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Turning Points: Women Speak About Their Lives

by

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological hermeneutic study explores how the lives of five women changed as a result of one or more turning points, or change experiences in their lives. The discussion, based on feminist assumptions, questions the prevailing definitions of women's traits. The mislabeling of terms like strength and passivity in relation to women are examined. Relationship, emotionality including anger, and voice are discussed from a feminist perspective. Implications for nursing practice include the importance of being in relationship with clients, of authentically listening, of the ability to look beyond the presumed limitations to aid clients in recovering coping skills and strengths to improve and maintain their optimum level of health.

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Thank you all,

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## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my mother:

Jean Frances Rusk Murray

whose strength, intelligence, compassion, honesty, humor and love for life are the traits I try to emulate and instill in my own children. She taught me the importance of attending to the stories of women and became the catalyst for the journey that has led me here.

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## CHAPTER ONE: COMING TO THE QUESTION

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives.

Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider

I grew up listening to the stories my mother told me about her life. Even when, during my adolescence, I thought I really did not have very much in common with her, when I was fighting for my independence and she was trying to pull me back and keep me safe, I would still listen as she told about her life growing up on the Prairies during the Depression years. Her life seemed somehow exotic to me. As a child growing up in a city, her stories of her life sounded like fiction to me because they were so outside my experiences at that time. My mother described riding in the cutter to school all through the brutally harsh Prairie winters, life in a small town and later on the farm, and how her father had actually run right over her with his Model T Ford when she was four years old, but because the ground was soft, she had survived. I heard about the amazing, funny, sometimes sad escapades of “the Rusk girls”, that is, my mother and her four sisters as they played ball, learned, danced, acted, and fell in and out of love. These stories were the background to my growing up. My mother was beautiful, intelligent, musical, funny, educated, loved my father for 52 years and loved her own children as well as all the children she taught over the span of her career.

I had never realized how important my mother’s stories were to me, how much I longed to hear them, until her terrible final illness robbed her of her memories. I knew I

needed to record anything she could remember in the time she had left, but it only became an exercise in frustration for both of us. Her once sharp wonderful mind would not cooperate. I asked her questions, gave her clues, names, places to try to jog her memory, and sometimes it worked and mostly it did not and I tape recorded everything she could tell me. And occasionally, there was a flash of *her* again, the humor, the strength, the sparkle in her eye.

My mother's life was not extraordinary by most standards. It was the life of a woman of her time and place. Yet, what I would give to be able to hear her voice, listen to her tell me about the summers the young, handsome American dog trainers came to town or how, the first time she spied my father at a dance, she turned to her sister and said, "That's the man I'm going to marry." The stories are in my head now, but they are not complete, the sisters are gone and there is no way I can remember everything. I took her stories for granted while she could tell them, and now I realize how important they are to me and to my own children, because they are our heritage, our history and also the history, in a broader sense, of many of the women of her time.

I have realized the importance of listening to women as they share their stories, their lives. There is so much to learn, to ponder, to be amazed by in this sharing of lives. There are connections between lives in the oddest places, stories of bravery, loss, love, expansion – all in all – the ways women live their lives. We need to know the stories of women. As a woman, I need to share my life stories with others. Our lives matter, our voices need to be heard and acknowledged.

This research project contains the stories of five women who willingly shared with me their lives as they have interpreted them until now. I have reported them factually, and have interpreted them through a feminist lens and through the lens of my own experiences. In this way, I have taken up the challenge that Audre Lorde has thrown down. I have opened up a space for women to be able to tell their lives and for others to be able to examine those lives as well as their own and to recognize how all our lives are affected by the lives of the women around us.

This research grew out of my interest in women and their strengths. I believe that women exhibit strengths in their everyday lives that are not recognized or valued by our culture and society. The ideology of woman as “the weaker sex” has permeated our society even though women have strength. Originally I had planned to speak with women about the strengths they had recognized in themselves within the contexts of their lives and then to discuss how these strengths had impacted their lives.

The generation and interpretation of the research findings were based on hermeneutic phenomenology and feminist assumptions. It was while I was reading feminist writings that I began to realize that something far more basic than non-recognition of women’s strengths was at work. This was and is just a small part of the whole in which women live and function in our society. Women have not only gone unrecognized for their strengths, but also for their very voices. As a rule, we as women are heard less in our society than men are. Considering that women make up approximately half of the world’s population, there is a woefully small percentage of female representation in the upper decision-making echelons of the areas that guide and

govern the course of our lives, that is, religion, government, business and the legal system, although that is changing. Women are finding their voices and are being heard more and more. Women need to be able to recount their lives, their own unique worlds, for every woman lives a different life in a different world, even within the same culture. “Strengths” was my interest. Was it what other women wanted to talk about, what they felt was important to be heard?

From my reading and talking with other women, it seemed to me that women wanted to be heard. I had an opportunity with this research project to create a space for some women to tell their stories, not limiting it to stories about strength, although I thought that may come out as a subtext in the stories that were told. I thought there needed to be a context that would provide a jumping-off place for women; a place to focus their thoughts and begin to reconstruct their experiences. I decided on the concept of “turning points”, that is, those times in a life when a decision taken, a word spoken, an action carried out, can alter the course of a life.

### **Contextualizing the Landscape**

#### **Situatedness of women**

Women, like men, occupy a certain niche in our cultures. Like children, women have been situated in a place that is marginalized and thus oppressed in relation to the standard by which all in our culture are compared, that is, “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian and financially secure” (Lorde, 1984a, p.116). Women tend to view and act in their world according to how they find themselves situated within it. But

how have women, who make up approximately one half of the world's population, come to be situated in this way?

Butler (1990) refers to both Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty when she theorizes that to be a woman is not to be confused with the biological fact of being female. Rather, she states that "woman" is "... an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts... the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 270). Throughout time, as the acts are performed repeatedly, society, including the actors themselves, come to believe the acts as true. These acts are shaped not only in time, but "conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention" (Butler, p. 272). Gender is constructed in this way because there is an understanding within the ruling class of the culture that this is the way to understand the world and to insure a continuity of their world. The dominant class has the power to make its ideas of how things should be into the way things are seen as right or valid in the context of the culture. Ceci (2000) writes of power as privileging a certain view in our hierarchical society, and refers to the idea that "this privileging may have less to do with any internal or inherent criteria of truthfulness or validity and more to do with the power of those positioned in particular ways to enforce or impose their particular perspectives even in the presence of other equally plausible understandings" (p. 70). Some of the effects of this power are blatant, while other effects may be quite subtle. But this dominant narrative has led women to be seen as "other than" men because the performances prescribed and enforced by society are very different. To be viewed as "other" is to be

viewed as “less than” in our culture, as not just “different from” but “deviant” (Lorde, 1984a, p.116) with all the attendant negative connotations (also prescribed by the dominant narrative).

So women find themselves situated in a world as not only different but deviant from the dominant class. The dominant class justifies the oppression of women because they are “less than” and thus their lives, their worlds, their words by definition hold less importance. Althusser (1971) and Lorde (1984a) both write of the need of the dominant class to keep a marginalized group like women (and children) oppressed in order to maintain the “profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people” (Lorde, p.115). Women who, as marginalized people, have been bludgeoned with the ideologies of the dominant narrative, and who shoulder much of the responsibility for nurturing and guiding the children, are in a perfect position to carry on these dominant narratives in the form of training children to perceive the world in this same way. Thus, women are used to produce the next generation of workers needed for the profit economy, and at the same time to reproduce the ideologies that are at work to keep women oppressed. This whole scenario is so dominant, it becomes invisible to detection, “just the way things are”.

The patriarchy functions in non-profit non-capitalist economies as well, for example, women who are told by their socialist government how many children they may have, or women living in a subsistence based culture where roles are clearly delineated, women work as hard as men to keep the community fed and growing but where men make the decisions for the community. One needs to take the time to consciously consider the overwhelming power of these dominant ideologies to shape our actions and

our perceptions of the world, because we are so immersed in the messages that come from them.

Women are each situated differently within their worlds. No two women will perceive their worlds the same, because no two women, due to their personal history, culture, relationships, are able to see the world in precisely the same way. People see or “experience” what they are able or allowed to. Thus, white feminist thought has tended, in the past, to place all women in the situation of the oppressed based only on gender. This led to a “universal supposition of cultural experience [which ran] the risk of rendering visible a category [of women] which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women” (Butler, p. 274). White feminists were working under the dominant ideologies that said some people are more deviant than others, for example, non-whites. They were also so immersed in this ideology, they may not have recognized it as such. They allowed themselves the luxury of ignoring the privileges being white brought and defined “women” in terms of their own experiences (Lorde, p.117). Feminists of color like Barbee (1994) wrote about the way middle-class white feminists viewed “women’s experiences” through a white female lens and so “diminish or trivialize” (p. 497) the experiences of black women.

Ceci notes, “Our circumstances and situatedness as knowers affects the nature of our experiences, what we take as fact, what we consider to be normal or natural, and this changes over time and across society” (p. 66). White feminist thought has started to recognize the situated-ness of women who live under multiple layers of oppression, as well as recognizing their own situated-ness. It is becoming more apparent to white

feminists that there is not one “woman’s experience”. The “pretense of homogeneity” written about by Lorde is giving way to a recognition of the different ways race, sexual orientation, class, age, disability, education, marital status and various other forms of marginalization impact the lives of women.

### **Female embodiment**

Women live in a world of multiple realities. Gadow (1994) discusses the narrative of female embodiment that makes women perceive their bodies as “things” or objects at the same time they perceive them as capacity when she writes, “Woman is never free of an awareness of her body, never able to transcend it fully, live it unconsciously. ... the body’s ‘witness’ is more fundamental than being looked at by the other. It is a watching oneself, a watching out, a carefulness” (p. 297). These multiple realities tend to shape and guide how we live our lives. There is a complexity that needs to be attended to if women are to survive. This complexity of being treated and viewed as a “thing” may translate into a “deep inner sense that there must be something wrong and bad about oneself” (Baker Miller, 1986, p. 59) and if one has this perception that she is bad or wrong, then she may believe she deserves to be treated badly. Baker Miller writes that the result of being treated like an object is “to be threatened with psychic annihilation” (p. 59). This destructive way of thinking is then brought into relationships with others, and in an especially destructive way into the man/woman relationship. If the dominant group in our culture, the lawmakers, the religious and business leaders are telling women they are evil or treating them as objects, it may be difficult for some women to perceive themselves in any other way. If a woman is perceived as an object, then it is permissible in the minds of

some that she be sexually assaulted, beaten or humiliated in other ways. Until a few years ago, it was permissible in court in Canada to publicly display every aspect of the past sexual life of a rape victim, but to never discuss the past of the alleged rapist for fear that “he might not get a fair trial”. Women are admonished from earliest days to dress modestly or else they will be seen as “asking for” sexual advances to be made whether they want them or not. Women themselves know the danger of walking down dark streets and some take the precaution of carrying whistles or cans of mace. Women take self defense classes to protect themselves and come together to expose these dangers by holding “Take back the night” walks. If only women could protect themselves by staying out of dark isolated areas. But women are treated as objects in the workplace, in school and at home as well. In fact, in discussing the vulnerability of women, Gadow (1994) quotes an eloquent unnamed woman, “...you practice pulling the air over you like a blanket...you have to walk like Zen himself, walk and not walk, you are a master in the urban Olympics for girls, an athlete of girlish survival” (p.297).

### **Ideologies and the ruling narrative**

It is difficult to consider language and the attainment of voice without considering ideology and the way certain ideologies embedded in our society are responsible for the attempts to silence women. Before I discuss some of those ideologies it would be worthwhile to consider what an ideology is, how it can control the way people see their world, and the effects of this contrived and controlled view on how we live our lives.

Griffin (1982) describes ideology as “the desire to control reality with the idea and to describe reality as always predictable” (p. 279). Through ideology, the concept of

“the other” develops because ideology always needs “a symbol and a scapegoat for the ideologist’s own denied knowledge that this ideology is not more real than reality and must bow to contradictory natural evidence” (p. 278). Any theory or way of thinking can become an ideology when it goes from being a liberating idea (from bonds of existing repressive ideologies) to being another oppressive thing that “denies any truth that does not fit into its scheme” (p. 280). Ideology “attempts to discipline real people, to remake natural beings after its own image. All that it fails to explain, it records as dangerous. All that makes it question, it regards as its enemy. ... slowly it builds a prison for the mind” (p. 280). These are the effects of ideology. And because women are defined by men as having “all those qualities which the masculine mind splits off from itself” (p. 291) those very qualities come to be seen as “inferior or suspect” (p. 291). Difference is misnamed deviance. Audre Lorde (1984a) writes that in our society, we “respond to the human differences between us in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate” (p.115). Because the experiences, the lives of women are seen in the dominant narrative as subordinate to those of men, the dominant discourse upheld by men is that, among other things, women’s stories, their lives, are not really worthy of being told. Women’s stories are often dismissed, seen as not valid, except, to some extent, by other women and some men. Women, like children, should be seen and not heard.

### **Power of language**

Scott (1992) writes that there is no separation between “experience” and language because people “are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t

happen outside established meanings)... discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment" (p. 34).

Language directs our experiences. In fact, without language there is no experience because there is no way to understand it as experience. Language is more than just words strung together into phrases. Language is gestures, inflections, and things left unsaid. Language creates ideologies. It can be used to create, justify and normalize oppression of various groups, or to create a new awareness of the situated-ness of people and become a vehicle for emancipation.

Language as an enforcer of oppression is used to remind people of their places in society. People may come to accept that how the dominant discourse attempts to define and place them in society is valid. As women, we grow up listening to ourselves being used as the comparison for something shameful, something less than, something to be changed if only it was possible. What a terrible insult and dismissal it is in our culture to be told "You run like a girl" or "You throw like a girl". Language is not power neutral. It carries a power that is all-encompassing since it is the shaper of experience.

Women have been on the receiving end of language used as a blunt instrument. How many derogatory terms have been substituted for the word "woman"? Is it any wonder that some women have come to accept these terms as acceptable ways to refer to other women? We do it without considering the ideology that dictates to us as women the "proper" way to look, to act, to "be" as women. Gender needs to be performed properly, that is, according to the dominant narratives that tell us what is expected from us. These

expectations are transmitted through language, controlled by the male dominant class (Butler, 1990; Scott, 1992). Women's voices, views and needs are attended to less than those of men, by the patriarchy we live under.

However, another narrative is beginning to influence our society, and that narrative is coming from feminist thought. Feminist thought is in reality not one thought but many philosophical stances. These different stances share some commonalities. Feminist thought in general values women and the experiences, ideas and needs of women. Feminist thought recognizes that women live under layers of oppression held in place by the ideologies, structures and interpersonal relationships within society. Feminist thought encourages women to become vocal, to make our voices heard in order to bring about the social changes that will liberate women from oppression (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 17). Women are successfully making their voices heard. Women's literature and music have developed a large following of men and women. Unions, including nursing unions, have played a large role in clearing a space for women who work outside the home to make their concerns regarding working conditions, wages and sexual harassment and violence in the workplace heard and, to some extent, addressed. Many professional women are bringing feminist thought into their professions and passing it on to their students, clients or co-workers. These positive developments are heartening.

In every era there have been women who have achieved positions of power not only over other women (Mother Superiors of the convents) but over whole populations as ruling monarchs. Women have been able to inherit property (although until quite recently in historical terms, usually only because there were no sons in the family to inherit the

property). There have been tales down through history of great warriors like Boudica, the British queen who fought against the Romans, or the Amazon warriors (Anderson & Zinsser, 2000). Many women declared saints have had great influence on Western religions. There have been well-educated women, women of great wealth, and independent women in every century. Today, women are to be found in almost every field of endeavor, and affirmative action has opened the doors of many disciplines previously under-represented by women. Women politicians are being elected and once elected, seem to get re-elected as often as male politicians do (Carstairs, 2001). Nursing has been recognized as a profession, with a research based body of nursing science. With every generation that passes, it seemingly becomes easier for women to access wealth, power and education on their own terms, not as accessories to powerful, wealthy or educated men.

Yes, women do have agency. Women and men are recognizing how destructive the discrimination and oppression perpetrated by the patriarchy is on all who it considers subordinate. Some women and minorities, and also some men have worked and fought energetically to name the injustices they have endured and perceived, to re-write the laws that condone or legislate discrimination, to call to account those who have and who still are exploiting the “weaker”, “the other”. In the process, many women and men gain from these efforts. More people are increasingly aware of how the dominant discourses we all live under work to keep women and minorities in submissive roles. Women watch the media for examples of racist sexist advertising and organize campaigns to bring it to the

attention of those who presumably should want to stop it. Women keep trying every day to hold the gains we have made, and to keep the process going.

However, women's bodies are still used by advertisers to sell everything from automotive parts to zero gravity boots. Most of the senior officers in most public and private organizations are still men (Davis, 1995, p. 20). The makers of some music videos think an appropriate image for young men and women to be watching is the one that has semi-nude women rubbing up against the male singer, and the words to the music full of violence against women. Women are mostly still paid less than men for doing the same job and when both come home from their full-time jobs, the woman is still usually doing the majority of the housework and childcare. Politics remains a man's game where a female politician still may run the risk of being publicly judged more on how her voice sounds than on how she represents her constituents (Carstairs, 2001). It is apparent that some advertisers still believe the adage that "sex sells", and even though the images portrayed in the media can be breathtakingly misogynist, think it is worth it, and that is the point. To sell a product is to make money – the prime directive of business in the patriarchy. Could this be a manifestation of the backlash against the feminist movement that is so well documented by Faludi (1991)? Or are these examples of the metaphor of society as an ocean liner – "cumbersome, requiring great distances to slow down and long stretches of time in which to turn around" (Howard, 2001)?

It may seem that women have made great strides toward equality, and in some cases, this may be perceived as true. Yet I cannot help thinking that the road ahead of women is long, hard and even dangerous. This struggle is complicated by the tension

between the many different theories in feminist thought. Do women want to be treated as equals to men or do women want our differences validated as ways of being in the world that are just as necessary as the ways men find themselves in the world? On the other hand, are the ways men are in the world necessarily valid, and are the ways women are, necessarily all desirable? What does the patriarchy lose if women's differences cease to be defined as weaknesses, and what do women gain?

Women are laboring under various layers of oppression. Paradoxically, women who recognize the effects of the patriarchy cannot help but be influenced by it and are also complicit in it, something women also can recognize. When a person has grown up in a system that is all-pervasive, and has been for generations before her, there will be times when she may forget to be as vigilant in her fight against this system, may become disheartened by the magnitude of the task or even exhausted by the scale of injustice that the feminist movement is naming. In their study of women who had chosen to terminate a pregnancy, McIntyre, Anderson & McDonald (2001) discussed how women can be complicit with the patriarchy in maintaining ideological beliefs that are designed to keep women submissive. The authors wrote, "The women spoke of tension developing as they recognized their own participation in the dominant narratives, and even their own complicity in the judging of women who choose abortion" (p. 61).

