had with abortion. My Catholic voice wanted to question how this person could have done such a thing, justified such a thing, still want to be involved with the church after knowing she had done something so against the church.

Obviously this Catholic voice comes from a very Catholic place, though not judging, I found myself wanting to understand the situation from a Catholic point of view. The influence of my counselling discourse had me want to respond as though in a counselling room, and jump into the role of therapist. This really brought my awareness to how we often have to choose to emphasize one voice over another. Although the influence of my Catholic and counselling inner discourses surely influenced how I did respond, it was the researcher discourse that predominantly carried the interview forward. I have used the word predominantly as I also recognize that while the research discourse may have played a dominant role, it was also a hybrid of the discourses that I was aware of at the time.

Our inner discourses interact with each other, and in an analogous way, each has their own voice. Ultimately however, one has to be the one that is spoken, or written.
While this was a voice that may have been more strongly influenced by inner discourse with the Catholic church, I am learning to make room for newer narratives and slowly through this autoethnographic process I am learning to let the inner discourse of my spiritual self speak too.

I speak of the Catholic influence in my inner dialogue but what has been my experience with the church this far? I have shared with you how my co-researchers have experienced the church but I am not quite sure how to share mine. In sitting down to share my story with you I am aware of the many different voices in my head, the church, my co-researchers, various others with whom I have had these conversations, the literature I have consulted, my family, friends and thesis supervisor, to name a few. I am also aware of the audience by whom my story will be greeted when I commit it to writing. This will include my thesis committee, friends and family, my co-researchers etc. Somewhere between being aware of writing for my audience, as well as hearing the influential voices in my head, I must negotiate the middle ground so as to find my story. This requires a process of constant renegotiation.

*How I Arrived Where I am*

I was born and raised Catholic in a family that, while not devoutly religious, did observe all of the holidays and sacraments of the church, and attended mass every Sunday. My godfather loves to tell the story of my baptism, how he risked life and limb to carry me across the frozen river so that I could be washed clean of original sin. Sounds like a treacherous sacrifice that he made for me that fateful day, and the only flaw in his story is that I was baptized in late June, on a warm summer day in Winnipeg.
My memories of receiving each of the sacraments seem to all have an element of sadness and confusion. When I was ten, I entered the confessional for the first time, and was petrified to leave lest I tarnish my freshly whitened soul with my mere humanness. At the age of twenty, again in the confessional, questioning my faith, and searching the priest’s face for answers to explain my very existence, I was asked to hurry up, as there was a line of people waiting. I haven’t been back since.

My church attendance was dwindling but when I was in my early twenties something changed to affect my church attendance even more. I was wrought with guilt and feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. I pulled away from my faith and for reasons unknown to me could not enter a church without a wave of emotions; nameless and washing over me, sweeping the self I thought I knew, out to a sea of bewilderment and anguish.

I was successful in shelving this period of my life until the first year of my Masters program when a dear friend shared that she believed her experience with depression had been a gift from God, in effect to draw her closer to Him. Her words reached deep into my soul and shook it from its slumber. Finally, I had some words to serve as a starting point to shed some meaning on that dark period of my life. My experience up to this point had been isolating but after then I found that by hearing the words and story of another, I was finding new meaning in my own experience.

It was that conversation that reignited my spiritual yearnings and catapulted me on my spiritual journey. If one conversation and one way of seeing things could have been so meaningful I wanted more. I craved hearing how others were negotiating their spiritual identity development, were they going through dark nights and could hearing
their stories help me understand my own? Questions such as these have brought me to my topic and lead to this research.

Where Exactly am I?

When I look at the influence of the church on my spiritual development I am not sure that I can tease the two apart enough to say how one has influenced the other. The church has influenced my spiritual development immensely; even in the beginning when I felt guilty for wanting to explore it. I felt that I was betraying the church by wanting to discover my spiritual self outside of it. I grappled with this for years and truthfully still do at times when my Catholic voice gets louder than the others. Just as powerfully, however, my spiritual development is influencing my relationship with the church. As I begin to recognize my spiritual self outside of the church I better understand who that self is and this stronger sense of self has made me feel more comfortable in the church on the occasions that I attend mass.

I see Bakhtin’s (Morson & Emerson, 1991) view of the polyphony of discourse, as analogous to the polyphony of voices, as each discourse needs a voice to be heard. According to a Foucauldian (1981) view, the church has offered a particular discourse replete with a specific way to govern oneself should they choose to be a Catholic. This Catholic discourse has informed my Catholic voice. Rather than wanting the church to be the dominant discourse for me; I have chosen to open myself up to the other discourses that are running through my mind, one of which is that of a spiritual self. I am finding it easier to notice my inner spiritual discourse and, by the same token, to exercise my spiritual voice, although it is often in private conversations and negotiations within ‘my’ Catholic discourse before being voiced out loud. Although I still acknowledge hesitation
in voicing my spiritual self, I appreciate that this process has made me more aware of it, and more comfortable sharing it. I am also at ease with the voice of my newly emerging spiritual identity needing to check in with my Catholic identity, as I believe my Catholic identity is invariably a part of who I am.

Reflections: Conversations with Co-researchers

I have still struggled with how best to relay my story to you, and how to explain how my story has been influenced by my conversations with others. At one point I thought I might present the influence of each co-researcher separately, but that seemed so mechanical to me. Another difficulty with that approach is that while each co-researcher influenced me differently, so too did the conversations that took place for me between meeting each co-researcher. As such, I have decided to share with you how I have found meaning in the literature I have read and the interviews I had with my co-researchers.

I found that, in doing the interviews, it took me a while to get out of the role of the interviewer and the co-researchers out of the role of interviewee. It was interesting however, to see how each conversation, though starting out the same, could take an entirely different route, each with its own meaning and learning.

Awakening From The Dark

It's funny how opening your self up to something can suddenly create more of it in your life. At least that was my experience with beginning to study this topic. While I have only included the conversations that I have had with my co-researchers, there were certainly many others that were had in less academic venues. Aside from my interviews, some of my most honest and telling conversations on this topic have come at the most impromptu times; social gatherings where an unexpected conversation on spirituality
erupts, or killing time at a dental or doctor appointment. One such conversation took place this summer while bobbing on a water noodle in the warm Bermudian waters, where a relative of mine shared his story of his spiritual awakening. His was a story of a near death experience, with psychosis-like symptoms in his recovery from addiction. My awakening and my story is not quite that drastic. Similar to Christine, who awoke one morning from a depression with a new pair of eyes through which to see the world, I too had a gentle awakening from the dark.

**Spiritual Growth**

I have since found that awakening from the dark can be viewed in some literatures as a form of spiritual development (Coe, 2004). This however, was not my initial experience with religious or spiritual literature. During my undergraduate degree I was first introduced to the work of James Fowler (1981; 1991) in a text book’s brief description on his stages of faith development. I must be honest and say that I was a little disappointed as I felt that his stages seemed limiting, too restrictive and defined, for such a personal journey. Fortunately upon coming across him years later, that impression was quickly changed.