And there is that silencing that women may be feeling today, coming, ironically, from other women. It may have become politically incorrect for women to criticize other women. Atwood (2001), discussing how some women writers are treated by other women in positions of power, is actually describing a kind of reverse oppression. Atwood writes

that if a writer dares to write anything that “the right-thinking elite” in the feminist movement decides does not conform to its “batch of self-righteous rules and regulations”, she finds herself “worked over – critically, professionally or personally” (p. 147), resulting in women writers who are so afraid of writing anything that may be construed as anti-Woman that they stop writing anything. Atwood is a long-time feminist. She is a strong supporter of women’s rights. She is not afraid to speak out against injustice. She is speaking out against what she calls “the fear that dares not speak its name... [the] fear of other women” (p. 148). Atwood writes, “Does it make sense to silence women in the name of Woman? We can’t afford this silencing, or this fear” (p. 148). This is an example of postmodern feminist thought that Miller (1997) describes, among other things, as one that does “not deny the existence of male dominance and oppression of women in a variety of situations [but also allows] for the possibility that women can exert power over other women, men and children” (p. 148). She quotes hooks who challenges “the simplistic notion that man is always the enemy and that woman is always virtuous” (p. 148).

### **My Own Context: Assumptions**

I came to this research proposal with a set of assumptions. As I researched this topic, I detected a shift in my assumptions on the topic of “voice” and women. I became much more positive and hopeful about the ability of women to make their thoughts known, find a conduit for their creativity to be expressed and to make spaces for other women to do the same. I think this newfound optimism is evident in the following assumptions.

I assume that everyone has experienced a time or event in their lives that has affected or changed in some way the way they live the rest of their lives. These events can be dramatic or seemingly inconsequential, happy or sad, worked toward or happened upon by chance.

I assume that there are women who would like to share the experience of a turning point, to have it recognized, to discuss it with another interested party and to explore the resulting life changes in a respectful and accepting manner.

I assume that these turning point experiences may involve a demonstration of the discovery or the employment of strength by the women experiencing them.

I assume that these turning points may or may not have been recognized as such at the time they were happening. It may have taken the perspective of time for the women to see more clearly the results of the events taking place.

I assume that women, whatever their station in life, have wonderful ideas, great creativity, compassion, and an overriding need to be and stay in relationship with others.

I assume that women, whatever their station in life, have a need to put forward their thoughts and ideas, and to have these ideas received in a thoughtful, respectful and even welcoming manner.

I assume that there have been many obstacles put in the way of these women in expressing their ideas and creativity, obstacles put there by the dominant culture in the form of trivializing, ignoring or reacting with hostility to these ideas. This has led to hesitancy on the part of many women in expressing themselves, especially when they know there will be males in the audience.

I assume that increasingly, women are striving successfully to find their voices, using all sorts of different methods to make themselves heard, including methods that may not at first be recognized as such.

I assume that as women become more aware of the inequities in society, and accept that they do have these ideas and abilities, we will be speaking out more and more, to every member of the culture.

I assume that women need to work hard to make these opportunities available and desirable to younger women and girls so that the next generation of women does not have to struggle quite so hard for quite so long to find their voices.

I assume there are some very hopeful signs that younger women are indeed finding their own voices. For example women songwriters and singers are singing about the strength of women, writers focus on women's strengths, artists use female forms and symbolism in their work, as well as women who extol and personify the strength of women in all walks of life.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Feminist Thought: Changing the Context

As I reviewed the literature I was struck by the amount of feminist writings relating to language, and also by the differences of opinion evident in the writings. Again I was reminded of the diversity of the feminist experience. However, I am guided by Cameron (1998) who, in an elegant introduction to her text, The Feminist Critique of Language, discusses three main areas of the language question. The first is speech and silence, which includes discussions on the processes and practices in patriarchal societies that work to keep women's voices from being listened to by the patriarchy. Different meanings of silence are also discussed. The second general area considers how sexist language and discourse represent gender and women to the users and learners of the language. The third area deals with the actual differences in the ways the genders use language in their speech. Are the different ways of speaking due to belonging to a different culture (male or female), to differences of power, is language something that is part of the "performance" of gender?

These categories are presented as separate but the discussions for the most part are interconnected. Although my topic may, at first glance, seem more involved with the question of speech and silence, all the readings I present here inform my question.

In her classic, A Room of One's Own, (1928, 1957), and in the essay "Women and Fiction" (1929, 1998), Virginia Woolf interprets conditions, both physical and psychological, that kept women's voices from being heard until the eighteenth century. Until that time, women were considered as chattel by their families, to do with as was

seen fit. They tended to be married against their will to men they did not choose, often for political and/or financial considerations. They were excluded from most of the affairs of the world, "...save that which could be met with in a middle-class drawing room" (1998, p. 49) or in the hovel they called home. Women had many children and spent their time ministering to the needs of others. In fact, she quotes Florence Nightingale who wrote that "women never have a half hour...that they can call their own" (1957, p. 70). It is her opinion that in order to write, the writer has a few essential needs including some education, some leisure time, some money of her own and a room to write in, preferably with a lock on the door. These things provide the physical environment conducive to creativity, and also a psychological advantage to a woman who writes. Woolf wrote about the advantages of having an annual fixed income of her own, "Indeed...it is remarkable... what a change of temper a fixed income will bring about.... I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me" (1957, p. 38). This was in response to her observation of the "ridicule, the censure, the assurance of inferiority in one form or another which were lavished upon women who practiced an art..." (1998, p. 50). Woolf saw that a woman needed to overcome the trivialization of women's writing by men of the time because it did not deal with "male" issues like war or sports. She also thought that women writers had no tradition, no guides to how to begin the writing process, and that works by men were not appropriate because "...the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use" (1989, p. 50).

Woolf was a middle-class white privileged educated woman who viewed these obstacles to writing for publication through the lens of privilege. Many women writers have successfully written under circumstances equal to or worse than the ones discussed by Woolf as major obstacles. Think of Anne Frank who wrote her beautiful diary living in an attic, with no space of her own, little in the way of writing materials, no privacy, no way to gain knowledge of the outside world and always under the threat of discovery and death at the hands of the Nazis.

In her essay, "Age, race, class and sex: women redefining difference (1984a) Audre Lorde seems to be giving a rebuttal to Woolf while also agreeing with some of her views. It is clear in Woolf's writing that she is talking about white English women and writing. Lorde describes the failure of white feminists, even in the time she is writing, to understand that oppression of women happens on many levels, and different women experience oppression differently. Educated, white middle-class financially secure women (an apt description of Woolf herself) have neither the right nor the ability to speak for all women. The question of women writing poetry is examined in this essay, almost as a response to Woolf. Woolf (1957) wrote that although "the original impulse [of women writers] was to poetry" (p. 69), "it is the poetry that is still denied outlet" (p. 80) because, of all the forms of writing, it is the one that needs the most sustained effort and thought. However, Lorde takes a different view, stating that "poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women" (p.116) because it is the most economical. "It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical

labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper” (p.116).

Lorde also discusses the differences in what is written about by different women. “Black women’s literature is full of the pain of frequent assault, not only by a racist patriarchy, but also by Black men” (p.120). Black women writers are speaking about the violence against Black women and children that Lorde (1984a) describes as “a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured” (p.120). Morrison (1987, 1994), describes the violence and assaults perpetrated on Black women and children by both White and Black people in heart-wrenching detail. This is significant because on one level, Black men and women have been brutally oppressed by White men and women, leading to a feeling in the Black community of men and women standing shoulder to shoulder to fight the oppression. When a Black woman then goes against this “unity” to expose the violence against Black women perpetrated by Black men within the community, this is misnamed as betrayal of her own people - another way of “misnaming” with the aim and result of keeping women silent.

Other women of color have also described the abuse they and their sisters have endured. Johnson (1998) writes of the horrible sexual, physical and emotional abuse perpetrated against her, not only by strangers, but by men in her own family. As a North American aboriginal woman, she also exposes the violence within her own community. Cameron (1981, 1987) also writes about the abuse North American aboriginal women have encountered.

Eagleton (1996) writes of misnaming and of silencing of the voices of women. She contends that there are many interrelated determinants that operate to silence women, not in the way of being incapable of speaking the language, but in ways that cause women to feel hesitant and lacking in confidence about speaking out. Ironically, language is one of those determinants because patriarchal power in our society rests in the language of that power, the language of religion, business, the judicial system and the media, areas all controlled by powerful men. Eagleton cites not only gender but differences in class, race, sexual orientation, status, financial resources, age and national identity that echo the concept of the layering of oppression discussed by Alcoff (1999), Barbee (1994) and Lorde (1984a).

Eagleton writes, "The obverse of the debate about silence is feminism's strong exhortation to women to speak, to write, to claim language and use it for their own purposes are aims high on any feminist agenda. Women, as all oppressed groups, find liberation intimately linked with language" (p. 17).

When women begin to claim language and to name the wrongs that have oppressed them, that oppression may begin to be addressed. That is the subtext of Fiore and Elasser's (1982) article which chronicles the liberatory journey of a group of Bahamian women enrolled in an English literacy class. However, this was to be no ordinary language course. It had been designed by a group including the two authors as a vehicle to enable the students to not only "master the intricacies of the writing process" but "to be able to use writing as a means of intervening in their own social environment" (Fiore et al. p. 116). As the class progressed, the women began to look outside their own

experiences to the larger social context they shared with other women on their island. They identified marriage as an institution they wanted to understand more fully, from other perspectives, because they saw marriage in the Bahamas as unequal and unfair and through their reading and discussions realized other women did not experience marriage as they did. By the end of the class, the women had taken control of their learning. And, they had written an open letter to the men of the Bahamas outlining their newfound understanding of marriage and stating how they wanted to see the institution of marriage change in the Bahamas. They had found their voice with the help of a supportive teacher and their own initiative.

Women I have spoken with are divided in their views on the appropriateness of the teacher promoting the initiative by the Bahamian women students described in the article by Fiore et al (1982). While some women think this initiative is an important step for the Bahamian women to take in making their voices heard within their society, other women believe that by speaking out against the injustices they saw, the women in the literacy class were putting themselves at risk, possibly in physical danger from men who might beat them or divorce them, and that the risk may far outweigh any improvements the Bahamian women may hope for as a result of their efforts.

Lorde (1984b) takes direct aim at the idea that women who speak out about injustice are in danger and so should keep quiet. In this essay, composed during a time of great fear about a breast cancer scare, Lorde writes that she has realized that staying silent will not protect women from harm. Women suffer, are vulnerable and afraid whether we speak out about injustices or not. Women stay silent for “fear of contempt, of censure, of

some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation” (p. 42). By speaking out, we make ourselves visible, an act of self-revelation that “always seems fraught with danger” (p. 42). But it is that very visibility that is also women’s greatest source of strength, and if we stay silent, we will still be just as afraid. Lorde writes about reclaiming the language that has been used against women, to transform silence into language and exhorts women to “establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation” (p. 43). By breaking the silences, women can break down the barriers that separate us, can learn to live with the fear and vulnerability that visibility brings, and so transform our silences into actions. Lorde declares, “For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (p. 44).

Berman, McKenna, Arnold, Taylor & MacQuarrie (2000) , the authors of a disturbing study on the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence perpetrated against “the girl child” and female adolescents, found that in many cases, the harassment itself is mis-labeled as “teasing”, and that when girls try to report it, often they are the ones who are punished. The girls in this study generally thought that “there were no consequences for the perpetrators” (p. 40) of the sexual harassment. When violence like this is ignored by the school, and when the media is full of images of violence and sexual harassment against women and girls, the violence becomes normalized and “girls’ experiences become trivialized, their sense of confidence and safety undermined and the institutionalization of male domination of women is perpetuated. The message conveyed

repeatedly is that sexual harassment is acceptable” (pp. 42-43). Consequently, girls find themselves being silenced by family, schools and society. Yet some girls kept on reporting the boys, fighting them off. As one girl in the study asked, “So we get messages from teachers that we should ignore when they do this... but what are you supposed to do, just sit there and let it happen” (p. 40)? The authors advocate the proper naming of violence and sexual harassment against girls and women, not the mis-labeling of the notion of “boys will be boys”, because “without the explicit naming and defining of men’s sexual violence, gendered violence remains normalized” (p. 44). Girls need to have access to health education programs that recognize “gender as a central dimension of self-esteem... that address how girls are diminished in a society that profoundly devalues female attributes” (p. 44). Girls need to be encouraged to speak out about their experiences and hear their truths. They need to feel that they are being heard, that sexual harassment /violence is not acceptable and that they will be supported by society as they name it and recognize it for what it is, what the authors call one of the primary weapons of the male dominance.

Gilligan (1982, 1993) discusses the topic of women being able to find their voices from a psychological viewpoint. Gilligan’s research on women’s moral development seems to suggest that, contrary to the opinions on moral development expressed by Kohlberg (cited in Balk, 1995), women were not “stuck” at some less developed stage of moral development in relation to men. Gilligan’s studies suggested that women followed a different path to moral judgment based on identity formation in adolescence and adulthood. Kohlberg had studied college-aged males and then generalized his findings to

women, concluding that women's moral development stopped at a lower stage, while men continued to "progress" in their development of moral judgment. This is only one of the many psychological theories still taught today "in which men's experience stands for all of human experience – theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women's voices" (p. xiii).

Gilligan discusses how her research into the development of moral judgment in women has allowed her to better understand how our society attempts to keep women silent, and how women have been affected by these measures. Gilligan divides the forces that silence women into two broad categories. The first is the conflict women may feel regarding relationship and how voice may affect relationship, a concept highly valued by women. She describes this as the "internal voice" that tells women it would be "selfish" to have a voice in relationships, and maybe a woman does not really know what she wants, and probably her experiences are not a reliable guide when it comes to decision-making. If a woman has a voice in relationships, that voice may alienate the ones she wants to be in relationship with, "carrying with it the threat of abandonment or retaliation" (p. ix). Therefore, it is probably a better idea for a woman to hold her tongue, "give up their voices and keep the peace" (p. x) in "painful or difficult situations" (p. x). This in turn perpetuates a "male-voiced civilization and an order of living that is founded on disconnection from women" (p. xi).

Gilligan also writes about the choice to speak that many women have made versus the choice to dissociate ourselves as women from what we say or feel, often motivated by a concern for the feelings of others, or by the fear of dismissal, denigration or

punishment. The process of women finding a voice has highlighted the different ways men and women approach human relations.

Aptheker (1989) and Colwill (2001) illustrate the many ways women have indeed been able to find their voices. Not only are literature and poetry explored, but other (possibly) overlooked methods such as painting, quilting, music, and union organizing are reviewed in terms of women being heard. Aptheker's fascinating discussion on the art of quilting reveals not only a device for creative expression for women who often had no other materials with which to express themselves. Quilting, seemingly the most domestic of activities, has the potential for becoming an actual subversive activity as women come together on a project, discuss their lives, laugh, plan or mourn together. Witness the famous AIDS quilt that forced us to recognize that real men, women and children were dying by identifying and individualizing those that the quilt memorialized.

For me, the most beautiful illustration of this subversive potential is the example of the Amish women. Amish women are forbidden by the elders (men) of their society from using colorful fabrics in the construction of their quilts. They have become skilled in the use of shading and different beautiful forms of stitchery in their quilts. Even these pious women, the most traditional of the traditional, have found a way around the edicts of men to express their creativity. Aptheker and Colwill find strength, creativity and self-expression in women, and I find this very hopeful and affirming for women.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The main purpose of this project was to honor women's experiences, the lives we all live. I wanted to place women at the centre, to open up a space for each woman to be

able to say what it is like to be her, to live her life, to see the world through her eyes. In turn, as I pondered and wrote about each woman's experience, and about my own life, I hoped to recognize and show how each woman's experience can touch the experience of other women including myself. While we are separate women, we are also intimately connected in ways that speaking out would illuminate. I made no attempt to generalize the experiences of all women from the lives of these particular women, but that is not the point of hermeneutic research. "The point is simply to know the attributes, tensions, dimensions, depths of the connection; to reconnoiter and step carefully from there"(Aptheker, p. 28-29), to "evoke in readers a new way of understanding themselves and the lives they are living... understanding who we are differently, more deeply, more richly"(Jardine, p. 50).

I used the concept of "turning points" as a vehicle to begin the discussion, a starting place for women to focus on. This was the "jumping off" place for women to review the events of their lives and to make some sense of how we have come to the place we inhabit now. I wanted the women to tell me about how they and their lives had changed from the turning points, or life transitions they had experienced. Did they think these turning points had transformed them in a positive way, or not? Did they think that they had learned lessons from these events? Did they feel somehow different in the time following the transition experience, and if so, how? I suppose I was looking for growth, increases in wisdom, in strength of spirit because I needed to believe that if the transitions were hard ones, there was some purpose to them. I do not know what I expected of women who had experienced happy or gentle transitions. I was at a place in my own life

where turning points were only hard and unhappy, fearful or daunting. That was the lens I was looking through when I started the research. I wanted to see the turning points make a positive change in the lives of the women I would converse with because I needed to believe in a positive outcome in my own life.

As I listened to and pondered the data, I wanted to learn more about the area of language and how it impacts women. At that time, my study of this topic was (and still is) at a beginning. Many authors are starting to write about language and feminism, from a variety of perspectives. I am not a linguist. I do not have the background to discuss the debate between linguists and sociolinguists about how language is built to be oppressive, or indeed, even to comment on the actual debate itself. That is better left to linguists like Spender (1998) or Black & Coward (1998).

I consider myself a feminist. In doing the literature review for this study, I realized what a wealth of reading awaits me in this area. The more I read and discuss, the more I see there is to read, to discuss, to learn and also to unlearn. The same issue raises its head when it comes to writing. Everything is so interrelated it is hard to know where to start and where to stop. I have realized, as David Smith (1992) writes, "... we live within a living web of meaning, not in a static linguistic museum. It becomes impossible to view the world confidently, arbitrarily, in terms of the old categories of truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, just as one must come to terms with the transience of one's securities"(p. 255). I hoped to be able to open myself up to new ways of thinking, of being in the world through the self-reflection needed to proceed with hermeneutic phenomenology. I strived to attain that "mystical appreciation..." of "the

profound interconnectedness of everything” (Smith, p. 255) that the hermeneutic process promised to open up for me if I could only let myself go there.

I view this project as a political act, my contribution to the much larger political force that is women speaking out about our lives. Because, when we as women speak about our lives and are also listened to and heard by a broader audience than the usual friends and co-workers, we challenge a patriarchy that survives in large part by denying us, as women, a voice. In fact, more than a challenge, it is, in the words of Gilligan (1982, 1993) “potentially revolutionary” (p. xxiv).