When Fowler (1981; 1991) shared that he saw faith as possibly, but not necessarily, independent of religion I realized that I could keep my faith. Faith in his words, is a “way of moving into the force field of life...a person’s way of seeing him-or herself in relation to others and against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (1981, p. 4). I could keep my faith but perhaps find a different venue in which to express and celebrate it. Having been raised in the Catholic church it had seemed like the natural place for me to live my faith, but it didn’t feel like the only place. According to William
James (1902/1958), “there are two lives, the natural and spiritual and we must lose one before we can participate in the other” (p. 140). While I am not losing my life in the Catholic church, to create a more spiritual way of being, I am certainly changing the way in which I will be living in the church.

James Fowler (1981; 1991) and William James (1902/1958) allowed me to see my relationship with Catholicism and spirituality in a different light, and Coe (2000), Armentrout (2004) and Moore (2004) named the painful darkness for me. By recognizing it as a dark night of the soul it allowed me to find new meaning and purpose in it. It was no longer just a blanket of darkness; it was a blanket of darkness with a purpose, a purpose that in the end would bring light.

Literary doors opened for me and conversations found me. Articles and books lead to new books, and these in turn lead to discussions about things I had never before discussed. New seeds of thought were planted in my head and old wilting ones were brought back to life. Energy surged within me as I looked at my old experiences through new eyes.

**Spiritual Literature**

My interview with Tanya emphasized to me my use of spiritual literature, and how instrumental it has been in my spiritual growth. As Tanya shared, within this literature there is no right or wrong. Even the books that I have not agreed with have allowed me to grow, as I understand what it is that I do, and don’t agree with, and begin to understand why, thus helping me to refine my evolving voice. This feels different than it did in the church, as often times when I found myself in disagreement, I also found myself feeling guilty. The guilt was from concerns that maybe I wasn’t good enough, or
Catholic enough, or that I was missing something of importance by not being able to agree with all that was said. Interestingly, these words and sentiments were almost verbatim what Angela shared with me in our discussion, as she also questioned whether she was good enough, or as she shared, "God good enough". Spiritual literature has allowed me to question, (my natural tendency anyway) but more so allowed me to feel okay, even good about questioning. I am also more aware now that the criteria by which I would judge whether I was “good enough”, is based on Catholic discourse, which again does not need to be my dominant discourse.

*Grace*

While spiritual literature has made me feel more comfortable questioning, I still have an aversion to the word *spiritual*, though I am learning to use it now with more ease and comfort. Perhaps this is because through this process I have become more comfortable with my own spirituality?

Looking back at Chapter Two it seems to me that I approached it in a very mechanical fashion, and now that I feel more in touch with myself in this process, moving through it less mechanistically, As part of my chronological journey I beneficially reflect on my choice of literature in Chapter Two, and am grateful for the discrepancy between how I did it originally, and how I would do it now. To me this shows development, and I would rather it be this way, than looking back at my work from months ago and choosing to do it the exact same way again.

This speaks to another way in which this had changed me. When I originally started this process I was always looking for big changes, huge signs to show me that I was developing and making progress. Recently however, in some yoga therapy training, I
came to notice and appreciate the little changes as well. By using assisted postures, our work was meant to emphasize the mind-body connection, a difficult task for me to do as I find it much easier to stay in my head.

In these poses I initially found that because I was more cognitively focused, the positions were merely to get a good stretch, and so I would go to my maximum physical edge to ensure I got the maximum stretch. This changed for me though, and when I slowly learned to let go of my need to stay in the cognitive realm, my experience in the posture became an entirely different phenomenon. I found that by accessing the wisdom of the body I noticed that I did not need to go to such an extreme physical edge in order to reach a mental or emotional one. Had I stumbled across an implicit sensual aspect to spirituality that can unite body and mind? This learning was huge for me and got my wheels turning. If I was always focussing on the bigger edge, how many little ones was I missing along the way? Until now I had my eyes set on ‘establishing my spiritual identity’ and figuring out my relationship with the Catholic church. But what signs could I see along the way to let me know I was getting there if I was always focussed on what was ahead, and not what was happening in the moment? What learning was I missing, practically giving up, by not opening myself up to the process in its entirety, including every little step along the way?

In that pose was a piece of learning, and my physical stretch lessened but my mental and emotional awareness’s grew. This has brought me closer to a sense of grace with myself, a willingness to allow this process the time it needs to unfold itself and play out as it need be. While I am still looking for larger signs and markers of milestones, I am certainly much more aware of the little things that are often quite as significant.
This sense of grace that I have found within myself, reminds me of the state of grace that Gonzolas spoke about, when he shared that he believes he needs dispensation from the church in order to be in a state of grace, and able to receive the sacrament of communion. Communion is how he develops his relationship with Christ, and he needs grace to do this. This got me thinking about the grace that I could offer myself, to develop a relationship with myself. I believe this will ultimately bring me closer to my beliefs too, irrespective of whether they belong to, or were established from, the Catholic church.

Recently I have noticed a sense of internal permission to now explore areas of interest as I continue to develop spiritually. I feel less guilty about exploring ideas outside of the church, and in fact so doing, has actually made me feel closer to God. It is easier for me to accept my process as just that, and by doing so; I can more readily honor it, and lessen my desire to rush through it.

Recovering Catholics

While the term, ‘state of grace’, caught my ears, so too did the term, ‘recovering Catholic’. Countless times I have heard this expression and it got me to wonder if I fell into this category. If so, what was I recovering from? From simply being a Catholic? From being who I thought I had to be as a Catholic? Or from something else altogether?

Jessica had shared that she felt sorry for me and was angry at the church because of all the guilt it had instilled in me. I however am not angry at the church, and I do not feel sorry for myself at all. I do not feel like a recovering Catholic, and if anything, I am grateful to the church for helping shape who I am today. It if weren’t for the church and my struggles within it, I wouldn’t have had the opportunities to have these conversations
and reflect on what they mean for me. I likely wouldn’t have read the literature I have where I recognized pieces of myself and connected with others who have trod a similar spiritual path.

I am not a recovering Catholic, I am an integrating Catholic. Incubating my Catholic-ness to determine how much of it still fits for me. It will have been with the nourishment of my Catholic cocoon in which I was raised, that I will emerge as a spiritual butterfly, eager and willing to spread my wings and find life outside of the religious world in which I have known it.

Church as Community

To me, the religious world has always meant both the institution, and the social aspect of the church community to. The provision of this community struck me as a common thread when some of my co-researchers shared what they received from the church. Even at times of great frustration with the church there still appeared a desire to be a part of it, because of the sense of belonging it provides. I have mulled over this and although I can’t locate it, I believe there has to be more to this than simply desiring a sense of community. If this were the case, wouldn’t joining a recreational team or book club be enough to satiate that hunger for kinship?