Throughout the research I spoke of “voice” as in “clearing a space for women to be able to find their voice”. But what do I actually mean by “voice”? I think of “voice” as made up of what we think and feel, how we express that and how it is listened to and heard. Voice is more than speech, more than the components of language, more than the adverbs, nouns, adjectives we use to express ourselves. Voice consists of all the ways we use to express ourselves, as Aptheker (1989) shows us. To have a “voice” is to be heard and listened to by others. It is being able to say what we feel deeply and to have those thoughts attended to, thought of as important and also appreciated for the difficulty many women have in finding and opening up their voices to others. To have a voice is to be in relation with others. It does not have to do with maintaining oppression or falsehoods in the attempt to build up one’s power or prestige at the expense of another. Gilligan describes voice as “a form of psychic breathing” (p. xvi), as crucial to healthy survival as the air we breathe.

### **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCHING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE**

To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of the meaning can reveal.

Max van Manen, Researching Lived Experience

#### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Women live in a complex web of interrelationships. To do justice to this complexity, and to realize that there may be no “right” interpretation of the data, or that what is seen as “right” at one point may be revised time and again as the data is reflected on more and more, it seemed appropriate to use the process of hermeneutic phenomenology to open up the study of turning points.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the study of life as it is lived, in all its messiness and seeming contradictions, that is, warts and all. It does not set out to prove or disprove a hypothesis. There is a real sense of the interrelatedness of all things in the world. Instead of dissecting out one or a few variables for study, hermeneutic phenomenology accepts and opens us to all the experiences we live with every day. Phenomenology strives to help us understand in a richer, deeper way the meanings of people’s experiences in the world, by means of careful description of the experiences, and concerned reflective thought.

A hermeneut does not try to “bracket” assumptions before beginning the research. Instead, the researcher accepts that we all interpret all the parts of our lives through our

own previously held assumptions. Generally, the hermeneutic researcher is inquiring about a topic with which she has had some experience or knowledge of in the past. The researcher uses this “fore-understanding” or “fore-conception” as Gadamer (1999) calls it as part of the means of trying to understand, in some way, the meaning of the text. The researcher probably has not had exactly the same experience as that of the research participant, but there is a thread of some commonality that is recognizable to the researcher, a “polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (Gadamer, p. 295). For example in this study, we have likely all experienced something that we would, after a time, recognize as a “turning point”. Mine may not bear any of the same circumstances as yours. Yet, in the way it played out or in the effects it may have had on a life lived, it is a recognizable thing for both of us. We may recognize a common feeling, a similar result, even though the events were totally different. These two events are “part and apart; not quite the same but not simply different” (Jardine, p. 91).

The way language is used sets hermeneutics apart from other forms of research. The language is not dry, scientific, filled with numbers, probabilities, or cold hard facts. Rather, it is evocative of the themes underlying the experiences. It leads to seeing presumably familiar things in a new way. The “language” of the arts is useful to the hermeneut because it is in literature, poetry, music, painting, film, that the lived life is “condensed and transcended” (van Manen, 1997, p.19).

Writing is intimately related to the sensitivity and thoughtful reflectiveness necessary for hermeneutic research. van Manen (1997) quotes Merleau-Ponty as saying, “When I speak I discover what it is that I wished to say” (van Manen, p. 32). To write

and rewrite, think and rethink is essential to this form of research. With every writing and thinking, we may get closer to understanding the phenomenon we are studying. Dialogue instead of interviewing is one of the methods of data collection. We may not begin to understand either our own experiences or those of others until we enter into dialogue with each other. Indeed, in hermeneutics, the research participant becomes more of a co-researcher into the phenomenon. This dialogue may change the way the researcher and the participant think the phenomenon transpired, because any time a person sits down to describe some event, it will never be identical to the next time in the next minute or the next year. There has already been a transformation of the perception of the event. Because I see the event through my own “fore-understanding”, it is transformed again. This event is the starting point in the journey to better understand the human condition, life as it is lived. van Manen (1997) describes this as “borrowing” the experiences and reflections of other people “in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience” (van Manen, p. 62).

There is no prescribed method or way of “doing” hermeneutics. Much more important than method is the ability of the researcher “to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. xi). There is an acceptance of ambiguity not commonly found in other research methods. There is a subjectivity associated with hermeneutics which is essentially the perceptive, sensitive, discerning and intuitive way the researcher illuminates the text in its “full richness and in its great depth” (van Manen, p. 20).

Hermeneutics can have a transformative effect on all associated with the research, including those reading the report. The researcher accepts that this very research could/should be the catalyst for review and revision of her own assumptions, another “turning point”.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were five adult women aged eighteen and over, willing to explore their experiences of turning points with me. This small number was appropriate because I was focusing on increasing understanding of the experiences of these particular women and myself, not attempting to generalize to a larger population.

The convenience sample was recruited by means of self-referral from posters displayed where women would see them, for example, women’s bookstores, laundromats, the Women’s Centre, the faculties of Nursing and Social Work at the University, and libraries, as well as snowball sampling. I wished to recruit women of various ages, education, socio-economic status, culture and sexual orientation. I was not completely successful in my recruitment plan as all the participants had roughly the same socio-economic and sexual orientation status, and all were nurses with various levels of nursing education. There is no one “woman’s experience” as all women are constantly being shaped by how they are situated, and so their “interpretations, values, interests and actions can differ dramatically” (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p.17).

### **Study Design**

I met each study participant in a mutually agreed upon location affording us the privacy and atmosphere conducive to conversation. This was not an interview situation.

Rather, it was an opportunity for both of us to converse, to share in as open a manner as two strangers can hope for. These conversations, as opposed to the interview or to questionnaires, allowed the participants to access their thoughts and emotions as well as “the facts”. “Spoken accounts allow the speaker to give more details and include concerns and considerations that shape the person’s experience and perception of the event” (Benner, 1994, p.110).

The conversations were audio-taped, allowing me to review not only the thoughts of the participants, but also the silences, the emotions expressed and the general tone of the conversations. Conversations lasted one to three hours until they naturally come to a close. During these conversations, I did my best to stay engaged with the participant, trying to understand the meanings of both their words and their silences, and the meanings behind the words. I tried not to assume an understanding of their words, but asked “Could you tell me more about that?” or “Could you help me to better understand that?” when necessary.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, any medium that helps to illuminate the meaning of the phenomenon being researched is considered to be data (Hagedorn, 1994, p. 46). Participants were encouraged to share with me artwork, photographs, poetry, literature, music or anything else that they thought might help me to better understand their situation. Multiple ways of knowing and being often require many different methods of illumination. Participants articulately discussed their lived realities, as well as sharing their art, beloved poetry and books they had found helpful. Sometimes it is difficult to verbally explain a lived experience that has affected one profoundly. This is the type of

experience described by Silva, Sorrell & Sorrell (1995) as “profoundly felt by its bearer but often inexplicable” which “goes beyond our ability to directly understand it or describe it, yet it is so vivid and powerful that one cannot help but know it” (p.10).

### **Interpretation of the Data**

What happened to me wasn't what anyone else thought was happening at the time. A popular misconception is that we can't change the past – everyone is constantly changing their past, recalling it, revising it. What really happened? A meaningless question. But one I keep trying to answer, knowing there is no answer.

Margaret Laurence, The Diviners

My goal in analyzing the data was to achieve a greater understanding of the lived experience of turning points in the lives of the participants and also in my own life. Interpretation in hermeneutic research involves both the participant and myself in the telling and listening; we dwell in the conversation together, neither one necessarily knowing the whole story but, together, opening up new possibilities for understanding that will transform, in some way, how we understand self and Other.

I began by listening to the audio-tapes and examining the other data sources such as photographs and artwork. I transcribed the conversations so that I could hear them repeatedly. I included non-verbal data, for example sighs, laughter, silences or tears as these are often as significant as the spoken word.

As I immersed myself in the data, I needed to try to trust my intuition and interpretive skills to help me understand it. Tesch (1987) writes that commonly,

phenomenological researchers are investigating something that holds a special significance in their own life, so they tend to know “a lot about it at a human level, even before the data are in” (p. 6). This intuition or “re-cognition” also produces new insights (p. 7).

I dwelt with the text, taking my time and having patience, remembering “the foolhardiness of saying too early what the world is like” (Smith, 1992, p. 255). Jardine (1998) describes this “taking of time” as “living with” the data over time to be able to “dwell with such an incident and allow the slow emergence of the rich contexts of familiarity...by taking the time to experience where it ‘goes’”(p. 45). The act of reflection also involved the writing, the “kind of contemplation... that in turn leads to a deeper awareness of the profound interconnectedness of everything... a mystical appreciation”(Smith, 1992, p. 255) of the bonds we share and the “living web of meaning”(Smith, p. 254-255) within which we all dwell.

The results of a hermeneutic phenomenological study that is also based on feminist thought cannot be reproduced in a laboratory. They cannot be generalized to a larger population. There can be no “last word”, no definitive result that will stand the test of time. Jardine (1998) describes a “good” interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology as “one that keeps open the possibility and the responsibility of *returning*, for *the very next instance* might demand of us that we understand anew” (p. 43). How, then, can the adequacy and dependability of a hermeneutic phenomenological study based on feminist thought be assessed?

### **Dependability of the research**

Women and men live their lives embedded within their culture and society. Their experiences happen with the context of that life, and people interpret their experiences, likewise, within the context of their lives. A way to measure rigor in studies employing feminist thought as a basis is to use the concept of dependability. Dependability does not require study results to be reproducible, constant over time, or taken out of the contexts they are embedded in. (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 19)

I kept a journal over the course of the research, documenting my thoughts, feelings, assumptions and intuitions. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation was demonstrated through the amount of time I spent with each participant and with the time I gave to reflecting on and analyzing my findings. I found myself remembering and thinking about the conversations even as I went about my other life, working, eating, reading and even dreaming. Interpretations would pop into my mind at the unlikeliest moments, out of activities that, on the surface, seemed unrelated to the research.

Similar responses from the women demonstrated dependability, although this similarity may not be as striking as with other research methods, due to the embeddedness of the women within their different environments and circumstances. In fact, the search for differences is a valid part of the data analysis.

### **Adequacy of the research**

Adequacy is another way to determine rigor in feminist studies. Adequacy of a study is confirmed if the study design can be shown to have been well thought out, and the study itself is understandable, relevant to the stated purpose of the study, justifiable

from a perspective of desiring to increase knowledge about the area of study in an ethical and honest way, and meaningful (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 20).

I examined and reflected on my own assumptions, values and motivation for carrying out this research. I constantly tried to be aware of how my own individual circumstances and situated-ness influenced my interpretation of the data. I asked myself how the participants were similar to, and different from me, and how these similarities and differences may have affected our conversations and my interpretation of the data. I searched my own life for similar instances and how I responded at the time. I discussed with colleagues, read and reread the text, looked for the “phenomenological nod” in my discussions with others, the recognition of similar feelings or thoughts by other women of what the participant and I had discussed.

My thesis committee, composed of doctorally educated nurses, researchers and educators, helped me determine “the adequacy of the literature reviewed, the effectiveness of data collection techniques, the logic of political arguments, the comprehensibility of descriptions...” (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 22).

Rapport was demonstrated by participants who willingly stayed in the study and shared personal, deep and specific information with me, and showed verbally and nonverbally that they felt a level of comfort with the situation. Participants willingly recommended participation in the study to friends or acquaintances, showing the trust that enables rapport.

Interpretations that are true to the data, that seem logical and that serve the interests of women show coherence. I questioned the data as to logic, plausibility and

consistency with other data from that participant. Did my interpretation of the data show what could be happening, or were things missing? Did this account seem similar to other accounts from participants in a similar situation, or were there differences that needed to be further reflected on?

Complexity was shown by locating the experiences of each woman within the context of her everyday life as well as the larger social, political, economic and historical contexts that influenced her life. Identification of differences in participants' life experiences also demonstrated this complexity.

Consensus was demonstrated by comparing and finding congruence in the life experiences of the women in the study. I also discussed differences in the women's life experiences. I reflected on the life experiences of these women and brought forth alternative ways of explaining the experiences. I included women in the study who varied in their backgrounds, countries of origin, marital status and racial/ethnic status. However, these women are all between 48 to 58 years old, all are nurses, and all are relatively healthy. I demonstrated how the women are positioned within their worlds, and how they came to be positioned in this way in order to show how differences in perspectives might have come to exist. My own life experiences, although different in many ways, also were similar to those of the participants, sometimes in very interesting and unexpected ways.

I was honest with the participants about the purpose and design of the research, and I assumed honesty in the participants. We engaged in conversation in which information was given and received on both sides. I attempted to reduce the effects of the power imbalance that participants might have felt in order to encourage them to speak

freely and openly with me by appropriate use of eye contact, reflecting the emotions they were showing, appropriate responses, and by sharing my thoughts and feelings when appropriate.

The concept of “naming” or “seeing beyond and behind what one has been socialized to believe is there” (Hall et al., 1991, p. 26) is fundamental to the philosophy of hermeneutic study and also to feminist research. In order to “name”, women’s lives must be thought of in terms of their own words and gendered experiences. Direct quotes were used to illustrate their stories - their voices were heard. I also discussed throughout this research ideas from feminist thought that “name” injustices and forms of oppression that affect how women understand their experiences. In this way, the research is relevant because in order to change oppressive practices and institutions, they must first be identified. Finally, I was aware that the interpretation of the data depended not only on the understandings I gained about the participant and myself, but also how our understandings could change over the course of the research.

### **Significance of the Research**

Significance of hermeneutic research lies not in the ability to create new theories, to generalize to a bigger population, but rather “ to turn us away from our idealized and admittedly beautiful and seductive edifications and grand theories, and back to life as it is actually lived”(Jardine, 1998, p.12), “the fix we are in”(Caputo, 1987, p. 3). The subtext is that not only is the nurse-researcher in a position to better and more fully understand the lives others live and how and why they react to their lives, she is also given a chance to better understand her own life and the way she has lived it to this point. The two

strands are also totally interrelated. As nurses, (as with others in the caring professions), we need to have the ability to know ourselves so that we can engage with others in an authentic manner. We need to understand as much as possible where our actions and responses may have come from so that we can become more aware of how we are interacting and affecting people we are in a caring relationship with.

This increased knowing of self is integral to the ethical knowledge for nursing practice, the idea of what is the “right thing”, the appropriate moral thing to do in a given situation. Van der Zalm & Bergum (2000) write, “Knowledge for ethical care is found in the relationship and has to do with mutual respect, engagement, mutual thinking, embodiment, uncertainty, vulnerability and freedom. If ethical knowledge is found in relationship, phenomenological inquiry is precisely what is needed to increase understanding. The more that is known about human experience, the more sensitive nurses can be to the needs of patients and families and to each other” (p. 215).

This type of research allows one to reflect deeply on events that have happened up to this point. This deeply reflective thought helps to increase understanding about the life-events of ourselves and others. It leads to the flash of understanding we gain when we are able to say, “So that’s what it’s like...” This newfound understanding about this particular situation will inevitably affect how we interpret and react to future situations, whether or not they are similar.

In this way, hermeneutic phenomenological research is transformative. The results of the research transform not only our knowledge about ourselves and our clients in certain situations. It also transforms the way we respond as nurses and as people to our

own as well as others' situations.

From a socio-political perspective, the way political, social, economic, historical and cultural phenomena affect the health of people, hermeneutic phenomenological study is essential to the nurse who wants to understand on a deeper level the clients she is working with. As our clientele become more diverse, for example, in terms of country of origin, culture, language, religion or in the way people experience their sexual orientation, it is imperative that nurses are able to grasp the impact of these factors on the health beliefs and actions of this diverse population. By listening to and reflecting on the ideas of different people, the nurse in a multicultural milieu will be able to give more culturally relevant care and to have an increased understanding of the client in her care at that time, as well as the family of the client.

Earlier in this section, I wrote that hermeneutic phenomenological research does not result in new theories of nursing. However, the deep reflective thought necessary in this kind of research may become the basis of new nursing theories or promote the clarification of present nursing concepts. Jardine (1998) writes that to the extent that we can feel the "deep connectedness, a deep interestedness (inter esse – being in the middle of things), a deep investment in the issues at hand" then "it is *theorizing* in the best sense, a theorizing that erupts out of our lives together and is about our lives together"(pp. 6-7).

In hermeneutics, there can never be a "final word" in the results of the research. Situations are constantly evolving. What we understood about a situation yesterday may change today. Yet, we are able to open our senses up, to allow ourselves and our understandings to evolve along with them. Our self-understanding is in a constant state of

flux, if we allow it to be. That is not to say that we never know where we are going, but that we can often get a better idea of where we have come from and how this affects all our interrelationships. As nurses we are always “in relation” with others. If we can allow a deeper more thoughtful knowledge of ourselves and of those we are in relation with, our nursing care can only ultimately become more thoughtful, more compassionate, better informed and more satisfying for all concerned.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE WOMEN

During my research, I had the privilege of gaining a glimpse into the lives of five women. They shared a part of their life stories with me in what I believe to be a candid and revealing way. Indeed, some of these women told me they had never revealed to anyone else what they were telling me in our conversation.

These women have some things in common. They are all “middle-aged”, 48 to 58 years old. They are all working as nurses. Four women are divorced. Four women have children. They all live in comfortable, clean, well-managed homes. They self-selected to be in the study and all volunteered to speak to me in the privacy and comfort of their homes – most around the kitchen table.

I wonder about the qualities in these women that have led them to me. These women are at an age where they have seen something of a life, where there has been time for them to experience some of the ups and downs of a life. But younger women also experience life and feel the effects just as profoundly. What was it about these women that enabled them to be secure enough to come forward?

The participants of this study have had time to reflect on their life experiences, time to look back and gain some perspective on their perceived turning points and where those turning points have taken them. Maybe it takes a certain amount of maturity for women to develop enough confidence to be able to participate in a study of this kind. Could it be that as nurses and care givers, they felt a need or wish to help me, care for me as well?

Possibly they saw an opportunity to talk about a time in their lives that they recognized as changing them in some way for the better and to have that “officially” recognized and discussed in a scholarly paper. Although women often willingly share aspects of their lives with friends and relatives, how often does a woman’s story get taken seriously enough to be written about? Were these women talking to me because they wanted their lives “to matter”? Did they believe they had found “truths” that they wanted to share with others?

Women’s stories are, for the most part, the stories of everyday life, the “messiness of life”. They are seldom seen by the dominant culture as heroic or worthy of investigation. They are just things that happen to women every day. But in that everydayness, they are what make up a life, they reflect the lives of those around them, they reflect the dominant culture. Women’s experiences hold truths the dominant culture may not recognize, may not perceive as valid or would rather ignore. Probably that is part of the reason they may not be solicited or distributed as frequently as men’s stories.

As I listened, read and thought about the stories these women shared with me, I reflected on how my own woman’s story was interwoven among the others. I have shared many of the same experiences, in my own way, as the study participants. Many times during our conversations the phenomenological nod, that “ah-hah” of recognition, the gut level feeling of shared knowing flashed through me. Yet even as I felt that, I also knew that what we both felt could never be the same, because we looked at life through our own lens, our unique upbringings.