I certainly agree that the church has a way of providing a commonality, perhaps a more significant one than appreciating the same author, or taking pleasure in the same sport. The unity that church provides runs far deeper than these things by providing a common way of seeing and being in the world. As I write this I am aware of a small sense of panic within. How can I find my connection and surround myself with similar others if I am not actively engaged in the church?
I am calmed as I remind myself that similar to Christina, I experience this connection when I’m in nature, and present in God’s creation, and like Tanya, I find it tucked away within the pages of the literature I choose to read. Much like the conversations that have manifested in my life, simply by being open to this topic, so, too, are ways of feeling oneness with others finding ways to encroach upon my life. Again, it has been by opening myself up to question my beliefs that has brought me closer to them.

**Relationships**

Relationships have also been instrumental in bringing me closer to my beliefs. Through conversations with others I am forced out of my head, and prodded to articulate the thoughts that otherwise might swim in my head, unquestioned, unchallenged and unsupported. Again Bakhtin, as cited by Morson and Emerson (1991), speaks to my need for an other by which to help understand myself:

> In order to understand it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding...For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others.

(p. 55)

Speaking with others has encouraged me to formulate my thoughts more clearly and in some cases take a stance on something that I otherwise may not have done if the thought have remained in my head unchallenged. It has also allowed me to find others who are also experiencing spiritual struggles. It has given me insight and different ways
to view things. During her interview Jessica also commented on how questioning her faith and expressing her spiritual struggles has strengthened her relationships with friends and family who are also struggling. It has provided a sense of comradely and taken away a perceived feeling of isolation.

*Conversations and Meaning*

It only seems easy to speak about our experience and knowledge of God and his way in the measure that we insulate our religious speech and theological imagination from the endlessly complex and disturbing world in which that speech finds reference. Religious and theological speech have become so disconnected from the conversations of our culture that we lack the language in which to say what needs to be said simply.

(Lash, 1988, p. 217)

Upon starting this process I did feel that I lacked the language to say what I needed to be said. I still often find that my words are not enough, or that I spend more time explaining my choice of words, than the subject for which they are meant to explain. By hearing the stories of others and sharing my own, I am slowly starting to build a vocabulary to understand and articulate my experiences. This has proved helpful not only in my conversations with others, but also brought about awareness in my own internal conversations.

I am exercising the grace I spoke about earlier as I feel at this point in my story I should have had a huge emotional release, a therapeutic break-through, some sort of a sign to show that this was a therapeutic process for me. Large overt emotions were never really my personality, and I am learning to appreciate the smaller releases, break-
throughs, and connections along the way. I am learning to appreciate the trees for the forest, and most importantly I have accepted that this is a process, one that does not end simply because I am nearing the end of my thesis.

Stopping to Smell the Flowers

I can not easily put my finger on it, but something has shifted. Again I wish to use my yoga therapy training as an example. The day after we held quite a long stretch in our hips I was walking to class and felt something in my hip. Immediately I thought it needed to be stretched, but upon taking a moment to sit with the sensation, I realized it was something quite different. The feeling I was having was not tension that needed to be stretched out, it was space that had been created by being stretched. I had immediately assumed it was the former as it was the more familiar reaction, but because I took a moment to sit with it, I found myself faced with a whole new situation.

This taught me two things. Firstly it taught me the power of sitting with something, being present in my experience, as opposed to running away or trying to control it. This is not necessarily a new concept for me, but this more recent experience really reminded me of the awareness that can come from just allowing something to be as it is. This lends to the second thing that this experience taught me. By sitting with something I realized that it was not as I initially thought it was, but rather something quite the opposite. I had assumed it was the need for stretch as that’s what sensation in my hip had meant in the past, yet really it was the space that had been created by a stretch that I was sensing.

Where else in my life have I been assuming things were the same old and not noticing that in fact they were quite opposite? My spiritual identity struggles have indeed
at times felt like spiritual muscles needing to be stretched and strengthened, yet when I take a moment to reflect, I recognize that I have created more space around my spirituality than I have realized. Though it may be natural for me to think that my struggles indicate that I am still in the process, taking that step back brings the awareness that while I’m still in the process; I am not in the exact same place in the process.

This spiritual space that I have created for myself allows me room to manoeuvre around in my spiritual development as I search for an identity that fits for me. Miraculously, I have come to a place where I am actually alright with this too. The things that I have heard and read in this process have made me more aware of my inner dialogues, and how the different discourses in my life, namely that of the Catholic church, have played a role in how I view my world. The Catholic discourse has lead to a Catholic voice, but it does not have to be exclusively or dominantly my only voice, and it is not my only voice. The space I have created for myself, through my conversations with others and my reading, has allowed room for a spiritual discourse which is giving me a spiritual voice.

By taking my spiritual conversations out of my head and allowing others into them, either by reading or speaking, I have been able to take a step back for reflection. Often times my thoughts can feel like a hamster running on a wheel, going around and around. Hearing or reading the opinion or story of another has been a sort of stick in my wheel, stopping the monotonous roll of my thoughts, and forcing me to sit with something and find out for myself, which line of inner discourse my current thought is coming from.
Stopping to look at my thoughts allows me to question how they fit for me. Fritz Perls (1992) speaks of the term “introjects”, to explain when we take on ideas without first making them fit on a personal level. He uses the analogy of eating to explain this, as when food is not properly chewed, it causes difficulties with digestion. Interestingly, when I began to notice my spiritual struggles, I also noticed I was having difficulties with digestion. Before swallowing something down now, I must first take a moment to see how well it will fit for me, and how readily I can digest it. This is a precaution I must exercise for my nutritional needs, and have recently learned to implement for my spiritual needs too.

So although this is in some regards the end, for me and my spiritual identity, it is really only the beginning. As Bakhtin (Morson, & Emerson, 1991) speaks about the unfinalizability of the word being something that is constantly being negotiated in conversation, the story of my spiritual identity development is also unfinalizable. As I am in constant conversation with my inner discourses and now with others as well, I have come to acknowledge that this process will continue to be one of constant renegotiation, and that I will have to stop to smell the flowers along the way.
CHAPTER 6: CONFIRMATION

All we... have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us, some from our interactions with others. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to honest and intelligent use.

(Miller and Glassner, 2004, p. 138)

The Catholic sacrament of confirmation is one to strengthen the bond between the confirmed and Christ, as well as with the church. At this point in my development I am not sure that my relationship with the church has been strengthened, however I do feel more confirmed in my relationship with myself. When I started this process the guilt of questioning the church impeded how freely I felt I could explore my spiritual identity outside of the church. This however is slowly changing with the more I read, and the more people with whom I speak. Today I feel more confirmed in who I am, and the spiritual identity development process that I am going through. Should that one day lead to feeling more confirmed in the Catholic church? I am not sure. But I am sure that I am open to the journey.

While this has been a meaningful and enlightening process for me, what implications can it have for the world outside of my own? In this concluding chapter I will be discussing how this story has implications of my research for both the counselling and theoretical worlds, as well as sharing what I believe to be some limitations of my work. Finally, I will also end with some suggestions for future research.