I explored again the meanings our culture places on basic concepts, imbedded ideologies that define “good mother”, “wife”, “not-a wife”, “strength”. Meanings defined through dominant ideology may or may not be the meanings defined by those considered “the other”, for example, those considered outside the ideal. When is a mother considered to be “good” and when is she judged “a bad mother”. Does a “bad mother” love her children less than the “good mother”? What is considered “strength” in people? Does one gender have a monopoly on what is defined as strength? And conversely, does “weakness” have a gender? And how does the overwhelming concept of “relationship” impact on us as members of a culture? All these questions will be discussed throughout the rest of this thesis.

What follows are my impressions about what the women recognized as turning points in their lives and how those turning points subsequently affected or altered their way of being inside our culture. Although I did not go into the interviews consciously looking for themes, some interconnected concepts did emerge – interconnections between the participants themselves and between them and me.

I am in and of these stories as well. I will try not to be “the absentee author, the writer who lays down speculations, theories, facts and fantasies without any personal grounding” (Rich, 1986, p. x). I will place my trust in you, the reader, to open yourself up to new ways of thinking, to different ways of interpreting the lives of people. And in the process, you may re-think events in your own life. Things are not always what they seem.

### **The Culture of Women**

I will discuss briefly a certain culture of the women I interviewed. Not culture in an ethnically defined way, but what seems to be a shared culture of women. I have encountered it many times before – in the women I have cared for in hospital, in home visits, in committee meetings, in social gatherings. The culture I speak of is the culture of food. Food and drink are used by many women as a means of welcoming, of thanking, of sharing lives, almost a tool towards intimacy of thought. Women are nurturers, nourishers, care givers. These women welcomed me into their homes with tea, coffee, iced drinks, beer. I ate chips and dip, cheese and crackers, banana bread, and at one home I shared an evening meal with the woman. This sharing of food and drink seemed to ease the way toward a sharing of ideas and feelings.

Four of the conversations took place around the kitchen table. The kitchen, probably more than any other room in a house, has traditionally been the domain of women. Yes, men and children pass through, but they are like travelers, always leaving for other rooms. The kitchen is woman-space. I was proudly shown around the rest of the home, but we usually drifted back to the kitchen. Possibly, the participants needed the physical closeness of sitting around the kitchen table in order to feel safe and comfortable enough to “open up” their thoughts, feelings, needs to another. The kitchen is not usually the most beautiful or ornate room in a home. It usually does not have the most expensive furniture, dramatic draperies. It gets dirty. It gets messy. It is warm and good smells come from it on occasion. But the point is, many of us expect a kitchen to be messy if it is used to create nurturance and nourishment.

I see this culture of food and kitchen as a metaphor for the lives of the women I spoke with. Sometimes their lives were clean and neat, but often they were messy and at times chaotic. They are all nurturing women who do what needs to be done, clean up the mess as best they can and carry on. Isn't that the whole point of studying something hermeneutically? Hermeneuts accept that life is messy and many layered and interrelated with other lives. And in a woman's life, relationship is often paramount. The importance of relationship to the women in the study will be discussed below.

### **Turning Points**

Five women chose to participate in this study. They all chose pseudonyms to be known by, so they are Lyn, Kate, Pam, Laura and Phyllis. The turning points they identified revolved, directly or indirectly, around family relationships.

As the women spoke about their lives, it quickly became evident that isolating one turning point to discuss would not be possible. Although they identified one or two tuning points, these were shown to constantly be emerging from previous ones, and to evolve into others. Some of the women knew exactly what they wanted to start talking about, while others had a more difficult time identifying where they wanted to begin.

The women told me stories rich in detail, complex, funny, sometimes tragic. As I began to write, I realized the difficulty of trying to condense a life into a few paragraphs. What do I include -- and what do I leave out? There is a danger that what I see as very significant, the woman will not interpret the same way and vice versa.

The life experiences of these women are unique to each, yet intertwined with each other and with me. That is, while certain aspects of each woman's life are unique to her,

there are many other aspects that reflect similar experiences in the others. It is difficult to say of each woman “This is her experience. Now let us move on to the next one.” There is an interconnection between the stories and with my own story that, if we all read all the stories and reflected on them and on our lives at the same time, we might experience a “cold shiver of recognition” (Caputo, p.188).

### **The Women’s Stories**

In considering the woman’s construction of her own narrative, we come to realize that she is not located outside the dominant narratives but, rather, lives her life immersed in them. A particular experience can serve to disrupt our participation in the dominant discourses... the women showed they were capable, albeit in different ways of negotiating new ways of relating to the dominant discourses.

McIntyre, Anderson & McDonald, The intersection of relational and cultural narratives: Women’s abortion experiences

#### **Lyn**

Lyn sits with me in her kitchen, surrounded by her animals, and tells me a story of relationships broken and found, devastation, strengths and learning. As she talks, Lyn radiates a joy and acceptance of life that has been hard-won. She recognizes “several major turning points in my life that have all kind of evolved from the first event, and that was way back at the time when my husband left...” She and her husband had been high school sweethearts. They were married nine years and had two daughters, aged 5 and 7

when the marriage broke up. “So it was not an easy time. It was probably one of the hardest times in my life and that went over a period of two years...”

As Lyn talks about her marriage, I get the feeling that the day her husband left, although devastating in some ways, may also have been a blessed relief for her and her daughters. She describes the night he left, “And he was hitting me and he held me to the wall by my throat and then something just snapped and he left. It was like he knew.” One of her daughters was hiding under the bed. The other ran outside to escape the scene.

After their divorce, Lyn decided that she needed to “get in a healthier place”, not only for herself, but for her daughters as well. She took several courses and workshops. But life has a way of interrupting our well-made plans and our hard work. Just as she thought things were going well, her eldest daughter, aged 15, began a relationship with an older, controlling, abusive man. This daughter’s relationship led to the second identified turning point in the life of Lyn’s family. Lyn recalls, “I remember she would just not come home at night. I would be out till 3 - 4 in the morning driving around the city looking for her... She would not communicate... she ended up getting kicked out of Grade 11 and she moved in with him... at this time I was fried, I was burnt, I was scared of losing my daughter. I felt like I’d lost a daughter... And I just kinda felt like I wasn’t going to give up on her.”

Through a friend, Lyn contacted and began to work with a psychologist, and with her help, Lyn was able to reunite with her daughter. Both daughters eventually began seeing this psychologist and now Lyn states that “it’s just been incredible” how they all have moved so much further along the path of recognizing healthy relationships and re-

ordering their lives. Lyn sees this relationship she and the girls have had with this particular psychologist as a third major turning point.

Today, Lyn lives with her daughters in her own comfortable home. She works full time at her profession. She is happy and content with her life, recognizes the hard work it took for her family to get to this place and realizes they all have more work ahead of them.

Lyn also found what she calls her “passions”, hiking, painting and gardening, that she thinks would not have developed if she had stayed in the care-taking role placed upon her during her marriage. She has reclaimed her creativity and proudly displays her watercolors framed on her walls. She finds life to be a joyful affair. Her positive attitude is displayed when she muses, “You know, it’s living in the present, enjoy what you have... I believe in synchronicity. I believe in things happening for a reason or not happening for a reason and trying to look at the positives.”

The idea of developing strength is central to Lyn’s telling. She states, “I think probably the greatest thing I’ve found out is my strength. You know, I am strong and I’m not afraid to face most challenges in life that before I would have been terrified of.” She expands on this feeling of quietly being strong enough and accepting enough of events to be able to pick her battles when she says, “I find when I run into a crisis now or an event happens, whether it be at work or with my kids, I just know I can handle it, I know I can deal with it, I know it will work out with however it’s supposed to be.”

Besides feelings of strength, heightened self esteem and an increased confidence in her own abilities, Lyn also recognizes an expanded sense of purpose as a result of her

life experiences. She describes it as “a journey and I find I really feel like we are here to learn lessons.” She goes on, “But realizing that part, that a big part of my purpose is to be able to share what I have learned with other women and other people. That hopefully, to help them see their strengths...and they are important. And that they can build on it, whether it’s something like just being a good mom or whatever it may be.”

### **Kate**

My first overwhelming impression of Kate’s life was of great loss and deep pain. This was the longest conversation of the study, dense with grief, and she opened herself up to me in such an intimate and detailed way that to this day, I am still in awe of her trust in the process. She made herself so emotionally available – even vulnerable, that I had to ask myself if my reticence to hear her on tape again was not part of my own discomfort with emotion, my own problem in the process.

Kate explains, “Well, I guess I could say that moving here and getting divorced all within the first few months of moving here was a major turning point...I moved here in late August and by December, he wanted out of the relationship. And I had moved here, and I had lost everything. I had lost my home, my family, my friends, my job, my city, my province.”

Three interconnected themes come through loud and clear in Kate’s story. The first one revolves around “loss of voice” within her marriage. The second is the discovery/acceptance/recognition of her anger at the situation and how it propelled her to move on into the recovery process. The third theme seems to be her (re)-discovery of herself as a person.

Kate is the consummate caregiver. Now she recognizes that in herself, but it is questionable whether she recognized it during her marriage, or if she did, she may have felt that she was doing it to eventually benefit both herself and her husband. She says, "...I was so focused on being a caregiver, and that's the way I have been raised as a woman, to look after the husband and to sacrifice and defer your needs for the family. And I was so focused on him going back to school and getting his law degree, his MBA and all that stuff and I was always working." The pain, disappointment and feelings of betrayal are evident in her voice as she continues, "...that year he was in the MBA, I did everything for that man...that's the way we've learned. That if we love them and care [for] them and do everything for them, then they have to love us back and care for us and always provide for us. That doesn't work anymore."

Kate had been raised in the idea that women defer their needs for the family. During her marriage, she seems to have accepted this part of the ideology. And when it all went awry, she could not believe that since she had held up her part of the bargain, he had not done the same. She felt betrayed, not only by her husband, but by a whole system she lived under, the ideology of "the good wife".

Kate said, "Of course, we never had any kids and I felt we weren't as important – my ex and I – as the sister-in-law who had families." I wonder if the thought ever crossed her mind that she did have a child, one who was older and bigger than her, but possibly for some of her (and his) purposes a child nevertheless.

Her identified turning points have promoted a great deal of growth in Kate. She seems to have gained a strength and confidence that were unknown to her before. She

describes herself as “five years into the healing”, had earned a Master’s degree in Education, has discovered a supportive group, sometimes in the unlikeliest places, and is learning to spend time by herself. She is able to articulately express her emotions.

She recognizes how she has evolved through her experiences and sees a purpose in her pain. “And yeah, I’m a whole new person as a result of it and it’s almost like, I’m not a spiritual person, but it’s almost like it was meant to be that this is the path my life is taking. I don’t know whether there was some other force or some other power that was saying, ‘Okay, Kate, you’ve had a good life with this man, you’ve established a career and you’re financially stable but you’re not growing, you’re not moving on in your life. You’re not fulfilling your potential.’”

She speaks of a “force” that is “... helping you learn life, helping me to be a better person, and helping me with the peaks and valleys of life that I go through and I always think these things, these events in my life are happening to me for a reason – so I can learn and grow from it.” She has started to do yoga and to meditate daily. She describes how meditation helps her: “... with meditation it’s more just shutting out all emotions and just being, just concentrating on your breathing and letting go of the committee in your head...It’s very freeing. It’s like getting rid of all the pollution in your head and in your body and afterwards, it comes together. You’re more aware of yourself and your feelings...”

She is divorced now, lives in a beautiful condo by the river with her beloved little dog, and seems to have discovered a whole new self, one that she likes much better than

the old self. Her bitterness about what happened was still very much in evidence when we spoke, that part still is in the process of healing.

### **Pam**

Pam's story is one of tradition versus modernity, hard choices made, and the whole ideology underlying the tradition of "the good mother" and "good wife". In order to try to come to understand the rest of Pam's life, it is necessary to think about her traditional life. She was a traditional East Indian woman who found herself in a semi-arranged marriage. It may be true that she could have refused to marry him, but marriage is a tradition believed in strongly by her culture and she says that when she met him, "I liked what I saw of him..." How can anyone predict how marriage will turn out in a situation like that? And yet, marriage is unpredictable in the West, too, where we tell ourselves we have freedom of choice to marry who we like. Of her quick engagement and marriage (everything happened within nine weeks), she explains, "...that's the way it was, you know. That's the way my sister got married and that's the way I got married." She accepted the system she lived in – or did she?

Pam recalls her "...very bad marriage. And I knew it was bad right from the beginning but I guess I was too timid to do anything about it... He wasn't hitting me, he wasn't abusing me that way, not physical abuse, but it was emotional, mental, and I think that's the worst thing that women have to – something that will probably stay in me forever because I still have dreams." As a traditional woman Pam felt that she could not voice her troubles to her in-laws and she could not go back to her own parents. In her

culture, "... divorces are something that is taboo, you know, they have a daughter that came back is not good so I didn't want to stay with my parents."

So Pam stayed in this bad situation and had a son with this man. When the boy was 6 years old, he was enrolled in a very good boarding school. That is the day Pam calls her turning point. "And then I said, 'Now I have to do something about my life'. I couldn't face going back to my husband." Pam left her marriage and her six year old son and fled the country.

How do we begin to make sense of that action in a world where to be a mother is to be smothered under an all-pervasive ideology of "the good mother" and her attributes. We all know them, because they have been socialized into us from the earliest age. In Pam's traditional family, the propaganda of motherhood may be even more extreme than in our Western culture. This is how it goes: mothers love their children before they are born. They bond with them at birth and naturally do the majority of childrearing because of their maternal, caring, nurturing nature. A mother's life is totally bound up in the lives of her children. Fathers leave, and do so on a regular basis, but mothers *do not leave*.

A person outside the situation might question, perhaps strongly, the decision she made that day to leave her only child and go away. Could she not have gone back to working in an office, a job she was experienced in and that she liked to do? If her husband and in-laws were so abusive and unsympathetic, how could she leave a little boy to face that same behavior? Even if today many more of us are beginning to see the ideologies we live under in a new light, the overriding rule of our society and of hers is simply that women do not leave their little defenseless children. Through participation in

this study, Pam found a way to have her thoughts and actions considered by others in a different, more thoughtful manner. Instead of trying to understand how others might regard her decisions, it is more important to make an effort to hear her and to try to understand and accept the sense *she* makes of her decision to go.

When I try to understand in this different way, I can see strength and bravery in this traditional woman. This was one of the biggest decisions Pam would ever have to make in her life. She had planned it and put everything in place beforehand so that, in her mind, it would be the right decision, albeit a decision born out of desperation.

Pam was a traditional woman, living in a very traditional society. Imagine how desperately unhappy she must have been to contemplate that unthinkable step. She was trapped in a marriage where six years “was like six million” in her words, a traumatizing union that left her with recurring nightmares to this day – “And still somehow, sometimes I can still have nightmares. I don’t think of it but I get nightmares.”? How many women living in abusive relationships with no emotional support, their own families unable or unwilling to help, think about leaving the situation? Would they leave their children if the situation was so bad? In Pam’s culture, sons are special, grandsons are special. She knew her son was well taken care of both in a good boarding school, and by a grandmother who doted on him. What did he have to look forward to if she could have afforded to take him with her? She lived out of a suitcase and went to school full-time. Who would have looked after him in a foreign country?

It must have taken all her courage and strength to leave the house and set out for a strange, rainy, cold country where she could only stay by taking a nursing course that she

never wanted to take and that she did not like. Imagine her carrying everything she had in one or two suitcases, coming from a traditional world to a place that would treat her differently because of her skin color and accent. Her life was full of hard work, discomfort, loneliness and always at the back of her mind, her son and a failed marriage.

Pam's journey to make a life for herself and her son spanned three continents, eventually ending in Canada. She lived with her brother-in-law and his family, who had also moved to Canada. She worked hard, and with a loan from her brother, bought a house for herself and her son. She discusses the importance of owning property because she had felt rootless for a long time – "...I always felt I was always going around just with a suitcase... and even there when I moved out... from my in-law's house to my house, I just moved out with a suitcase. I felt I needed to belong and I don't think renting would have helped. I just wanted a house of my own."

Pam never mentions the word "strength" about herself, but does allude to it when she speaks about coming to Canada with her son and getting them both settled. She says, "I had very little confidence... But I had the drive in me. I knew I had to survive, I and my son had to survive so... we did." When she says that, there is a pride but also a matter-of-factness about it. She did what she needed to do because she needed to do it. How many women appear to others to be brave, adventurous, strong, when they themselves mostly feel that they did something only because it had to be done?

Pam believes she did the right thing for herself and her son, yet the guilt she feels about how she dealt with her son is very apparent as she talks. "But like, going through a

divorce, coming to a new country, a new job, and I think – so there were times – I think I neglected my son, he didn't get what a normal kid would have got.”

Her doubts about her mothering skills surface when she describes their relationship. “And I had never been with him. I had never been a mother to him so he wouldn't listen to me... he and me, we never had a relationship that a mother and son, like an upbringing. It never was. Because he was in the boarding school, and when we came here, I was too busy working two jobs... So he didn't have much of a home life either... He was always out, always out and I didn't know how to control him. I didn't know how to be a mum of a 13 year old. And I was working and buying a house and I guess I was too wrapped up in my own life too.”

But things have turned out well for her son. “But still he's turned out to be a good kid now. He's good. He's happily married now and I hope his marriage doesn't break apart like mine did.”

Today Pam is remarried and works at a nursing job she is happy with. In fact, in speaking of this particular job, she says, “But I started my job here in '88. So I was 40 years – my life started at 40 years.”

### **Laura**

Laura and I shared a lot of commonalities, and we laughed often as those shared experiences surfaced. This was also an emotionally charged interview because even though Laura chose to speak about going back to work and how that has changed her as her major turning point, her marriage and ex-husband kept jumping to the fore, both in her story and in my thinking about her story afterwards. So I want to make clear that

Laura chose to speak about her return to the workforce as a nurse as her turning point. It could be that she thought this showed her strengths and capabilities much better than her marriage and divorce did. But she also recognized that her divorce as a turning point was “a major one...and in comparison, everything else is... minimal... So if I went there, I mean it just minimalizes all the other things.” So even though she described in awesome detail the story of her marriage and divorce, I need to honor her wishes and to concentrate on her chosen turning point.

Laura was married to a wealthy, high-powered man for many years. They had three children when they divorced, and because he would not agree to support them, Laura was forced to return to the work-force on a full-time basis. Although she does not explicitly state that she knew the end was coming for her marriage or that she was putting a survival plan into action for herself and her children, she seems to have known what she needed to do and when she needed to do it. She explains, “...I must have known, too, because I decided to do my refresher course. You know, when women do things like that, there’s things in the back of their minds. And when I completed the refresher course, I think it was two weeks later that we decided to separate.”

After earning her baccalaureate in nursing and experimenting with some jobs she found unsuitable, she secured a position as a nurse in a clinic that serves a multi-cultural and somewhat disadvantaged population, and has been there ever since.

This turning point of going back into the workforce seems to have boosted her self-esteem. In her job, she has discovered in herself skills that she is very proud of. She says, “... when I started work... I focused on high needs populations which was really

interesting because it opened tremendous doors for me...I worked extremely hard and I worked over my lunch and I worked late and I attended conferences on my own time and I bought piles of resources but I have a tremendous network of resources now. For example, I do lots of things around community development and starting lots of programs.” Her fund raising skills, her “credibility” and “connections” have been put to use on many occasions to get the start-up funding and resources for different programs.

She recognizes how she has grown as a person and as a nurse since she has gone back to work, and the pride is evident in her voice when she says, “...I applied for a position...I didn’t get it but it was just a terrific experience...I had the opportunity to highlight some things and even just to validate myself with what I had done and what I had been involved with.”

An underlying theme throughout our conversation was how Laura has been able to regain control of her life. This theme was also very apparent in Kate’s and Lyn’s stories. Since she has left her marriage, she says, “...it’s really nice to have the control of your own finances and to make the choices. And – we make good decisions, we make bad decisions, but they’re our decisions.” I could imagine that the ability and responsibility of managing her own finances would seem like a major victory for her considering how the marital finances were managed. She has gone from being forced to beg for housekeeping money to being in complete control of the family finances.

She recognizes a strength in herself that has been gained through the circumstances of her life. She says, “...I think we’ve done well because it takes a

tremendous amount of courage to move forward and be on your own and not know what's going to happen and still...".

She is proud of herself and of her children. She smiles as she relates how much she likes her life at this point. "So I feel very rich and very fortunate. And I wish I didn't have to work so hard but I do and I accept that, and again, I've got wonderful supports. I've got really good friends. I've got a fantastic family. I've got a nice home. I can make the choices of who I see, when I see, what I do. And I do have a really nice lifestyle. But I've made it for myself."

### **Phyllis**

Phyllis's turning points revolved around the changes parenthood brought to her life. She quickly identified the births of her daughters as a major turning point. Consequently, she says, "I suddenly became a much nicer person... my world quit revolving around me. It revolved around them and the family as a whole... I just became a lot more flexible, a lot less self-centered. My priorities definitely changed."

She mentioned changes in her life that occurred after her children were born that many parents could relate to, for example, the change in her social life. She explained, "And my social life went from going out with friends, going out for dinner or whatever, to going to the zoo... Our social life changed quite a bit. We hung out a lot more with friends who had kids the same age as ours... And our friends, actually that we had been pretty good friends with, basically dumped us... For them, they were still free to do everything. We weren't." But she says this did not bother her because she was "...just in a different world."

As we spoke about how children changed the lives of parents, she wondered if she "... would have pursued more education... Probably if I hadn't had them I would have done something different with my career." As I listen to her on the tape, I do not hear any regret in her voice. There may have been regret at some time, but today she just wonders.

She feels she was lucky because she could plan her work around her home life instead of having to accommodate her home life to fit her work life. In fact, she says, "I really enjoyed going to work, a lot. Like, I worked a lot of the 7 to 11 in the evening shifts... it was like a treat 'cause I'd get out with my co-workers. And work back then was not too difficult, 7 to 11 – we worked in teams so it was actually a lot of fun, so it was like an evening out." She did mention in passing that after her daughters had received their driver's licenses, she had gone back to work on a more regular basis and was able to socialize with her nursing peers again.

Lately, she has encountered another but related turning point – that of her two daughters, now both University graduates, who have moved away from home at 24 and 26 years of age. Her youngest daughter moved first, and this was particularly painful for Phyllis. She says, "... the biggest shock for me was moving her – the day we moved her – going to her room and it was empty." Her eyes well up with tears as she continues, "And seeing it empty made me realize that our family wouldn't be together anymore, ever, probably... I guess I thought I was prepared for it but I really wasn't. But I got over it really fast because I realized it was a very good move for her. She's really happy. Grandma's happy. She walks to work. And so there were a lot of pluses."

This distress at children leaving home to set out on their own lives and careers is one that is shared by many parents. In a close-knit family like Phyllis', the effects of this transition can be dramatic, even traumatic. As much as she saw this move as a good thing for her daughter, Phyllis' life has very much revolved around her family and she saw this event as "...more the image of the family fragmented after 24 years – 26 years..."

As I compared this conversation with those of the previous women, I began to realize that there had been much left unspoken, or alluded to but not developed, in this conversation with Phyllis. Phyllis spoke of the ordinary everyday things mothers go through with their children. In retrospect, ours was a much more subtle conversation about a life that had an ordinariness about it that reflects the lives of many women.

For example, Phyllis stayed home with her children during the day when they were young. Phyllis did not mention how living on essentially one salary impacted her family. Her husband is a successful professional man. Did she encounter the same issues of single-handed parenting as he climbed the corporate ladder that Lyn and Laura spoke about explicitly? As I was on the way to my car after our conversation, she suddenly volunteered that the decision to stay home with the children had led to some experiences that were not easy, and earlier she had said that in the first few years of her marriage "...we didn't have a lot of money or anything."

I had the feeling from the other women that they were using this process as a means of self-validation, a way to tell others about lives lived, to gain a voice again. Maybe Phyllis did not feel this need in the same way. Maybe she felt there were things that were better not said, because we work together, and how much of a private life do we

want to share with co-workers? Maybe it reflected how I was during the conversation. Was there something in my demeanor that did not encourage the same kind of sharing I had experienced with the other women?

A few days after this conversation, Phyllis gave me a photo of a poster she has hanging in her home. By giving me an image of this poster, I wonder if Phyllis wanted to make sure I truly understood and appreciated how this turning point has affected her. But if she had any doubts about her own eloquence on this subject, there was no need. The importance of these turning points for her was made abundantly apparent to me in our conversation.

The poster is a drawing of two little girls in old fashioned long gowns and wearing bonnets. The older one stands behind the younger one, supporting her. The writing around these two figures reads:

“I remember when you were My Little Girl. As much a part of me as my right arm. My every breath and step held you in mind. Then suddenly one morning – you were grown. I was not finished with you. But, we must love our children enough to let them go. But in my heart... you will always be My Little Girl.”

I think Phyllis speaks for many parents when she says, “And it was more just that they were growing up. I mean, you want them to become independent and you want them to be on their own and make their own living – but...” The eloquence of a sentence left hanging seems to be a reflection of the rest of the conversation – things left unsaid that made the meanings possibly more clear to me than words spoken.

## **Understanding Women's Experiences**

### **Considering separation of parents and children**

In our society, the birth of a child is recognized by most as a major life-altering event. It is also seen as normal that children grow up, most gain their independence and, at some time move away from home. Phyllis' daughters left home in a sane, orderly way, having finished their university degrees and going on to the next phase in their respective lives. If we are ready to accept Phyllis' experience as one that is "the normal progression of things", why do those of us who are parents feel that same heart wrenching loss when our own children leave us to strike out on their own?

When our children leave home, we as parents are confronted with two undeniable truths. We may have more freedom than we have had for many years to pursue our own interests or to reclaim our passions as Lyn has done. But when our sons and daughters are old enough to leave home, we have to acknowledge our own aging. Then we might begin to ask ourselves, "Where did the time go?" We may look back and think that our children grew up much too fast. We remember vividly the day they were born and some of the especially happy or sad or funny things that happened in between. But how many of us as parents found ourselves saying in frustration to our children, "Grow up!" not realizing that, too soon, they would?

Other women in the study have experienced this loss/separation from their children, but in rather different ways. In Lyn's case, her daughter's leaving was not seen by Lyn as the normal progression of things. She worked very hard to get her daughter

back and then continued to support her children as they all worked through the emotions that their situation had engendered.

Pam's story casts this issue of loss/separation from children in a whole other light, or rather, in two whole other lights. In Pam's culture, when a woman marries, she goes away from her parents' home and lives with her husband's family, wherever they live. This is perceived as "the normal progression of things". But even if this is the norm, I wonder how a mother might feel knowing that she may never see her child again. How does it feel to know that your daughter is going to live in another house, where her mother-in-law may be the dominant figure and where there is a possibility of mistreatment of daughters-in-law? Is it any easier just because it is considered "the norm"? And then, I wonder, how does this come to be the norm? Would mothers agree to this idea? Or does it reflect the idea of women as chattel, going where their owner/husband lives, a norm that benefits the man to the detriment of the woman? As this bride is taken off to a strange new home, she loses her support system, gives up her previous relationships, and must depend on her husband and his family for all she has lost.

The presence of a new daughter-in-law can benefit the mother-in-law as she relinquishes household work and gains the possibility of grandsons, both things designed to increase her status. Paradoxically she, too, was once a new bride, coming into the home of another mother-in-law. I have difficulty understanding why Pam's mother-in-law was not more sympathetic to Pam's unhappiness. After all, she was once a new bride in a strange home.

In Pam's case, this move was seen by her as disastrous, but she felt unable to return to her own family. In her culture, her parents would be shamed if she returned from a marriage. She explains "...that's how it was since I got married. You don't belong to your parents anymore. That's how it is, you know? That's how it has been instilled into us that once you are married, your parents' house does not belong to you any more." But again, I wonder if a mother in Pam's culture would really feel shame if her unhappy daughter came back to the family, or would she feel joy at seeing her daughter again? Is the culture really that black and white? I hope that there may be shades of gray in that situation.

Pam's story also illustrates the separation of mother and child when it is the mother, not the child, who leaves. Mothers who leave their children are not considered the norm in our society, nor in Pam's traditional one. When a mother leaves, it seems that the whole fabric of society is torn apart. It is seen as a horrifying and unexplainable act and her mental health may come into question – she must have had a breakdown – she's not in her right mind. These judgments hurled at the offending woman are part of the ideology of mothering we are indoctrinated with all our lives, so it is understandable that the woman, in spite of the circumstances that forced her to take such drastic actions, might begin to think the same things of herself.

After my conversation with Pam, I found myself becoming much more aware of the many instances when mothers do indeed leave their families, sometimes for years at a time. Women leave their homes to work in other countries. They send money back to the family. The children are often raised by grandparents or other family members. In some

cases, the husband is also out of the country working. Women in the armed forces may leave their families, sometimes for extended periods of time. The plan is always that eventually the family will be reunited. Pam also reunited with her son and provided a life for him. Do we understand Pam's experience differently from other women who leave home? Pam left because she saw no alternative in an abusive marriage. Other women leave for financial or other reasons. If we understand these situations differently, on what do we base our thoughts? It may be that mothers who leave home are more numerous than we believe. We cannot give ourselves the right to judge the decision of a mother who leaves because we usually have little idea of the actual events that are occurring inside the home or on what basis decisions are being made.

As I mentioned previously when discussing Pam's reasons for going, it may be more useful to try to understand how and why the social structure we live under teaches us that some reasons for leaving are viewed as valid while other reasons are viewed as deviant. For example, a woman/mother who goes away to work and to send money back to her family is seen as contributing to the financial good of the family and subsequently to the economy of the country. Because she is making money that will ultimately benefit the economy, her work is seen by the dominant discourse as valid and so she is not branded as deviant but may even be encouraged to stay away and continue to earn. On the other hand, a woman leaving an abusive situation may not be viewed as valid by the dominant discourse because of the net cost to the economy in terms of needing to find subsidized housing, needing some form of social assistance until she re-orders her life, needing to be retrained to enter the workplace, the loss of unpaid childcare and so on. The

dominant discourse may recognize no advantage to itself in the actions of this woman and so may invalidate the action.

### **Snapshots of marriage under the dominant discourse**

The pictures that Lyn, Pam, Laura and Kate painted of their marriages seemed like studies in inequality, microcosms of stereotypical male/female relationships in our culture. These women were functioning inside one of the main ideologies of the dominant discourse, that is, husband/man is dominant while wife/woman is subordinate. The women give voice to the extent of the indoctrination. Lyn recounts, "I thought I'd been the good wife, the good mother...I did see things. I knew things weren't right in the way he treated me. I mean he was very controlling... And yet I think you just kind of get caught up in it without realizing that there's anything different." Pam reflects, "But then I guess it was my fault that I stuck to my marriage. But that's what we were supposed to do in our – that's how it was with our community... and then I decided to stay. Because I could not accept that my marriage was a failure."

Lyn, Laura, Kate and Pam all related instances of physical or emotional abuse during their marriages, and yet they stayed in the marriages and tried to make them work. Kate describes an instance of being physically threatened by her husband: "It was a control thing though... he always had that power over me and I always felt that way... he grabbed me by the collar of my coat and that's the first time he's ever physically threatened me... I think that was the turning point for me that I knew he had the physical power over me..." Lyn recalls, "And he was hitting me and he held me to the wall by my throat and then something just snapped and he left." Emotional abuse was the weapon of

choice for the husbands of Laura and Pam. Laura confides, “This is just so humiliating. ... he would hold the cheque up there (standing up and stretching her arm up as high as she could, holding an imaginary cheque) – ‘I want you to jump for it.’ Yes – to jump...just like a trained seal. And I remember doing it on some occasions...” Pam describes her husband’s actions and subsequent consequences: “He wasn’t hitting me, he wasn’t abusing me that way, not physical abuse, but it was emotional, mental, and I think that’s the worst thing that women have to – something that will probably stay in me forever because I still have dreams.”

It is unclear if the women realized how subordinate they had become during that time. Possibly they only truly see the overwhelming power of it once they had moved out of their marriages. Laura gives evidence that she did indeed realize and fight against her position within her marriage as she concludes her story of having to jump for housekeeping money. She says, with pride and satisfaction, “...and then I said I wasn’t going to do it, he could do what ever he wanted but I wasn’t going to do it. And then he’d just leave it on my dresser.”

Laura described being married to a high-powered husband: “...I was always secondary to him... There was no question, he made a lot more money, but there was no value placed on the work that I did, on the work that I would do with the kids...he worked very hard, there’s no question. But he let me know he worked very hard. He would tell me how lucky I was.” Lyn recalls, “We moved to Calgary and he worked his way up in the oil company...and the more money he made, the more he got into the power and control and so basically I was home with the kids and he’d stagger in whenever, and

that's how it went. So it really was not very good but but I think I tried to close my eyes and just keep it together.”

Lyn, Laura and Kate described how they had agreed to move away from their homes, families and support systems because their husbands' work demanded it. Pam moved to a new town to marry her husband. None of the women mentioned the courage it must have taken to agree to move to a strange city leaving all their support systems. Kate recalls, “And I had moved here and I had lost everything. I had lost my home, my family, my friends, my job, my city, my province. I knew two people when I moved here...”

Laura describes the loss of support and of material possessions as her family moved from city to city for her husband's career: “... we had accumulated a lot of property... we had a really beautiful country house that we'd sold and we had our city house that we'd sold and we moved ... We were there for two years and then we moved ...”

Lyn and Laura both functioned as single parents to their children as their husbands climbed the corporate ladder. Lyn remembers, “...he spent very little time with the kids. Basically, looking back, I single-parented. And times when the kids were in crisis, or sick in the hospital, he was off partying and drinking.” Laura also describes her husband as absent much of the time and with unrealistically high expectations of his family, “He wasn't particularly involved as a dad because I think he was involved in other things and so on, and then he just wasn't around... and it's hard to raise the kids... we had three kids in less than three years ... But at the same time, he expected the house to be perfect, the kids to be perfect, the kids to be successful, everything to be absolutely wonderful.”

These women supported their husbands and families emotionally and, in some cases, financially. Kate worked full-time while her husband took two university degrees. She recalls, “And I was so focused on him going back to school and getting his law degree, his MBA and all that stuff and I was always working...that year he was in the MBA, I did everything for that man...”

### **Expanding understanding of women’s strengths**

I entered this project assuming that women are strong. I wondered if the women would think that their experiences had strengthened them. The women I spoke with did not necessarily perceive themselves as strong, especially the four women whose marriages had broken up, until the actual transitional experience of the break-up and subsequent re-ordering of their lives. They saw themselves becoming strong because of the experiences surrounding the turning point. On listening to them talk about their lives inside marriage, however, and after thinking and reading more on the subject of strength, I can see that they also exhibited great strength within their marriages.

All the women recognized and accepted their growth in strength following their respective turning points but what of the strength it took to look after children single handedly, to take the abuse of their men and remain in the relationship, to financially support them while they went to school, had depressive breakdowns or climbed the corporate ladder. These are the taken-for-granted challenges women perform that are seldom hailed as strong or heroic because those words are defined differently in our society – in a masculine way as opposed to a feminine one.

The women in this study all worked hard to keep their marriages together. Some readers may wonder why they stayed in marriages that they describe in such gruesome detail. The answers to this question may be as numerous and diverse as the women who would answer them. Some women may stay because they believe their children need both a mother and a father inside a marriage. Some may fear to leave a bad marriage to strike out on their own (with or without their children), knowing how our society thinks about “single moms”. Some women may fear the stigma they perceive attached to being a divorced woman, possibly seen by others as a “cast-off”, a “failure” at marriage, doomed to spend the rest of her days alone. Some might miss the material comforts they have accrued during the marriage. The women in this study had spent many years living a life approved of by society, that is, the dominant discourse of society. Who would want to be put in the position of being perceived by our society as “less than” or “other”, designations that this same discourse would be so ready to place on them?

Perhaps they were exhibiting a very major womanly strength, that is, the strength to keep working at a relationship in spite of troubles and even dangers they faced inside them. Is it strength or weakness to stay in a relationship and try to make it work? They may have felt it was just necessary, but what is strength, bravery, even heroic acts if not to carry out actions, not for praise or fame but only because they need to be done? Women cope. Relationships need to be saved, people need to be in relationship with each other, although this perception of the importance of relationship may vary from person to person. I am not suggesting that these women should have stayed in these bad relationships or that for society to function, relationships have to be as unequal as these

were. The women knew their relationships were unequal and unhealthy in many ways. Yet, they speak of being “devastated” (Lyn, Kate) when their relationships with their husbands were finally dissolved. The women had carried most of the responsibility to keep these relationships working, by raising children almost single-handed, by supporting their partners financially and emotionally, by swallowing their pride, looking the other way, trying to ignore the bad parts. This may be seen as “giving up”, “giving in” or “denial”. Or, it could be seen as strength to carry on amid difficulties, to keep trying to save a relationship no matter what it took. Society and the women themselves may not think of themselves as “strong” within their marriages. However, they exhibit a different kind of strength, one not generally recognized in our society where strength is defined by the language of men, but strength as defined by the underground language of women, the strength of relationship.

In some ways, the strengths the women “discovered” in themselves after their turning points reflect the male definitions. The ability to handle their own finances, to buy and sell houses, to finish their own university degrees, to face the unknown with courage and determination are traits we expect in men. Possibly these women recognized these strengths because these traits are already labeled as strengths by the dominant discourse.

The ability to face the vagaries of life with confidence was expressed by several of the women. Lyn said, “I think probably the greatest thing I’ve found out is my strength. You know, I am strong and I’m not afraid to face most challenges in life that before I would have been terrified of... I find when I run into a crisis now or an event

happens, whether it be at work or with my kids, I just know I can handle it, I know I can deal with it, I know it will work out with however it's supposed to be."