In order to complete such a task I must admit that my literary voice is tentative, and my natural inclination is to submerge it in the literature, hiding myself between the
opinions and thoughts of others, only to occasionally nod my head in approval, or shake it in slight disagreement. That might be an appropriate approach if this was a thesis on what the relevant literature has to say about the lived experience of spiritual identity development, however it is not. This is a thesis on my spiritual identity development and how exploring my relationship with the Catholic church has allowed me to make meaning from my spiritual struggles, and in order to achieve this I have had to exercise my literary voice, which continues to be a work-in-progress.

Implications for Counselling

Internal Discourses

Helping clients to find their voice may go beyond showing that it is ok to share their thoughts and feelings. In order to do such things the client must first learn to tease out their voice from the various discourses that are running through their minds. In my writing this took the form of learning to recognize the Catholic discourse, academic discourse, and the discourses of my co-researchers, committee, friends and family. I had to learn how each was influencing me, hindering or helping me as I endeavoured to find my own, personally fitting, unique combination of these discourses.

My own inner dialogue found new meaning when I came to recognize my spiritual struggles as resulting from my different inner discourses. Being able to recognize a particular thought or belief, as being influenced by a particular discourse, was empowering as it kept me from getting overwhelmed. Rather than feeling that my thoughts were too much, I could step back and realize where they were coming from, culturally, which put me in a better position to determine how well they fit for me, or to decide to challenge them.
An example of this is the concept of “good enough”. I have certainly asked myself several times if I am good enough, and Angela expressed this taking it one step further to ask if she is “God good enough”. Where do these questions come from? From Wittgenstein’s (1958) perspective, any criteria, such as the Catholic criteria for “good enough” are located in particular forms of discourse; in this case, Catholic discourse. This small realization was enough for me to step back and reflect on how well these criteria are working for me. Although it didn’t change my internal discourse, it at least brought it to my awareness so I could name it, and I found this to be quite empowering. If the Catholic discourse is but one of many of my discourses for understanding and relating, then perhaps a combination of discourses might offer more personally fitting criteria for “good enough”, rather than letting one discourse dominate.

**Evolution of Language**

Recognizing internal discourses influencing spiritual development is one thing, finding optimal language to express them is another. My own aversion to the word spiritual has stressed the necessity of using the client’s language. Even though my struggles with spirituality were what brought me into counselling eight years ago, if my therapist had used the word spiritual, I likely would have shut down. I suppose this speaks to the difference between understandings that we receive, and those we more actively negotiate and construct, so as to make them more personally fitting. I wasn’t ready to hear that word, it didn’t have meaning for me and wasn’t something that I could relate to. The word spirituality was not in my vocabulary at the time, and it was only six years later when it did creep into my vernacular, and with much hesitation.
Clients may present with spiritual struggles for which they do not yet have language to express, and this can sometimes prove difficult in finding a way to navigate through them. My research reminded that not only is it important to use the clients’ language, but it is also important not to impose mine on them inadvertently. Even though it might take longer, the value of them finding their own words is therapeutic in itself.

Facilitating the process of helping clients to find their language might include expanding on, and exploring a client’s use of metaphors and word choices, and encouraging them to go deeper into exploring the inarticulate or inadequately articulated aspects of their spiritual struggles. For some clients this may even be the first time that they have done so. In my experience this deepening has been assisted by finding creative ways for clients to connect with themselves and their emotions via other modalities. Other than my own experiences with yoga therapy which I shared in Chapter Five, another example that comes to mind is one particular client I worked with who struggled to use language as she had a developmental disability. Using body awareness through yoga poses she was able to recognize her feelings in a different way, and this allowed her to connect with her spirituality in a whole new way.

*Autoethnography in Counselling*

In autoethnographic research, Ellis (2004) reminds us that the focus is less concerned with a presenting problem or finding a solution, and more with gaining insight into the problem. This is a focus on using conversation and written reflection to create critically informed awareness on the dominant cultural ways of being. I believe if we were to look at the counselling process from an autoethnographic lens, this would translate into a process that is ongoing, and as such, the solutions needed, will always be
different, depending on the clients’ changing circumstances and preferences (Strong, Pyle, De Vries, Johnston & Foskett, 2006).

I also believe that this line of counselling would encourage clients to release their dormant researcher and author as I have done in my autoethnographic journey. The role of the counsellor would be to reflect on, and partake in, the discovery of new meanings, and the re-integration of meanings once taken for granted, or newly acquired. For me, this created space around my spiritual identity development; I finally had room for some insight into it. Rather than sitting in it in isolation, I connected with others and with literature, and this cast my experiences in a new light, illuminating new meaning. This too can happen in counselling when counsellors are aware that clients need space to tell their stories in order to find their way through the sometimes dark nights of spiritual struggles.

Fluidity of Meaning

In my experience, I discovered that the more I could sit with my spiritual struggles, the more I could find new meaning in what they were about for me. In time this process became more comfortable, and as it became more familiar, it became less intimidating and overwhelming. “Sitting” meant learning to be ok with the inadequacies of my language and the pain created by not being able to express myself. Having someone to share this with, as I did with my co-researchers, enabled me to find new ways through it. For clients, sitting and reflecting in the presence of another may help to stimulate a richness of language as they develop a clearer picture of their unique lived experiences, continually assigning new meaning as the therapeutic dialogue progresses.
Pastoral Counselling

Speaking specifically to Catholic discourse, I would like to relate the learning of my autoethnographic journey to pastoral counselling. There was an overall feeling that the priests are out of touch with the social struggles of the congregation, and can’t relate to them. Yet somehow they are the ones to whom parishioners confess their sins, and talk to regarding their spiritual and religious concerns.

Catholics may be struggling with issues related to Catholicism, such as the church’s stance on homosexuality, pre-marital sex, and abortion. These are issues articulated in particular ways in the Catholic discourse, and can be related to the development of identity and self-concept. Despite how dismayed Catholics may feel about how the Catholic discourse is influencing their identities, there is still a desire to be a part of something outside of themselves, a spiritual desire to look beyond their present understandings and experiences. Rather than having parishioners turn away from the church in search of this need to connect, pastoral counsellors may do well to create space for parishioners to discuss and explore how they believe the church is affecting their spiritual and identity development. There needs to be a context for these people to openly discuss the things they are uncertain about, and have only tentatively contemplated. This would be a place where they can discuss things with curiosity, where they can find their own meaning, without having to obey the meanings that the church has already packaged for them in the Catholic discourse. In this meaning-making process clients should feel able to speak freely without fear of having the Catholic dogma imposed, or needing to leave the church entirely to do so.

As therapists acquire a more thorough understanding of the identity struggle that
their clients are engaged in, they can join them in the self-authoring challenge, with a more compassionate understanding and skilful hand, to lead them to the safety and security of identity acceptance.

Implications for Theory

I want to re-emphasize that by doing this research my aims were modest. It was never my intent to explain how spiritual identity develops; nor was I interested in reducing people’s private stories to abstract themes, or gauge where they were at in their spiritual development. What my research offers is a narrative understanding of experiences of people, including myself, who have struggled to find their spiritual identity outside of the Catholic church in which they were raised.

Evolving Language with Evolving Spirituality

By looking more rigorously at some of my own experiences I have been able to provide a clearer picture of the processes and dynamics that shape spiritual development. Part of what the outcomes of my search offer is an understanding of the relationship I found between my evolving spiritual development and my evolving language. The change in my language use was twofold; the first of which is how I came to be more comfortable with the word spiritual, despite my initial aversion to it. As I was growing in my spiritual identity development, I became more at ease with using the word spiritual.

Secondly, my language was also affected as I spent more time exploring my spiritual identity and the discourses that were influencing it. Becoming more aware of these discourses allows me to question them and decide for myself how I wish for them to play out, as I learn to take bits and pieces from the various discourses in the creation of a sort of hybrid one that I feel is a better fit for me.
Complementing Stats with Stories

Bibby (2002) was also interested in changes in religion and spirituality, and in 2000 he completed a 25 year longitudinal study to look at the religious experiences and trends of ten thousand adults and ten thousand teenagers across Canada. His results gave clear indication of where Canadians were at in terms of which, if any, church pews they were occupying, as Canadians change churches, and in some cases leave church life altogether. I believe that my work complements studies like Bibby’s, by providing a story to go with the statistics. It is one thing to know how many people are struggling with issues of a spiritual and religious nature; it is another to know what these personal struggles entail. Sharing my personal account of my struggles and successes offers a more comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand.

While quantitative studies such as Bibby’s (2002) provide valuable information, there is also much to be learned by focusing on experiences of how things change, rather than what specifically changes, or by how much. Researchers such as Roehlkepartain and Patel (2006), and Hamilton and Jackson (1998) have suggested using qualitative studies to augment understandings of how spiritual identity develops. More specifically, Hamilton and Jackson even suggested looking at the identity-shaping role of traditional religion in spiritual development and how spiritual identity develops over time.

I believe that my research answers these requests for qualitative information by speaking to the lived experience of spiritual identity development. It even speaks to Hamilton and Jackson’s (1998) suggestion, by explicitly looking at the spiritual development of some Catholics. Further to this, it also provides insight into what it is like for someone to move away from the collective identity of the Catholic religion, and into a
more personal spiritual identity, and particularly in how an individual negotiates various discourses en route.

*Complementing Stage Theory with Story*

Rather than looking at development from the perspective of changing discourses, Fowler (1981) was interested in a stage theory approach to development. Specifically, Fowler wanted to understand how humans conceptualize a Higher Being, and the impact that this has on their establishing values, beliefs, and relationships with others (Fowler & Dell, 2006). From his research, he articulated a faith development model, as a foundation to understand the establishment of personal identity, personal relationships, and the making of personal and cultural meaning. While his work is unarguably comprehensive, it does not provide a picture complete with what the lived experience at each stage would look like. This is where I believe that my work is complementary to Fowler's in that it paints life experience on the canvas of his theoretical stage model.

Limitations of Research

My research is but a chapter of my spiritual development, in the album of my life. It is only a representation of where I was at in the course of my development, at the moment that I wrote it. Even as I write this, I am aware of the changes that have taken place since I first started writing Chapter One. One such change, as I have already shared, is my increased comfort with the word *spiritual*. Secondly, I could not look at the topic from an objective eye, as I am the subject under study. Rather than being able to look at my experiences objectively, I tried to do so with verisimilitude, as I attempted to render my story as realistically and authentically as possible.
I gave up the normal objectivity sought after by psychological researchers in order that I could provide a more meaningful representation of my spiritual development. While I tried to be objective in the writing of my subjective experiences, (hmm, there’s an odd little thought!) I was also aware of my audiences. Even this awareness could have been enough to impact what and how I was writing. I am also sensitive to the fact that my sisters are in their own renegotiations with the Catholic church. If they can so easily be influenced by my choices in trivial things like clothing and food, then it crossed my mind that they might just as easily choose my experience here to be theirs, and I would rather them find their own.

The discourses that I have been speaking about were also running rampantly through my mind throughout the writing process, and there is little doubt that I used them as discursive lenses as I made sense of things and about them. I had to negotiate between saying what I really think and feel, versus being aware of how my committee or my mother might read and interpret it.

A fourth limitation is the generalizability of my research. Again this is just my story, a chapter in the story of one young woman struggling with her spiritual identity and her relationship with the Catholic church. I could not write this story from any other perspective as it then would not have been my story. Just as my experiences were different from those of my co-researchers, so, too, were they different from those of other struggling Catholics. This is what makes us different; this is what makes this story mine.

Recommendations for Future Research

I have already expressed how I believe that research like mine might enhance understanding Fowler’s (1981) stage theory model on faith development. Using a mixed
method of exploration, co-researchers could be quantifiably identified according to where they are at in Fowler’s stages. Qualitative interviews could then thicken understandings of what the lived experience is like at each of the stages. This would then put a story (or stories) to each of the stages; to better explain what movement through the stages may look, and feel like, for those going through spiritual development. I want to emphasize that this is not to assume that everyone’s experience at each of Fowler’s stages will look the same, but it may help further conceptualize faith and spiritual development, by augmenting the research that Fowler has already done.

I have repeatedly shared that this thesis is only a partial account of my spiritual development, as it is on-going. At this point in my story, however, my use of language has changed and my awareness of the influence the Catholic discourses have had on my development has grown. In the beginning of this thesis, I revealed how I often tend not to discuss this topic, as I have found my language and my words, to limit how accurately I can share what my experience has been. Finding literature that speaks to this, such as Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, as well by speaking with co-researchers, I believe I understand my development more, and am finding more ways to discuss it. This encourages me to continue exploring the topic using some of my newfound language and new understanding of the topic. More specifically, I would be interested to look closer at the relationship between, the evolution of language, and the evolution of spiritual development. It would be my intent with this work to identify ways in which counselling could thusly be used to support clients through their spiritual development.

I have also spoken about my newly formed voice, which I am learning can be a combination of the discourses, rather than needing to be dominated by one. Bakhtin
offers us the term *polyphony* to describe this. Future research I would be interested in would entail looking more closely at the process of creating a hybrid of discourses, as people move from having a collective discourse dominate, to creating space for a more personalized combination of discourses. Specific to Catholics renegotiating their spiritual identity, for counselling implications, I would be curious to understand the discourse negotiations Catholics engage in, as they play with, and create a combination of discourses that they find more fitting for articulating their emerging spiritual selves.

**Conclusion-So What Does it all Mean?**

My use of authoethnography provided me the opportunity to not only discover my changing spiritual narrative, but to also exercise my literary vocal cords. This has not been an easy process for me, as I'm sure my supervisor will attest. I have slowly learned to acknowledge my voice and concede that I do have something to say. Perhaps my experiences are more than just that, and can contribute to the theoretical and practical interests of spiritual identity development.