Pam did not speak much about new-found strength, but her whole story spoke for her. She did say, "I had very little confidence... But I had the drive in me. I knew I had to survive, I and my son had to survive so... we did." She did this by coming to a foreign country and obtaining a nursing position so that she could save up to purchase a home for herself and her son. She worked hard, endured loneliness and the distress of being a single mother trying to raise a son in a country with norms and standards she was not used to. She seems to see her struggles as just something she needed to do, with no fuss or fanfare. However, I believe she is strong, and I think she might agree with me in this.

When Kate was able to accept her feelings of anger, she began to find her strength. This was a turning point in itself for her. "I found out he had a relationship with this young woman and that's when I got very angry. It took a while to get angry... so it was the anger that really fuelled my fire and propelled me to change... it really made me think 'Well, I'll show you, I can make a life of my own without you.'"

Kate was also able to recognize how her strength and self-confidence have influenced other areas of her life. "... now I'm a lot more fluid with change. I don't fear change whereas I was very rigid before and afraid to try anything new and different and now here I am, like, I'm unemployed. But I know that I do have a job down the road. But God, 5 years ago I couldn't think of being on my own and unemployed and how could I manage, where would I get a job, so I think my confidence level is 100% more and I'm able to express my feelings."

Laura identified both the success she has found in her career and the ability to make her own decisions regarding her finances as both contributing to and being a product of her strength. "...I applied for a position...I didn't get it but it was just a terrific experience...I had the opportunity to highlight some things and even just to validate myself with what I had done and what I had been involved with." She continues, "...it's really nice to have the control of your own finances and to make the choices. And – we make good decisions, we make bad decisions, but they're our decisions."

Possibly Laura speaks for all the women in the study when she says, "...I think we've done well because it takes a tremendous amount of courage to move forward and be on your own and not know what's going to happen and still..."

### **Voice lost and found**

A theme that recurred through the stories of the women was of reclaiming a voice that had previously been lost or squashed. Loss of voice within a relationship was blamed by many of the women for subsequent problems with the relationship and their partners. However, this loss of voice within their relationships could also be seen as evidence of their inequality and oppression within their marriages

Kate blames her upbringing for her inability to acknowledge her emotions or voice her needs or wants. She remembers the silence in her family surrounding the death of her mother: "Like, my mother died when I was very young. She died when I was 4 years old and we never talked about her. My dad was like that...and we never talked about that. Again, I was told, or not encouraged to express my emotions." Her father died when she was 18, and again she remembers: "Yeah, so this whole thing about holding

back emotion was so ingrained. Even, I can remember my father's funeral, all my uncles were there and it was like, well we're Smiths and we're not going to show our tears and it was just ridiculous. Here we were, we were just teenagers and we were losing our one remaining parent... I get angry about the way I was raised but that's just the way things were back in those days. You didn't talk about death. You didn't talk about sex. You weren't open to any of that kind of stuff so... And look what damage it's done to people. It's very unhealthy."

When Kate was married, she "was so concerned about him that... I lost my voice. I couldn't even finish a story or a conversation when we were together in a crowd without him helping me finish the end of the sentence or the story." She reflected on how this loss of her voice affected her during the marriage: "... but yeah, I lost my voice. And then you start to lose confidence in yourself. You don't know what you're saying – 'Well, I think that's what I feel or I think that's what I'm saying' but you don't – you lose your strength because you're so devoted to the relationship and not to yourself."

Kate is an intelligent articulate woman who had been trained to avoid conflict. She married a man who seems to have felt the same way about open conflict but nevertheless felt the need to control. Kate says, "It was a control thing though. I remember we never fought or we didn't have a lot of open conflict but he always had that power over me and I always felt that way." His need for power became much more manifest at one point in their relationship, and Kate actually dates her loss of voice from this incident. "... he grabbed me by the collar of my coat and that's the first time he's ever physically threatened me... I think that was the turning point for me that I knew he had

the physical power over me... and that's when I think I started giving up, like, objecting and being who I was and part of my loss of voice because he always got his way.”

As Kate worked through her divorce, one of the areas she has focused on is regaining her voice, but to do that, she says she had to acknowledge all the anger inside her, going back to the death of her mother. In fact, this anger propelled her to go back to university to get her Master's of Education degree, partly to prove to her ex-husband that she was smart and strong and she could do it. In university she took some Women's Studies courses and began to read about feminist issues and she credits this as helping her regain her voice. Over the past five years she has had time to think, meditate, read and take courses for herself whereas during her marriage she seems to have not had much time to be with herself and do things just for herself. She has come to some very positive, almost defiant conclusions including this one: "... now I know I will never let a man or anyone steal my voice or take away who I am anymore... I've learned to express my feelings and to talk about my emotions and that it's healthy to express them and to feel them... if you don't work through them and express them, you'll never move on... It's just a human phenomena that helps you work through grief and loss.”

Lyn alludes to her loss of voice in the marriage. She calls it a loss of self. She was also married to a man who needed to control. She recalls, “Up to that point, like, I had no self-esteem. I had lost who I was. I don't think I really knew who I was from high school on and even through University. Looking back, I probably floundered because he was always in control and I was always kind of like a little puppy running after him...”

Lyn does not speak about regaining her voice, but that voice is evident in the activities she loves to do now. She has rediscovered a creativity that has been dormant since high school. She paints in watercolors and her beautiful paintings hang on the walls of her home. She loves to garden. Maybe this is because, as well as watching things grow and bloom, gardening is an activity that lends itself to being quietly alone and gives the gardener an opportunity to meditate as she weeds or deadheads or mows or mulches. Gardening is one of those wonderfully mindless activities that leaves a mind free to wander and reflect. Her other passion is hiking – a pastime that takes her to the beauty of the mountains and also affords ample opportunity for contemplation.

Pam's loss of voice came about from her arranged marriage and from her own culture. She married a man she had known approximately nine weeks and she went to live with him and his family in another town. These people were strangers to her. Her father-in-law seems to have noticed how unhappy she was and tried to talk with her about it. She relates, "Actually, my father-in-law was quite disturbed about it. He did ask me what was the problem. Of course, I couldn't tell the father-in-law. I was too shy."

There are many ways that the women in this study have worked to discover or to regain a voice lost to them. Participation in this study could be another way to regain a voice. It may be that all these women took the opportunity to participate because I was offering them a way to give voice to their stories. McIntyre, Anderson & McDonald (2001) could very well be discussing these women when they write, "In conversations in which the women dwelt on their experiences of being silenced, there emerged a

conviction to reclaim the voice of their own narratives: the silence was broken by a voice whose echo could drown out the sound of the dominant social narratives” (p. 56).

### **Women as relational beings**

All the women in the study shared a common theme of alone-ness. None of the women were alone by choice. The issue of “being alone” in our society is a complex one that needs to be addressed here because it is such a commonality to these women and has required them all to change how they view themselves, their relationships and their environment.

Phyllis’s daughters left home within two months of each other. The older one had been talking about moving out for a while and was actively looking for a place to live. Then suddenly, the younger daughter had an opportunity to move out and she was gone. Phyllis found this quite difficult to deal with, possibly because the younger daughter’s departure seems to have been more unexpected than that of the older daughter. Also, Phyllis was suddenly faced with the knowledge that “...our family wouldn’t be together anymore, ever, probably...”. In fact, Phyllis stated that “...then when my older one moved out two months later, it didn’t hit me that way.” Both girls moved within the same city Phyllis and her husband and the extended family lives in. Phyllis sees her girls “all the time”. The whole family gets together every few weeks for pizza. Phyllis is happy with the living arrangements her girls have made.

Phyllis had an image of how her family was for 26 years (the age of the oldest daughter). She describes her family as “close-knit”. She and her husband had a certain way of relating to the girls when the girls lived at home that seems to have been loving,

supportive and, to a large extent, satisfying for all. Within two months, that way of relating shifted. A new dimension of independence for the girls has been added to the relationship. Phyllis has seen her girls grow up into independent capable young women. She is proud of them and is realistic in accepting that they will want to make their own way, including living in their own spaces. She has had to change the way she sees her daughters and also how she relates to them. For many parents, this transition can be difficult, as they have to relinquish some of the perception of control they thought they had over their children. It may take some time for parents to accept that they will not know everything their children do anymore, might not meet all their new friends, will not know if they stay out all night and so on. This change in relationship means that parents need to see their children as adults now, and this altering of perception is life-changing for all concerned.

Phyllis chooses to view this change in relationship with her daughters as positive for her daughters as well as herself and her husband. She describes herself as “freer” now. She and her husband had just returned from a much enjoyed holiday before this conversation took place, and she spoke about “regaining” her life and being able to take part in social activities in the evenings, a process that actually started when her youngest daughter started to drive. Even though she feared her family would be “fragmented” when her daughters moved out, it seems that the family gets together on a regular basis and even though they all do not live under the same roof anymore, the family remains close, and happy to spend time together.

Phyllis has been able to see how her changed relationship with her daughters has brought benefits to all their lives. What Phyllis initially perceived as very painful has subsequently opened up for the family a whole new set of positive results. The other four women in the study experienced changes in their relationships that, although painful in a different way from the pain Phyllis experienced, have brought them to what they describe as a more positive place in their lives.

Lyn and her husband had been a couple since high school. She recalled the atmosphere in her town as being very unforgiving toward those high school students not in relationship: "I mean it was just kind of the old stereotype. If you didn't have a boyfriend, that was, oh, you know, god forbid!...But I mean, at least in the town where I grew up, if you didn't have a boyfriend, boy, you were alone. Your future was cast...Nunnery, here I come!" (much laughing)

After Lyn and her husband split up, she had several relationships with men. She says, "And then after, as time went on, I just, I felt a real need, almost that I needed to have another relationship. Like, how can I be alone, I can't be alone, and I felt almost desperate, and I had several relationships and they didn't work."

Kate's marriage lasted many years, and she says that for the first 15 or 17 years, "we were very much in love. We had a great life... When I was in that relationship with him we did absolutely everything together. We were like two peas in a pod. I mean, I miss that. I miss his companionship..."

Even after the pain and bitterness these women experienced through the dissolution of their marriages, they seem to be willing, to various degrees, to try again to

have a relationship. Lyn talks about finding another relationship as “the icing on the cake” of a life she is happy with now. She says, “I would love to have somebody to come home and cuddle up with and talk about the day. I would. I would love to get married again...I would be nervous but I would be open to getting married again. But I wouldn’t settle for just anybody just for the sake of having somebody.”

Laura raised another issue when we spoke, that of the idea of aging without a significant person by your side. “But sometimes I wonder about getting old, though. Like, I don’t think of myself as being old. I think, I think it will be okay because of relationships and broad interests and always learning and caring and children and grandchildren and so on. And who knows because I don’t feel I have the opportunity but I don’t know if I could live with someone but I can’t imagine, either, being madly in love again. But I don’t know.” She is more tentative than Lyn, but she still seems to be leaving an opening in her life if a relationship offered itself.

Pam is the only woman who has remarried. She admits that she remarried out of loneliness. “I met him and I decided to get married to him. I had been too long alone and I felt I needed the companionship...I guess I was desperate for company, so I think I rushed too fast with my second marriage. Thank god it’s not a bad marriage.”

Kate is learning to live by herself, but it has taken her five years to get to the point where she is comfortable spending time alone: “...some of the things I know I’m comfortable now is I’m very comfortable being alone. I don’t have big problems spending the day alone...I mean, I’m still lonely and I want a relationship, but I’m comfortable being alone.” We laughed about the issue of learning to sleep alone. She said

with a smile, “I remember, it was like one side of the bed you never touched, the side he slept on, and for the longest time, and now I’m all over the bed. I have that great big bed to myself!”

These women, who had bad first experiences with marriage, who have grown immensely since their divorces, who have survived and become strong capable women in their own right, who have friends and jobs they enjoy and their own homes and interesting outside activities, still think that they would like to try again to have a relationship with, in these cases, a man.

Kate may reflect the feelings of many single women when she says, “When you’re single and on your own you realize you’re on the bottom of the eco-chain. Single women are really at the bottom of the food chain now... And if you’re a single mom in poverty, you’re just nothing.”

Kate relates, “I didn’t have a lot of women friends. My whole life was focused on him.” Interestingly enough, when Kate really needed them, she found she did have women friends who supported her. “...I went home at Easter and all my women friends, my girl friends supported me and surrounded me...”

It is interesting that the women in the study found that their support came from other women, even if they felt they had no real women friends. Pam is the exception here. Her main support came from her male in-laws. She stated, “[My brother-in-law] was good to [Pam’s son]. He was good so I can’t forget that...even from the beginning... he knew the way my husband was treating me. He was very good to me. He was very good to my son.”

In a world where women are frequently torn in so many different directions between children, work, partner, parents, the luxury of time to develop friendships may be missing. Finding the time to be with our friends may be difficult because they may have many or all of the same pressures we have. Many women, like Laura who moved with her husband to his various employment positions or other women who move for a variety of reasons including but not limited to employment, may not be able to stay in a place long enough to develop friendships. Having a friendship is like having a garden – both need to be started, nurtured, worked on. And they need the element of time. A good friendship, like a beautiful garden, does not happen in an instant. It takes time to develop - time that many women seem to be chronically short of.

On the other hand, some of us have never really learned how to be by ourselves. Women are socialized to be relational beings. Their socialization has taught them that the relationship to be most prized is with a loving partner. However, an equally prized relationship might be the one they have with themselves. Kate speaks at length about having to learn how to be by herself, think her own thoughts, ponder life, become comfortable with herself. A woman alone in our society is too often seen as an oddity, or worse, an object of pity or a threat.

To be different in society is to be bad, an outsider who threatens the status quo so beloved by the dominant discourse. A strong woman who faces life on her own terms, who makes and manages her own money and her own decisions threatens the status quo. It could be that the status quo is changing somewhat as women remain single longer and exit bad marriages in greater numbers. Change is difficult, it takes a lot of energy, it takes

a shake-up in our known world and maybe the biggest changes are made partly because we are desperate for a new vision of our lives. Is this where we develop some of our strengths? I wonder how many of us would change and develop these strengths if we were not forced to do it. In different ways, the women in this study were jolted out of their old lives into new ones that demanded a different set of survival skills, a different version of strength. A woman has to be strong to endure an unhappy marriage, to birth children, to raise those children and work at the same time, to support a husband who, at times can seem like another child.

These women, in one way or another, all saw the lives they were used to, shatter or morph into different lives. They have lost and found financial resources, companionship of husbands or children, possessions, relationships, but in many ways, the required gains/changes seem to have been overwhelmingly beneficial. The women in this study like themselves better, see themselves working to increase their own potential, and continue to learn about themselves more every day. They have discovered talents they never knew they had, found friendships and support systems, surprised themselves with what they are able to achieve. They feel proud of themselves.

## CHAPTER FIVE: EXTENDING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a computer game I play to help me clear my mind, to pass the time, to rest. Tiles are piled in layers on top of each other and every tile has a match. Selecting pairs of tiles makes them disappear, only to reveal the layer beneath them and so on and so on. The idea is to match all the pairs of tiles, work down through the layers of tiles and finally to make all the tiles disappear. Analyzing the conversations I had with the women in this study reminds me of that game. The visible first layer hides a multitude of other layers, deeper meanings, understandings that take part of their meaning from one layer and other parts of the meaning from different layers of the puzzle. As the listener in the conversation, I thought I saw the broad outline of the text, how different concepts/assumptions of mine matched with what I was hearing and how I think I understand how our society works. Subsequently, as I began to dwell in the conversations, to live them, breathe them, dream them, the many layers of the conversations began to come clearer to me. I saw them as a puzzle. Sometimes the meanings seemed clear enough. At other times, I could only make out the content once I had uncovered the layer above it.

The conversations I participated in with the five women in the study were finished months ago. But they will never be over. That is the paradox of the hermeneutic conversation. For as I sit and reflect on what the women told me, I discern changes in the conversations themselves and in my understanding of the conversations and myself. I think that if I wrote forever, there would still be something new to see, to understand, to attempt to communicate with the reader.

If we are constituted by our experiences, then how we are now grows out of the experiences that require us to become. What we label “bad”, “destructive” or “hard” at one time, we may re-label as a “growth experience” at a different time. Time is an essential component of the classification of experiences. Thus, what the women shared with me were turning points tempered by the passage of time, with all the changes in perspective brought about by the passage of time. The future may yield another understanding of these experiences to the women and myself.

My interpretation of these same experiences is similarly tempered by my own time and place. Interpretation of the experience may change over time, resulting in further re-interpretation. The way I am situated at this point in time will affect how I interpret data. What I see may be totally different than what you, the reader interpret. This is also the essence of the hermeneutic experience. Our perceptions depend on our circumstances at the time. No-one’s circumstances are ever the same at any given time. The messiness of life becomes the messiness of interpretation.

### **Interpreting Conversations**

As I began the conversations with the women, I always had a goal in mind, that is, to learn about the perceived turning point(s) of each woman, and to travel along with her as she discussed where these turning points had taken her. However, I was uncomfortable with the initial conversations because, once started, they seemed to be totally out of my control and I was not quite sure what, if anything, I should be doing about that. There seemed to be a shifting of emphasis – present, present to past, past to future, future back to present, but in trying to keep in the moment with each woman, I found myself flowing

with the conversation. Gadamer (1999) writes, "... the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct... the way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusions, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led" (p. 383). I really was not quite sure how I wanted "to conduct" the conversations, and maybe this saved me from trying (with no chance of successfully conducting a hermeneutic conversation). The conversations were all quite different and yet in many ways followed a similar path. The shorter ones were not necessarily the least complex ones. In some, there seemed to be much left unsaid, much left to me to interpret. In others, I was amazed at the amount of detail the women shared with me. In the end, like all good hermeneutic conversations they seemed to "gradually diminish(es) into a series of more and more pauses, and finally to silence" in "the stillness of reflection..." (van Manen, 1997, p. 99) – "Well, I don't know what else to say now..." (Laura).

In trying to come to some kind of understanding of the text in total, I was challenged to keep the question open because my natural inclination was to keep shutting it down with a recital of "facts" – "just the facts, ma'am, nothing but the facts", and conclusions about behavior. "The goal of interpretive work is not to pass on objective information to readers, but to evoke in readers a new way of understanding themselves and the lives they are living... understanding who we are differently, more deeply, more richly" (Jardine, 1998, p. 50). How could I "invoke in readers" if I could not do it in myself? It was as if I was in a constant battle with my empirical side, which has been so

well exercised over the course of my life and career. I felt as though I was swimming upstream, fighting the currents in myself to keep open and wondering and “interpretive”.

“Pursuing interpretive inquiry is potentially a painful process... There is a risk involved, a risk of “self-loss” (Gadamer) and the recovery of a sense of self that is different than the one with which we begin such inquiries... New possibilities of self understanding have opened up; old ones have been renewed and transformed and rejected” (Jardine, 1998, p. 49). Gadamer (1999) writes about our “horizons”, that is, how our presuppositions and prejudices limit what we can understand in any situation at any given time. Our horizons are continually forming and reforming “because we are continually having to test all our prejudices” (p. 306). I found this testing of prejudices happening to me in the course of this research. The quest to understand broadens our horizons and encourages us “to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion” (p. 305).

To see something in a new light, to understand in a new way, can be painful, not only because I was being “encouraged” to see things in a new way, but also because during the course of this investigation, I was re-minded of some very painful episodes from my own life. I have had to revisit those experiences in the light of my broadened horizons. I have lost the ability to shunt them away out of sight. I think Kate’s question is very relevant: “... why does life’s learning have to be so painful, why can’t they be happy events? Sometimes they are but it seems the true deep deep learning is the painful learning... it’s the deep learning that changes you... your core beliefs and your values are put to the front when you’re going through loss and change.”

Maybe part of the reason I found this exercise, in some instances, so painful, was because the women I was speaking with were not afraid to show me their pain. Sometimes the pain was subtle, controlled. It was the yearning to re-establish relationships, the quiet loneliness. At times it shrieked into the conversations – the bitterness of betrayal, the humiliation of voices lost, the deep suffering mothers feel for their children. And I did not have to hear it just once. I heard it over and over again, and every time, I seemed to feel a deeper or different understanding of the experiences of these women. For example, the more I thought about Phyllis and her turning points, the more poignant and profound they became to me, because children leaving home when they are ready is only the surface notion. There are layers of meaning accompanying this event – the change in family structure, the evidence of aging as a parent, the need to restructure time, and the opportunity to re-discover herself, not as primarily someone's mother, but as Phyllis herself, with time for herself.

The conversations were complex, multi-layered, situated in a time and place at once the same and yet different for myself and the other woman. The women spoke, but I have to accept that as each did, a myriad of thoughts were flooding her mind that I will never know, but can only guess at. The most obvious examples of this are the variety of sentences left unfinished. When we leave a sentence open-ended, what are we saying? Possibly we do not know how to finish the thought because we have not finished deciding what we think about that thought. We might reach a point unexpectedly and prematurely where we know there is something more to be said, but we just do not know what it is. On the other hand, we may leave sentences unfinished because by finishing our

thought we may fear we will put ourselves in danger of dismissal or embarrassment. We know what we would say, but we may not trust the person we are speaking with to understand why we say what we do. Or maybe the rest of the sentence would need to become a paragraph, a story in itself to convey the amount of meaning we wish to, and we lack the time, the will, or the energy.

One such incident in my conversation with Phyllis illustrates this point beautifully. We were talking about how she had felt when her daughters had left home. She said, “I mean, you want them to become independent and you want them to be on their own and make their own living – but...”

On another occasion during another interview I might have reflected the hanging “but” back to her in an attempt to elicit more information about her thoughts on children leaving home. But suddenly, I was the mother whose older children have left or are planning to go, and all the feelings I had and am having about this rushed over me. In my own mind the “but” went something like this: “but will they be okay out there, who will keep me somewhat informed about what life is like for their age group these days, who can I talk to, how can I let go of my perception of control and protection over them, how will our relationship change, am I ready for them to be so independent, how will our lives change, how will I know what music they are listening to, what will I do with all the space they leave when they go, it will be so quiet, I’ve had them such a long time – forever- I’m not ready to let them go and I am ready to let them go” – and on and on. There was a feeling in the room at that moment that some things do not need to be spoken between two mothers with children more or less the same age. Some things we trust to be

understood without words. In many cases what we understand may not be what the other person was trying to convey at all. But this time, I believe we both knew what we were thinking – it was the silent phenomenological nod – “I know how you feel”.

### **Language**

Earlier in this thesis, I wrote about three interconnected themes that would be of interest to me throughout this process. They are recognizing and working to change the ideologies of the dominant culture we live under, how “voice” is smothered and regained under this ideology (including but not confined to the power of language in our culture), and the discovery and re-discovery of women’s strengths. I have opened a space for the women in this study to tell of how these interconnected themes have affected how they have lived and do live now.

The idea of women being “silenced” by the culture we live in, how that affects a life, and how women are able to regain their voice within our culture are topics that have come out of the feminist movement. Writers, philosophers and researchers are examining “modes of learning, knowing and valuing that may be specific to, or at least common in, women” (Belenky et al., p. 6). After conversing with the women in the study, I read with interest what some feminist linguists are saying about conversations and the often conflicting theories of women and language.

Lakoff (1975, 1998) wrote about the use of “tag questions” used by women in conversations, that is, those questions at the end of sentences like “you know?” or “isn’t it?” which she characterized as evidence that the asker uses them in order to “avoid committing [herself] , and thereby avoid coming into conflict with the addressee”, or a

reflection of a use of language “imposed on women from their earliest years” where women have learned to speak as if we are not really sure of ourselves, we need confirmation from the listener or we do not own our own views (p. 250).

The conversations I had with the women in the study were loaded with tag questions. On listening to these conversations, I never once thought that these women did not know their own minds, or felt they needed confirmation of their views. Rather, I tend to see these devices more as Fishman sees them.

Fishman (1980, 1998), while agreeing with Lakoff that women use tag questions much more than men in conversation, has concluded that these questions are used as “conversational sequencing devices” that are “explicit invitations to the listener to respond and demands that they do so” (p. 255). She sees this device as giving the asker power in the conversation to demand a response. Fishman also counters Lakoff’s statement that the use of the term “you know” signals “another aspect of women’s insecurity” (p. 256). Instead, Fishman sees phrases like this as a way for women to solve a problematic conversation, for example, when she is getting minimal response from the listener. The phrase is a way to check to see that the listener is paying attention and invite or possibly demand a response. These phrases also show the amount of effort women put into a conversation to keep it flowing.

Kate characterized her loss her voice in her marriage by the way her husband would always take over the conversation or finish her sentences. “...I lost my voice. I couldn’t even finish a story or a conversation when we were together in a crowd without

him helping me finish the end of the sentence or the story.” She interpreted this as a belittling, dismissive act, as if she was incapable of explaining things on her own.

Tannen (1994), a student of Lakoff, discusses the use of interruption in a conversation and, while admitting interruption can be used to dominate a person or situation, her idea is that it can also demonstrate a “high involvement” in the conversation where “some speakers consider talking along with another to be a show of enthusiastic participation in the conversation, of solidarity, of creating connections” (p. 35). This only becomes a problem when the one who was speaking has the belief only one person should speak at a time and so stops speaking. Tannen calls these people “overlap-resistant” or “overlap-aversant”. Tannen argues that people have different ways of conducting conversations due to differences in culture or ethnicity. She considers conversations between men and women as “cross-cultural” because males and females are socialized to carry on conversations differently. Interruption shows the different way men and women speak, not necessarily an attempt by one sex to dominate the other. She is very clear that to generalize men interrupting as always another means to dominate women would be to negatively stereotype men unjustly, just as it would be wrong to negatively stereotype other kinds of “high involvement speakers”, for example, “New Yorkers, and women and Jews” (p. 74) who also tend to have an interrupting style.

Tannen does recognize that in some cases “interruption exists, that overlap can be intended to interrupt [and] that men can use interruption to silence women” (p. 75). Also, “men frequently annoy women by usurping or switching the topic” (p. 75) and these are all seen as attempts to dominate, lack of interest and lack of respect for her right to

continue, especially when “this is not an isolated incident, but one in a series” (p. 77) like Kate’s experiences with her husband.

The linguist Uchida (1992, 1998) has responded that “it is a mistake to separate power and culture of women and men – and to assume that the two are independent constructs... It is not only wrong ... to underestimate the effects of power structure and dominance; it is harmful” (p. 281). She disagrees with Tannen that “power has little to do with what happens in conversation between *socially equal* females and males” (p. 285) because, she asks, “When, exactly, do men and women interact as equals?” (p.285), considering that much of what we learn under the dominant discourse tells us that “As a female, I am seldom socially equal to someone who is male, even when we share other identities such as ethnicity, age, class and education” (p. 285). Male dominance exists, whether it is intentional or not, and to falsely interpret this in conversation as merely a cross-cultural mix-up is much too simplistic. The point Uchida makes is not to cast blame for communication problems on men or women, but rather to recognize that men-women interactions are operating under a social hierarchy that gives preference and higher value to men-talk. It is no coincidence that men are “aggressive and hierarchically oriented conversationalists” with women expected to provide conversational support (as Tannen demonstrates with women’s use of question asking), or that men’s roles “are more likely to be those of the protector, the teacher, the expert in relation to women” (p. 288). Women and men have been socialized to act their genders in this way, and these socializations are carried over into conversation. Uchido calls for an expanded framework

in which to think about the issue of gender and language “that allows us to see how we, in social context, are *doing* gender through the use of language” (p. 291).

This issue of how we perform our genders under the dominant discourse is beginning to be studied in greater amounts by linguists. It has been described in fiction, in essays, in diaries extensively. It might not always be identified as such, but the way we perform gender through language crops up constantly, especially with women writers.

Miriam Toews, (2001), in reminiscing about her Mennonite upbringing in a small town in Manitoba writes, “There were other things I became aware of as well... That seventy-five year old women who had borne thirteen children weren’t allowed to speak to the church congregation, but that fifteen year old boys were” (pp. 193-194).

There is a part in Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners that shows beautifully not only how Morag, as the young wife of a much older professor, feels trivialized by the way he speaks to her, but also how she proceeds to find her voice and finally declare her independence. Brooke, her husband, constantly refers to her in the diminutive, “You’re a good girl, sweetheart”, “idiot child”, “little love” and on and on. Morag bristles at this and yet dares not to bring it up to Brooke until one night when he tells her “Hush, child.”

“Morag abruptly pulls away from him.

‘Brooke –

‘What’s the matter? For heaven’s sake, Morag, you’re awfully touchy today.’

‘Brooke, I’m not your child. I am your wife.’

‘Is that it? I’ve offended your pride? My God, Morag, can’t you see I only used the word as an expression of affection? Remember how you and Ella used to call each other *kid*? What’s the difference, except that I meant this a little more tenderly and in a different kind of relationship?’” (p. 243)

This conversation displays what Uchido describes as the problem with the “difference/cultural approach” to understanding male-female communication as theorized by Tannen, that of the consequences of miscommunication. Morag ends up apologizing to him and saying she “must be unbalanced” but yet she continues to burn under the surface. Even though she seems to know what she feels and why this interchange was wrong, they are both working under the hierarchy that values man-talk and ultimately she comes out the bigger loser in the exchange. Uchido writes, “Whether manifested in the form of conversational roles, cultural values, possession of resources, or social norms, there is institutional power owned only by men that affects the result of miscommunication. Men’s power allows them to ‘misunderstand’ women’s meanings without getting penalized for it, and also gives them the right to penalize women for misinterpreting men’s behavior” (p. 289). Although Morag feels trivialized, she is the one who ends up apologizing, because in this relationship, Brooke seems to have all the power. He is a man and he is older than Morag and he is an English professor and he is well-traveled and and and...

Morag begins to really find her voice as she goes through the exhausting but exhilarating process of writing her first novel. This is very comparable to Kate’s experience of (re)gaining her voice as she went back to school for a Master’s degree, or of Lyn finding her voice through her passions of painting, gardening and hiking, or of Laura who found her voice through developing her skills of program planning and implementation and of networking.

Many of the women in this study thought they had lost their voice, their self, and were in the process of regaining that voice. Some were farther along the process. Some had to go deeper and try harder and overcome more than others. I wonder if those women were using the conversations they had with me as part of that reclamation of voice. The women seemed to have a need to tell about their lives, and not just the sanitized versions, fit for polite company. I heard their stories, warts and all. They shared their pain, joy, disappointment, pride, lessons learned and contentment with me. Some of what they told me haunts me to this day. And yet, I know they chose to not tell me things as well. What was underneath were the other things unsaid, intimated, the contradictions I felt in myself, the great evidence of the ideologies we live under, the realization that those ideologies are deeply ingrained in us. I see myself mirrored in the participants. I open up to a deeper understanding at that point in time of my own actions, why I feel what I feel and do what I do. In a way, these conversations are as much about me as about the other woman.

### **Re-viewing How Women are Labeled**

An important method of placing and attempting to keep women in a role that is viewed as “less than” by the dominant discourse is that of mis-labeling positive traits of women so that they come to be seen as negative ones in the eyes of our society or “just the way women are”. For example, the idea that women are “passive” while men are “active”, and that passivity translates into “not doing anything important” in the eyes of men. Rose (1990) writes, “Actually, of course, if women were passive and dependent they could hardly survive” (p. 56). The real issue might be that society only recognizes

“activity” as what men do, and does not recognize or validate all the activities of women because “such work is usually associated with helping others’ development rather than with self-enhancement” (Baker Miller, 1986, p. 53), and this is viewed as “not doing anything, as in, “She’s just a housewife”, meaning she stays home all day, not doing anything important or maybe anything at all. When a woman’s activity is recognized, it may be because it threatens the status or position of the men around her.

In reality, much of the activity that has been mis-labeled passive is really very active. For example, listening to and really hearing what others say, taking in, receiving or accepting are all activities that generate some kind of response. Often, women hear underlying themes that, if responded to, might put them in danger, and so women may not respond as honestly or enthusiastically as they want to. They are then labeled as “passive” when in reality they may be very actively protecting themselves from harm. (Baker Miller, 1986, pp. 54-55)

Another way women have been mis-labeled concerns the importance women place on initiating and maintaining relationship. Many, but not all, women often will try very hard to keep a relationship going, as can be seen by the actions of the women in this study. Some women may go to unimaginable lengths – unimaginable in the eyes of men, that is. Then, these women are called “needy” or “dependent” in that they “need” to be in relationship and that is viewed as a weakness, a trait that impedes what, to many men seem the much more worthy pursuits of “getting ahead” in an occupation, of pursuing and achieving their own goals at the expense of others.

Women are called “emotional” in a derogatory way by our society. To be emotional is to be weak, unable to “take the pressure”, not “strong” enough. Men can be emotional as long as that emotion manifests as something like loud happiness, as when a favorite team wins the game, or as anger or some other threatening or dangerous display. In fact, it is culturally acceptable for men to be emotional about sports (Baker Miller, 1986; Jaggar, 1989) maybe because the men who are cheering or in deep despair at the fortunes of their team identify themselves vicariously as part of the team and so allow themselves to react emotionally. When a man reacts emotionally in a culturally acceptable way, that is good. When a woman reacts emotionally, that is weak, or threatening to the status quo, as when she responds with anger.

As women have been finding their voices, one of the important things they have done is to name this mis-labeling and to recognize these maligned traits as the strengths they really are. This will be subsequently shown in the discussion of the studies below. Kate spoke at length about how she had to work to find her emotions, especially the emotion of anger. Once she was able to admit that she was indeed angry with many things in her life, she found that her anger propelled her to change and to grow in her life.

### **Re-thinking Strength**

In Chapter 4, I wrote about how the women in the study thought that their experiences of change and subsequent lifestyle changes had made them stronger people. They viewed their strengths in terms of being able to compete in the outside world, obtain and thrive in stressful but rewarding jobs, provide single handedly for their children, go back to school for higher education, find support people, buy and sell real estate or

manage their own finances. These are all strengths, recognized by our society as such and viewed by these women as proof they can “make it” in the world outside of marriage. However, all the women in this study have also exhibited another trait that may or may not be recognized for the strength it truly is by them and by society. That is the strength of being able to initiate, nurture and maintain relationships.

Gilligan (1982, 1993) and Baker Miller (1986) discuss the importance of interrelationship or affiliation to women and how, because this trait is not usually recognized as strength by male society, women have actually been “punished” by being labeled “needy” or “immature” for wanting to be in relationship. These authors argue that “immaturity” is not the issue at all. At issue is the way that psychological studies on maturity levels and autonomy have mainly studied college-aged men and then inserted women into the results, as if the psychological development of men and women is identical. Regarding affiliation, Baker Miller writes that although every person starts out in affiliation to others, boys are encouraged to become independent, to develop power and skills and are then rewarded for this “autonomy”. Women are encouraged by our society to stay in this affiliative state and to transfer this affiliation to men. Women do change and develop but also continue to value attachment. Baker Miller suggests that “the parameters of the female’s development are not the same as the male’s and ... the same terms do not apply. Women can be highly developed and still give great weight to affiliations” (p. 86). She argues that it is just this ability to seek and then sustain relationships that women have that, if recognized for the strength it is, could lead to the development of “...an entirely different (and more advanced) approach to living and

functioning” (p. 83) where “affiliation is valued as highly as, or more highly than, self-enhancement” (p. 83) and which could ultimately allow everyone in our society to conclude “that for everyone – men as well as women – individual development proceeds *only* by means of connection” (p. 83) as opposed to society’s idea that individual development means being better, stronger, smarter and more powerful than those around you and that “toes need to be stepped on” in order to succeed, that is, the stereotypical aggressive “self-made man”.

Rose (1990) asked women to talk about what “inner strength” meant to them in terms of their lived experience. The women described many of the same concepts that the participants in my research had mentioned. None of the women equated inner strength with having power over others. Instead, they talked about “quintessing” or becoming “the most perfect embodiment of self” (p. 62) by “recognizing” what would bring the most happiness by listening to her own feelings, by “becoming” a more authentic person, “accepting” themselves with their own set of values and beliefs that they thought were right for them and by “being” authentic with themselves and others, that is, living their lives in a way that corresponded to their values and beliefs. Some spoke of how they “centered” themselves by focusing on situations and how they would handle them authentically, and of “quiescencing” or “the process of becoming, seeking and being quiet, calm and at rest” (p. 63), much as Kate does with her meditation. Some described inner strength as “apprehending intrication”, the ability to see the complexity in situations and a tolerance for that complexity so that information can be gained from many more pieces of the puzzle to see a situation in a more complete and truer way. The women

discussed the value of “introspecting” or being aware or looking deeply inside their thoughts and feelings in order to better understand how they have come to be who they are, and how they can continue to grow, even if that growth might be painful or fearful. The women used “humor”, as Lyn did in our conversation, as a strength because it allowed them to “freshen their perspectives, to release energy, to gain distance in order to keep focused, to feel lightness in intense situations and to see both sides, or the paradox in life” (p. 65).

The theme of “interrelating” as an inner strength echoes the writings of Baker Miller and also the conversations with the women in my study. The women in Rose’s study found that interrelating with others seemed to produce a mutual energizing. The women spoke of the “authentic connection between two people” (Rose, p. 66) that involves giving to others and receiving from others in an open, loving and genuine way. Lyn and Kate referred to this give and take when speaking about relationships in their lives with friends, family and support people. Laura found a sense of strength by interconnecting with others in her job to start up and maintain the running of programs that benefit the clients she works with. In fact, the theme of interrelating can be seen as the bedrock for many other things women do in their lives, it is the ground women stand on to give and receive strength.