This process taught me to be kinder to myself. I have struggled enough with the rules, regulations and restrictions of the church in order to determine how to be, not to mention my own self-imposed expectations. Using my example of stretching muscles from Chapter Five, I have learned to soften the edges, trading intensity for awareness, and looking for smaller and more subtle signs of change, as I sink more deeply into my spiritual self. It has also included relaxing the borders on my standards of self-expectation, which has created space for me to be more exploratory, and try on new things without fear of guilt or shame.
I feel like I have expanded the limitations of my spiritual identity that were imposed on me by the Catholic discourse, and by my own self-defeating nature. Each day presents new opportunities to flex my new-found wings. By learning to feel ok and stronger in using my own spiritual voice, I hope others can do the same.
References


Berger, L. (2001). Inside out: Narrative autoethnography as a path toward rapport. 


handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence (pp. 34-35).


APPENDIX A: Recruitment Poster

CATHOLICS REQUESTED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

I am a Master's in Science student in the Division of Applied Psychology and am looking for participants for my study.

Criteria for participation:
- Must be over 18 years old
- Must have been raised as a Catholic
- Must have found (or currently find) yourself renegotiating a new relationship with God, outside of the realm of the Church
- And have felt challenged in developing a personally satisfying spiritual identity

Your participation will include:
- A face-to-face interview & brief follow-up.

Benefits of this study include:
- The option of receiving a copy of the final project for your participation
- Contributing your knowledge and understanding regarding spiritual identity development
- Contributing to the betterment and understanding of Catholics who find themselves struggling to establish a more personal relationship with their beliefs

FOR MORE INFORMATION EMAIL: dnjohnst@ucalgary.ca or call...(403) 836-3754
APPENDIX B: Email Recruitment Script

Introduction
I am completing my thesis for a Masters of Science degree in Counselling Psychology in the Division of Applied Psychology at the University of Calgary. Thank you for expressing interest regarding the research project that I am conducting, which has been approved by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. I am interested in looking at the lived experience of individuals who have been raised in the Catholic Church yet are now challenged with forming their own spiritual identity that is separate from the church.

Purpose of the Research
The intention of this research project is to explore the relationship that you might make between psychology and spirituality within the counselling process. As such, I hope that through sharing your experiences with me, we will be able to make connections between spiritual identity and psychological health. The insights gained may help identify themes that others who are further developing their spiritual identity may experience. This can not only lend to new awareness in the realm of psychology and spirituality, but also has the potential to inform the counselling process.

Are you interested in finding out more?

If YES:

What will I be asked to do?
Your participation will entail an audio-taped interview which will last 60-90 minutes and will be conducted face-to-face in a private interview room at the University of Calgary. Before commencing the interview I will provide you with the questions that we will discuss during the interview. Some of these questions will be general while others will be more specific, and all will have the intention of assisting me in learning about your lived experience of spiritual identity formation. I will endeavor to do my best to most accurately transcribe what you share with me during our time together. You will then have the opportunity to verify that my depiction of your narrative is accurate and indicative of your experiences. During this time you will be able to suggest as to what should be added, deleted or changed so as to most accurately capture your experience. This final verification process will require approximately another 60 minutes of your time.

Do I Have to Participate?
Participation is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You may also choose to answer only certain questions in order to self-monitor the extent of your self-disclosure.

What about my privacy?
Participation is entirely anonymous and confidential and as such, your name and any identifying information will be kept private. As the sole researcher of the study only my supervisor, Dr. Tom Strong, and I will have access to your name and contact information,
and your confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Due to the nature of the information discussed in this study, if the research data is subpoenaed by a court of law and if you disclose the physical harm or potential for harm to yourself, children, or another person, I would be legally obliged to disclose this information to the appropriate authorities (e.g., child protection or law enforcement officials).

Please note, if at any point you choose to withdraw from participating, only the information gathered up until the point of your withdrawal will be retained for use in the final write-up of the study.

If you choose to participate I will personally conduct and transcribe (i.e., type out word for word) the audio-taped interviews. Your name will not appear on any transcript or report of the results and any identifying information in your story (e.g., geographic locations, third parties) will be removed. You will be given the option of choosing a pseudonym (i.e., a pen name to refer to you) that will be used in all transcripts and the write-up, and only group information will be summarized for presentations or publications of the results. All data (e.g., audiotapes from the interviews, hard copy of transcripts, computer memory stick) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office, and data stored on my computer will be protected by a password. Data will be stored for five years, at which time it will be permanently erased, shredded, and destroyed.

**What are the risks and benefits of participating?**
This study will invite you to reflect on your lived experience of realizing that the Catholic Church has not been a good fit with your emerging sense of spiritual self, asking how you navigated such an experience to further develop your spiritual identity. This may remind you of some challenging times in your life that have touched you emotionally. While I appreciate and respect the emotional impact of such a process, our time together is not a form of personal counselling. If something we have discussed continues to upset you after your participation, the University of Calgary Counselling Centre offers University of Calgary students three free counselling sessions. In addition, non-students, or those who choose this option, may receive counselling at the Calgary Counselling Centre which will provide fee for service counselling based on a sliding scale.

Personal benefits of your participation may include continual growth and reflection upon the process of spiritual identity formation and psychological well-being. Additionally, your narrative will be recorded in the final write-up of my thesis document (which you will be give the choice of receiving a copy of), as well as potentially in academic and non-academic publications. By your participation you will be contributing to the research and applied community of counselling.

**What is the next step?**
Please find a copy of the Informed Consent form attached. Please read it over and maintain a copy for your reference. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Two copies of the Informed Consent form will be provided to you.
at the time of the face-to-face interview. Both copies will need to be signed and one copy will be for your own reference and the other for me.

Subsequent to this e-mail, I will be in contact to arrange a convenient time for the face-to-face interview. If you have any further questions, please contact me by replying to this e-mail (address is also indicated below) or by phoning (see number below) me.

**If NO:**
I thank you kindly for your consideration and greatly appreciate your time and interest. Any further questions/concerns, or a change in mind about participating, can be directed to me via e-mail (my address is indicated below) or phone (see number below).

Thank you for your kind consideration,

Dawn Johnston
M.Sc. Student, Counselling Psychology
Division of Applied Psychology
University of Calgary
E-mail: dnjohnst@ucalgary.ca
Phone: (403) 836 3754
APPENDIX C: Telephone Recruitment Script

Introduction
Hello, my name is Dawn Johnston and I am completing my thesis for a Masters of Science degree in Counselling Psychology in the Division of Applied Psychology at the University of Calgary. Thank you for expressing interest regarding the research project that I am conducting, which has been approved by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. I am interested in looking at the lived experience of individuals who have been raised in the Catholic Church yet now feel challenged in forming their own spiritual identity that is separate from the church.

Purpose of the Research
The intention of this research project is to explore the relationship that you might make between psychology and spirituality within the counselling process. As such, I hope that through sharing your experiences with me, we might make connections between spiritual identity and psychological health. The insights gained may help identify themes that others who are further developing their spiritual identity may experience. This may not only promote new awarenesses in psychology and spirituality, but also has the potential to inform the counselling process.

Are you interested in finding out more?

If YES:

What will I be asked to do?
Your participation will entail an audio-taped interview which will last 60-90 minutes and will be conducted face-to-face in a private interview room at the University of Calgary. Before commencing the interview I will provide you with the questions that we will discuss during the interview. Some of these questions will be general while others will be more specific, and all will have the intention of assisting me in learning about your lived experience of spiritual identity formation. I will endeavor to do my best to most accurately transcribe what you share with me during our time together. You will then have the opportunity to verify that my depiction of your interview comments is accurate and indicative of your experiences. During this time you will be able to suggest what should be added, deleted or changed so that I can most accurately capture your experience. This final verification process will require approximately a further 60 minutes of your time.

Do I Have to Participate?
Participation is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You may also choose to answer only certain questions in order to self-monitor the extent of your self-disclosure.

What about my privacy?
Participation is entirely anonymous and confidential and as such, your name and any identifying information will be kept private. As the sole researcher of the study only my
supervisor, Dr. Tom Strong, and I will have access to your name and contact information, and your confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Due to the nature of the information discussed in this study, if the research data is subpoenaed by a court of law and if you disclose the physical harm or potential for harm to yourself, children, or another person, I would be legally obliged to disclose this information to the appropriate authorities (e.g., child protection or law enforcement officials).

Please note; if, at any point, you choose to withdraw from participating only information gathered up until the point of your withdrawal will be used in the final write-up of the study.

If you choose to participate I will personally conduct and transcribe (i.e., type out word for word) the audio-taped interviews. Your name will not appear on any transcript or report of the results and any identifying information in your story (e.g., geographic locations, third parties) will be removed. You will be given the option of choosing a pseudonym (i.e., a pen name to refer to you) that will be used in all transcripts and the write-up, and only group information will be summarized for presentations or publications of the results. All data (e.g., audiotapes from the interviews, hard copy of transcripts, computer memory stick) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office, and data stored on my computer will be protected by a password. Data will be stored for five years, at which time it will be permanently erased, shredded, and destroyed.

What are the risks and benefits of participating?

This study will invite you to reflect on your lived experience of realizing that the Catholic Church has not been a good fit with your emerging sense of spiritual self, asking how you navigated such an experience to further develop your spiritual identity. This may remind you of some challenging times in your life that have touched you emotionally. While I appreciate and respect the emotional impact of such a process, our time together is not a form of personal counselling. If something we have discussed continues to upset you after your participation, the University of Calgary Counselling Centre offers University of Calgary students three free counselling sessions. In addition, non-students, or those who choose this option, may receive counselling at the Calgary Counselling Centre which will provide fee for service counselling based on a sliding scale.

Personal benefits of your participation may include continual growth and reflection upon the process of spiritual identity formation and psychological well-being. Additionally, your narrative will be recorded in the final write-up of my thesis document (which you will be given the choice of receiving a copy of), as well as potentially in academic and non-academic publications. By your participation you will be contributing to the research and applied community of counselling.

What is the next step?
I will provide you with a copy of the Informed Consent form. Please read it over and maintain a copy for your reference, and do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Two copies of the Informed Consent form will be provided to you
at the time of the face-to-face interview. Both copies will need to be signed and one copy
will be for your own reference and the other for me.

Subsequent to this phone call, I will be in contact to arrange a convenient time for the
face-to-face interview. If you have any further questions, please contact me by phoning
me at 403-836-3754, or you may email me at dnjohnst@ucalgary.ca. Alternatively you
may contact my supervisor, Dr. Tom Strong at (403) 220-7770, or strongt@ucalgary.ca

If NO:
I thank you kindly for your consideration and greatly appreciate your time and interest.
Any further questions/concerns, or a change in mind about participating, can be directed
to me via e-mail (dnjohnst@ucalgary.ca) or phone (403-836-3754).

Thank you for your kind consideration.
APPENDIX D: Letter of Consent

Name of Student, Faculty, Department, Telephone & E-mail:
Dawn Johnston
M.Sc. Candidate, Counselling Psychology
Division of Applied Psychology
Faculty of Education, University of Calgary
Phone: (403) 836-3754
E-mail: dnjohnst@ucalgary.ca

Name of Supervisor, Faculty, Department, Telephone & E-mail:
Dr. Tom Strong
Associate Professor, Chartered Psychologist, Division of Applied Psychology
Faculty of Education, University of Calgary
2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2N 1N4
Phone: (403) 220-7770
Fax: (403) 282-9244
E-mail: strongt@ucalgary.ca

Title of Project:
Spiritual yearnings: An autoethnographic inquiry

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the study
In this research, I will be exploring the lived experience of spiritual identity development from the standpoint of individuals who have been raised in the Catholic Church and found that it was not a good fit for their spirituality. More specifically, through engaging with you I hope to be able to find out more about the experience of spiritual identity development and the impact such a process has had on your spiritual and psychological well-being. This research will help the field of counselling by providing additional considerations for counsellors when working with clients who struggle with their faith, spirituality and relationship with the church. Your participation in this research will help other Catholics struggling with their relationship with the church and with spirituality create more meaning out their experiences.
What will I be asked to do?
If you choose to participate, you will be partaking in a face-to-face interview in a private room at the University of Calgary. The interview will be 60-90 minutes long, and will be audio-taped. During the interview, I will ask general and specific questions designed to assist me in learning about your lived experience with spiritual identity development. Before the interview, I will provide you with the interview questions we will be discussing during the interview. Subsequent to the interview, you will have the opportunity to read my impression of the interview and the meaning we made of the shared experience. You will be given two weeks to suggest any changes that you feel are necessary to more accurately portray your lived experience of spiritual identity development. Should I not hear back from you within the two week period it will be assumed that you were satisfied with my account of our interview as it is. The follow-up process is estimated to take about another 60 minutes of your time.

Do I have to participate?
Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There is also no consequence if you choose not to participate at all. Moreover, you have the right to answer only certain question(s) in order to manage the extent of your self-disclosure.

What type of personal information will be collected?
Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide demographic information (e.g., your age, gender, etc.). I will ask you questions about your experience with the development of your spirituality and how it has impacted your psychological and spiritual well-being. Prior to the interview, I will give you a copy of this consent form and the questions to be discussed during the interview, and subsequent to the interview, at your convenience, you will be provided with the opportunity to comment and make changes on how your story will be presented in the final write-up.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that applies to you.

I grant permission to be audio-taped during the interview: Yes: ___ No: ___

I would like to receive a copy of the thesis:
Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous:
Yes: ___ No: ___

I give permission to use my real name:
Yes: ___ No: ___

I give permission to be quoted using my real name:
Yes: ___ No: ___
I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: 
Yes: ___ No: ___

Using this pseudonym, I grant permission to be quoted: 
Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself is:

Are there risks or benefits if I participate?
As I am inviting you to reflect on and share your experience of spiritual identity development and how it has related to you psychological and spiritual well-being, parts of our discussion may remind you of challenging times during your life that may affect you emotionally. Although I acknowledge and respect your courage to share your story, the purpose of our time together is not a form of personal counselling. In the event that we have discussed something that you would like to discuss further in counselling, or if you feel emotional distress as a consequence of your participation in the study, you may approach either of the counselling resources listed below:

1. University of Calgary Counselling Centre – Phone (403) 220-5893 (up to three free counselling sessions for University of Calgary students)
2. Calgary Counselling Centre – Phone (403) 265-4980 (sliding fee scale and ongoing counselling service).

Personal benefits from your participation may include continual growth and reflection as you develop your spiritual identity in the process of your own psychological and spiritual well-being. I will cover all your parking costs related to this study. Additionally, your experiences will be anonymously recorded in the final write-up of my thesis document and, potentially, in future academic and non-academic publications. By this, you will have the opportunity to contribute to the field of counselling and as well to the research and community of spiritual and psychological well-being.

What happens to the information I provide?
Participation is completely anonymous and confidential (i.e., your name and other identifying information will remain private). Only my thesis supervisor at the University of Calgary, Dr. Tom Strong, and I will have access to any participant's personal and transcribed information. Your confidentiality will be maintained at all times. However, due to the nature of the information discussed in this study, there are two possible conditions when confidentiality would not exist:

1.) If the research data is subpoenaed by a court of law, and
2.) If you disclose the physical harm or potential for harm to yourself or another person, or the neglect or abuse of children.

In that case, I would be legally obliged to disclose this information to the appropriate authorities (e.g., child protection or law enforcement officials) and I would invite you to join in this process.
Please note, you are free to withdraw your participation at any point in this process (i.e., before or during the audio-taped interview, and before or during your review of my depictions) and only your information gathered up until the point of your withdraw will be retained for use in the final write-up of the study. If you wish to withdraw, you can inform me (phone: (403) 836-3754 or e-mail: dnjohnst@ucalgary.ca) or my supervisor, Dr. Tom Strong (phone: (403) 220-7770 or e-mail: strongt@ucalgary.ca).

If you choose to participate, I will personally conduct the face-to-face interviews, which will be audio-taped and taking place in a private room at the University of Calgary. I will transcribe (i.e., type out word for word) the audio-taped interviews, and your name will not appear on any transcript or report of the results and any identifying information in your story (e.g., geographic locations, third parties) will be removed. Hence, I will respect your confidentiality and anonymity. If you want, you may choose a pseudonym that will be used in reference to you in all transcripts, the final write-up, and future publications or presentations. All data (e.g., audiotapes from the interviews, hard copy of transcripts, computer memory stick, etc.) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office, and data stored on my computer will be protected by a password. Data will be safely stored for five years, at which time it will be permanently erased, shredded, and destroyed.

If you are interested, feel free to arrange a follow-up meeting with me to discuss the results of the study.

**Signatures (written consent)**

Your signature on this form indicates three understandings:

1.) You have understood, to your satisfaction, the information regarding your participation in the research project.
2.) You agree to participate as a research subject.
3.) I may use some of your quotes and stories, without any of your identifying information and with a pseudonym if you choose to select one, in presentations, published articles, and in any other future publications.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so feel free to ask for clarification or for new information throughout your participation.

Participant’s Name: (Please print)  

______________________________

Participant’s Signature: ___________________ Date:  

____________________________
Researcher's Name: (Please print)

__________________________________________________________

Researcher's Signature: __________________________ Date:

________________________________________________________

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Researcher:
Dawn Johnston
M.Sc. Candidate, Counselling Psychology
Division of Applied Psychology
Faculty of Education, University of Calgary
Phone: (403) 836-3754
E-mail: dnjohnst@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor:
Dr. Tom Strong
Associate Professor, Chartered Psychologist, Division of Applied Psychology
Faculty of Education, University of Calgary
2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2N 1N4
Phone: (403) 220-7770
Fax: (403) 282-9244
E-mail: strongt@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant, please contact Bonnie Scherrer, in the Research Services Office, University of Calgary, at (403) 220 3782 or e-mail her at bonnie.scherrer@ucalgary.ca
APPENDIX E: Co-Researchers Overview

The following is a brief overview of my co-researchers. In each case I will be referring to them by a pseudonym of their choice, except for Jessica who had me choose one for her.

Meeting Christina

Christina is a student in her early thirties, who responded to my recruitment poster at the University of Calgary. Her reason for volunteering was that she enjoys helping out where she can. Though soft spoken, it was evident at times that this topic was emotional for her as she shared her story. She appreciated how our discussion provided her the opportunity to reframe some of her experiences and lend a new way to look at things.

Meeting Jessica

Jessica is also a student at the University of Calgary where, in her late twenties, she is finishing up her undergraduate degree. Her initial intent in responding to my recruitment poster was to be able to speak out against the church, proclaiming herself to be a ‘pissed-off Catholic’. At the end of our discussion she became aware of how confusing this topic is for her, as things aren’t as easy to understand as she might have thought.

Meeting Angela

Angela is a soft spoken mother of two, who has already completed her Masters degree and is working as a professional. She was quite passionate and emotional at times as she shared her story and it was evident that she has put thought into her spiritual development as she wrestled with how best to bring her children up with spiritual awareness.
Meeting Tanya

Tanya works full time at a social service agency and is completing her education on the side. She spoke quite factually about her experiences and demonstrated clarity on what she believes them to be about for her.

Meeting Gonzolos

Gonzolos is a father of two in his mid-thirties, and is in the process of completing his Master’s degree. He spoke quite passionately about his experiences, and it was evident that he has put a lot of thought into their meaning for him.
APPENDIX F: Sample Interview Questions

**Precursors:**
Where are you presently at with your relationship with the Catholic Church? What has influenced your current relationship with the Church?

What do you believe sparked (i.e. instigated) your desire for renegotiating your spiritual identity?

What factors do you believe are contributing to the search for your new identity?

Did you feel that who you are (i.e. self-identity) did not coincide with who the Church said you should be?

What were the major life events that influenced you to explore your own spiritual identity outside of your Catholic identity?

What was the defining point or most influential moment in your life that awoke you to the idea of an emerging spiritual identity? (Triggers to signify that something has changed)

**Impact:**
How do the ways you presently see yourself influence how you go about developing your spiritual identity?

What, if any, impact has the emerging sense of (spiritual) self had on your current relationships with others? And with your relationship with your self?

What if any physical symptoms have you experienced that you relate to your emerging sense of spiritual identity?

If you have struggled with issues of self-esteem, or self-worth, depression, guilt, anxiety, and perfectionism – do you relate any of these to factors or developments in your spiritual development?

What, if anything, has been your experience with depression? Might depression have played a role in your process of renegotiating your spiritual identity? If so, how?

What has been your relationship with guilt? Has this relationship been changed upon recognizing your developing sense of spiritual identity?

What has been your involvement in the Catholic Church before starting the quest for a new spiritual identity? Has this changed since you have begun your spiritual identity quest?

What do you see as involved in further developing your spiritual identity?
What has most stood out for you in your spiritual development process so far?

How have your understandings of what it means to be spiritual changed for you?

What else would you like to tell me about the Church, spirituality or other aspects of your own development?