The women in Rose’s study also defined inner strength as “having capacity”, or “the ability to heal, to solve problems, to stay present, to face pain and to recognize when one does not have the capacity” (Rose, p. 66). They accepted and even “embraced their vulnerability”, allowing themselves to not always be in control, not always know

everything, to be “weak” sometimes – “...it’s okay to be weak too” (Lyn). By letting themselves seek help, the women saw themselves learning and growing and remaining flexible.

Ford-Gilboe (2000) discusses strengths from a related, yet slightly different view, that of the strengths of families where the mother is parenting alone. Since Lyn, Laura and Pam represent women in this position, a study of this kind is valuable in validating strengths discussed by these women. Ford-Gilboe’s study suggests that single-parent families where the parent is the mother are more similar to two-parent families than different from them. In particular, family cohesion, that is, attachments within a family that engender emotional closeness, was identified by both groups as the foundation that the family strength is built on and a key factor helping them cope with difficult situations, including their physical and mental health (p. 54). The author also discusses ways of coping that may be unique to single-parent families. For example, optimism and pride may be a more critical strength for mother-led families. These traits may help a family to continue to try to cope with the concerns of everyday life that are made more oppressive by the labels of “weakness, dependency and a bleak future” (p. 55) so often leveled against them by the dominant discourse. Ford-Gilboe also discusses the more non-traditional sex-role beliefs her study found in the single mothers in terms of a strength that needs to be recognized in that it helps these mothers to “more readily accept themselves as legitimate and capable family leaders, a difficult transition for many women” (p. 55) and “assist(s) these women to resist negative messages about the worth of their families and to move forward and redesign family life” (p. 55).

Schreiber, Stern & Wilson (2000), studied the concept of strength in women, specifically the idea of having to “be strong” as reported in their study of ways Black West-Indian Canadian women tend to cope with depression. These women saw themselves as stronger than White women, due to their history and that cultural icon, the Black mother. The women discussed four ways of “being strong”, three of which were culturally approved ways for them to manage depression. They included withdrawing from the world and not letting others know of their plight, because if others did know, “...they would shame her by saying ‘Get it together, girl!’ or ‘We’re strong, you got to be strong’” (p. 41). They told themselves that life is a struggle, there are certain things they need to accept and that nothing can be done about them, further reinforcing their need to suffer privately. Showing compassion, another method of “being strong” became a negative coping skill, because at the same time they were viewing the actions of others with compassion and forgiving actions that may have been inconsiderate, they themselves began to take responsibility for the wrongs they were forgiving in others. The authors write, “Showing compassion enables a woman to feel a sense of competence in being able to transcend ‘petty’ problems. However, by being compassionate she assumes more responsibility for what is happening in her world and thus adds to her already heavy burden” (p.41).

The fourth way these women used to deal with depression was by “diverting themselves”, that is, doing other things to distract them. For example, they all had a strong belief in Christianity and prayed, read the Bible and asked God to help them with their depressions. Some decided to think positively and to choose to be happier. Others

sought out therapists to help them. These women seemed to be the ones who recovered more fully from their depressions. By looking to sources outside of themselves for help, they were able to stop trying to be so “strong”, embrace their vulnerability and accept that they can be weak and need help. These new sources of help opened a space where the women could begin to see that their depressions might be caused by their social situations and not because they were “not strong enough”. Instead of trying to live up to the myth of the “earthy mother goddess who has built-in capacities to deal with all manner of hardship without breaking down physically or mentally” (hooks, 1993, quoted in Schreiber et al, 2000, p. 43), some of these women used this new knowledge to make changes in their lives that increased self-esteem and living conditions. Finally, the authors concluded that ““being strong’ [as defined by the women in the study] may be a factor in inducing depression and slowing or preventing recovery for some women...” (p. 44).

By viewing women’s strengths differently, it becomes apparent that not only are women able to be strong in many of the ways defined by the dominant discourse, women also have important strengths not identified or valued by the dominant culture but which are crucial if society is to continue to develop. Instead of being made to feel “less than” because of these strengths, women need to value them and recognize these strengths and capabilities. Since the beginning of this project, I definitely have experienced a shift in my own thinking regarding the strength of connectedness with others. I had not really thought of connectedness as a strength in my own or other women’s lives. In fact, I have to admit that I have used the term “needy” to apply to men and women who demonstrate this trait. However, I now see the ability to be in relationship with others as the strength it

is. I have stopped feeling “weak” and “needy” myself because I long to be in relationship. In fact, I have become proud of the ability people have to be able to initiate and nurture relationships that hopefully will result in mutual growth and not subservience of one person to the other(s).

### **Trust**

During the brief time I spent talking with these five women, and afterwards, as I listened over and over to the tapes of the conversations and thought about what they had shared, I realized there was one all-important concept they were conveying to me. These five women trusted me. I was taken into their homes and offered insights into their lives that were so personal, sometimes so overwhelming, that even as I think about it now, I am still in awe of the process. They conferred on me the privilege of seeing them in their raw-est, most vulnerable states. Sometimes they confirmed their trust directly, as when Kate said, “This is weird, and I never shared this with anybody, but...” or when Laura shook her head and stated, “God, I’m baring my soul...”. Mostly, their trust was implied in the content of our discussions. And they each were well aware that this study would be bound and available for anyone to read, so to an extent, they trust you, the reader, as well. But it is probably very different to trust an unseen and anonymous reader who only knows you by a pseudonym with very few other real identifying life details, than to sit before another person at a table in front of a tape recorder recalling truly painful moments of a life and laying them out for me to see.

I have wondered about what components in this particular situation engendered such an amount of trust in these women. Part of it could have been that I am another

woman, another nurse, of a similar age to them. Did I give off an aura of having been through a complex and at times bruising life myself and so implicitly make myself one of them? I didn't mean to, but during a conversation as opposed to an interview, expressions are shared, words are spoken. I believe they trusted in the processes of the clearly stated ethics of the data collection process I had written and reviewed with them before every conversation. I tried hard to remain an accepting and non-judgmental listener.

I have heard it said that when people are asked which professions they place the most trust in, nursing inevitably places in the top two or three. Maybe I was able to see that in action in these interviews. I was ready to see strength and weakness and questioning and love and the importance of relationship in these conversations. I was not ready for simple trust the women placed in me to hear them and accept them for who and where they are. And now I can feel that they would trust me to treat them and their stories right, to try to understand their words on a deeper level, to learn and grow as a result of our conversations, even to change the way I see and appreciate the lives we live. I can now see the women as teachers who show me and you, the reader, their lives as illustrations of the way the human spirit endures even in the face of great loss, and grows stronger and wiser in the process.

### **Hope**

As I thought and wrote about these women and their ideas about being in relationship and being alone and finding another relationship to be in, the contradictions, the ambiguities of life became evident. Some people might wonder, "Four of the women were in relationships that robbed them of their dignity, their voice, their peace of mind,

their physical and emotional safety. After years, they say they are still in the process of healing from these relationships. They have found themselves, they have interesting careers, enjoyable hobbies, good friends and support systems, their own money, make their own decisions, do what they want to do. Why would they want to get into another relationship?" I have previously discussed the importance of affiliation to many women, how women are socialized to be caregivers, and the ideology we live under that says to be alone is bad, to be with someone else is good. All those layers of discussion are valid.

Gadamer (1999) wrote that in order to understand what is said, we must "go back behind what is said, then we inevitably ask questions beyond what is said" (p. 370). As I look further into the texts of these women, past what may be considered the obvious answers to my question, I can recognize at some deep level, the next question I need to ask. Am I seeing hope in the stories of these women? People with hope have the strength to keep persevering through difficult times. Hope may be the bedrock we need in order to carry on. Could it be that without hope, there is not strength? One of my assumptions was that women are strong, but that strength may not be defined or recognized as such by the dominant discourse. I was busy looking for strength, and I found it.

What I did not at first see was the hope these women carried with them, even through the roughest times. The hope was not spoken about, maybe not recognized explicitly by the women. I did not see it either, at first. But how else do I explain Lyn, whose marriage I have described previously, now a centered self-sufficient interesting woman who has grown so much since her divorce, telling me she would love to get married again? How to explain Pam, who described her marriage as six years that seemed

like six million and took desperate measures to leave it - remarrying. What of Kate, who is working so hard to open her horizons, to become the woman she knows is inside of her. Would she be working so hard on herself if she could not see hope for her future? Phyllis is able to balance the grief of her children moving out of the family home with the thought/hope that they have made the right choices. And Laura, who has such pride and high hopes in her children, who struggled (with hope for the future) to make a new life for her family after her divorce, and now hesitantly wonders if there might be a new relationship down the road for her.

Maybe I think I recognize this hope because I feel hopeful for myself. I say the hope was not spoken about, but words are only a part of communication. In the things they told me, body language, interest in learning about life, about themselves, the expressions on their faces, they seemed to express hope. Not one of these women has given up. They have carried on, often through much adversity, to come to the better places they are in now. That is not to deny they are despondent at times. But these women have not given up. Neither have I given up. Am I seeing hope here because I feel a bond with the women, or on the other hand, is it the hope that I see in them that helps to create a bond between them and me?

Gadamer writes, "A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting... the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning... interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation" (p. 267). I do

not remember feeling consciously hopeful when this project began although I must have felt it in order to make the commitment to carry it out. Nor did I consciously feel hopeful as I started to interpret the conversations. But there came a sudden realization at some point that what I was seeing in these women was hope for the future, and when I looked further to myself, I realized I also had hope and hopes. I want certain things to happen and I think there is a reasonable possibility that they will happen. Like these women, I am not certain, but I hold out hope, I have a feeling that my desires may come to pass.

Kate mentioned how she has learned so much from people with chronic illness. She sees their hope as “more a spirituality... If they had some – even if it was basic – going to Tai Chi or yoga or meditation, that helped them more than all the pills and all the medicines in the world. So having that inner peace really helped them move along.” Now she is beginning to meditate, reflect and do yoga as well. She sees it as “very freeing. It’s like getting rid of all the pollution in your head and in your body, and afterwards, it comes together. You’re more aware of yourself and your feelings.” She does not mention the concept of hope for herself, but I wonder if she sees herself as recovering from a chronic illness as well, the illness of shut down emotions, of loss of voice and control of her life that she is working so hard to recover.

In a very understated way, Laura spoke of what I see as a hope for the future. I’m not sure she would even define what she holds as “hope”, maybe more of an uncertain hopefulness, a wish but not even that straightforward. In fact, as I reread these sentences I think I see so many emotions that a middle-aged divorced woman with children and a full-time job might have, because I am all those things myself. Laura said, “But

sometimes I wonder about getting old though. Like I don't think of myself as being old. I think – I think it will be okay because of relationships and broad interests and always learning and caring and children and grandchildren and so on. And who knows, because I don't feel I have the opportunity but I don't know if I could live with someone, but I can't imagine, either, being madly in love again. But I don't know.”

In that one paragraph I can see so many different parts of the puzzle. There is the feeling of disbelief in the number of candles on the birthday cake because I certainly do not feel that age – that age being the age we were never going to get to because only our mothers or grandmothers ever got to be that age and it could never happen to us. There is the recognition that we have some supports in this age, for example our different relationships and hobbies. There is the merest hint of a longing to be in a romantic relationship while at the same time greatly valuing her autonomy and independence.

I think that many people could find their own thoughts echoing in Laura's words. There is still that flicker of hope even though...

## **CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING**

There is no easy leaping over the only systems of thought and language that we have inherited. But we are now becoming increasingly aware of the need for new assumptions and new words.

Jean Baker Miller, Toward a New Psychology of Women

### **Third Daughter Syndrome**

I used to believe I knew what it was like to be pregnant and to birth a baby. After all, I have been a perinatal educator and nurse and a mother. I used to believe that birth, despite (or because of) the pain and hard work was essentially a joyous time for mothers, a time to cherish and love the new arrival, to welcome the baby into a loving family, an added source of happiness. I used to believe that baby girls were loved as much as baby boys.

I used to believe that the best way for children to grow up was inside a two-parent family, and that parents should make every effort to stay together because that environment was the one most conducive to healthy physical and emotional growth. I used to believe that one could judge the happiness of a marriage by watching how the couple interacted.

I used to believe that working with male clients was somehow “easier” than working with female ones. I used to believe that female clients were much more “needy”, always asking for help, complaining more, generally much more work than male clients.

There was even a time when I believed, as a nurse, I “knew” what clients needed to do in order to reclaim or enhance health.

I am much less sure of these beliefs now. What happened to me along the way? I used to be so sure about so many things. In the past few years, I have begun to realize how much I have been influenced, indoctrinated by the ideologies of the culture and society I live in. If we are constructed by our experiences, we are constantly in the process of re-construction as our lives change. We are like buildings that are never finished – take out a wall here, add a room there, re-paint. Sometimes we are actually de-constructed, or as both Lyn and Kate described it, “devastated”. Our experiences can become so different from the ones we have grown accustomed to, that our sense of self is changed. We experience something that may turn our world around, cause us to understand a seemingly familiar event in a new way. This de-construction and subsequent re-construction can be very difficult, but may result in a personal view of the world that is wider, deeper, more accepting and compassionate of the experiences of others.

The lens I view the world through is that of a middle class, middle aged, educated white woman. To many in the feminist community (Alcoff, 1999; Barbee, 1994; Lorde, 1984(a)), those characteristics, many or all of which might be perceived as advantages, would bring my claim to being a feminist into question. I may be labeled elitist, a dilettante who does not know what it really means to live under the multiple layers of oppression endured by so many other women. I may not be quite oppressed enough, in the opinion of some.

When we see others and their circumstances, it is so often through a subjective lens. We see through experiences we have had, prejudices we have been taught, through the lens of the ideology we live under. That brings me to the “third daughter syndrome”.

I work as a nurse on a Post Partum unit at a big city hospital with a very multi-cultural client population. I now realize how naïve I was about the birthing practices of other cultures. I learned that in some cultures, colostrum is considered “dirty” and is discarded. I learned that in some cultures, birth is *really* a family affair, families are large and extended and everyone in the family makes the visit to the hospital to congratulate the new parents and visit and hold the new baby. I learned what female circumcision looks like. None of these learnings had such a great impact on me as what I learned about birthing a third daughter.

In some families, women who give birth to a third daughter without having produced a son are viewed as failures. When they are discharged home, they are at risk of emotional, verbal and, in some cases, physical abuse by other family members. Nurses who have worked on this Post Partum ward longer than I, tell of having to discharge women into shelters because the women were too afraid to take a third daughter home from the hospital. My view of the world was suddenly fractured. I could barely believe what I was hearing. Women afraid to take healthy beautiful daughters home? Family members who saw the new mother as failing in her role as the provider of sons and therefore deserved to be abused? This is Canada, this is the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not the start of the 12<sup>th</sup> century – how could this still be happening? I experienced that shift in world view that necessitates a re-construction of everything I thought I knew. This became one of those turning points that impacted on how I nursed.

### **Becoming a Stronger Advocate for Women**

The women in this study discussed how they saw their turning points and subsequent development affecting how they practiced nursing. Many of the women see themselves as much stronger advocates for their women clients than they did before. Lyn said, “I certainly am a lot more aware of women’s issues and especially around abuse and control, and... family violence... I think until you’ve been in an abusive relationship or gone through problems with your kids – you really can’t understand until you’ve gone through it.” She definitely can see a purpose to her struggles now: “But realizing that... a big part of my purpose is to be able to share what I have learned with other women and other people. That hopefully, to help them see their strengths... and they are important. And that they can build on it, whether it’s something like just being a good mom or whatever it may be. So I think that’s been a big thing for me.”

Kate, especially, mentioned several times how she has come to view herself as an advocate for the women she works with. “...I think that’s changed the way I do my nursing practice. I’m more of an advocate for [women], I’m more of a role model and I’m teaching them to be more assertive and to stand up for their rights... I think I’m a lot stronger advocate for women... I really do my utmost to make sure she finds out what resources are out there and what she can do to help herself... Yeah, if anything I think this whole process has made me a stronger advocate for women. And I think that’s how I got the last job – the last 2 jobs were more advocacy for single women that are young moms and advocacy for people with chronic disease.”

Phyllis described how her turning point of becoming a mother changed her previous love of Pediatrics and pointed her in a whole new direction of nursing that she has enjoyed ever since. “After I had my own kids, I didn’t enjoy working on Pediatrics quite as much... I could relate more to what the parents were going through and it bothered me a lot. So every baby that came in sick, I’d think ‘Oh, what if that was my baby? ... I got pulled to Post Partum and I thought, ‘This is better.’ And previous to that, when I was in training, I thought Post Partum was the most boring place in the whole world! Why would anyone work there?...the only Post Partum experience I’d had was when I was a student so I was probably 19 or 20 trying to tell these moms how to breastfeed?...So yeah, my career focus definitely changed after I had little kids.”

Laura discussed at length how her advocacy efforts in her job have resulted in new programs in the community that benefit the people in her area of the city. Even Pam, who never wanted to be a nurse, found her niche in nursing because of her turning point.

Robin. “So you did your midwifery.”

Pam. “Yeah.”

Robin. “And – did you like it any better than nursing?”

Pam. “I – it was okay – no, I didn’t like it, not very much. The only part I enjoyed was, well, learning it but I didn’t like labor and delivery. I loved Post Partum. And that’s why I am still on the same floor, working the same kind of job.”

It is interesting to speculate on whether these women would have found themselves as strongly advocating for the women they work with if their lives had taken a different path. Is it possible to speak out strongly for the rights of other women without

having the same feelings of entitlement in your own life? Is it possible to recognize the advocacy needs of women in the community when you cannot see your own needs for advocacy, for gaining your own voice and for feeling your own self-esteem?

Kate did identify her marriage breakup as the catalyst to go back to school, where her women's studies courses helped her to identify the needs of women as well as helped her to regain her own voice. Lyn identified her experiences in her own marriage to a man who spent a lot of time away from home as helping her to "be a lot more aware and a lot more sensitive to where women are at...I certainly feel a lot more compassion for people, and understanding for women whose – just simple things like women whose husbands are gone a lot and they're at home raising the kids..."

Although Pam did not talk about it, I wonder if her experiences may have engendered an increased empathy and compassion for the women she cares for, many of whom are new immigrants, whose English language skills may be quite limited, and who find themselves birthing their babies in a milieu that may be totally foreign to how they have lived previously. She is called frequently by other staff members to translate for women of her community. She is able to explain the actions/traditions of that culture surrounding childbirth that may seem foreign or even dangerous or unhealthy for the new mother and baby to nurses not familiar with these customs and practices.

There seem to be some experiences that do, indeed, make us more compassionate, more empathetic care givers. The turning points the women in this study have described seem to have done just that in their nursing careers. These five women have grown so

much as nurses, because of the turning points and altered life experiences they have gained. They have gained strength and wisdom through adversity.

### **Implications for Nursing Practice**

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed topics that have implications for nursing practice. As I discuss these nursing implications in the following section, I am aware that they are all interconnected, and to discuss each of them separately is to discuss them artificially. However, for ease of discussion, I have chosen to separate them.

I also believe that although these concepts may have been discussed previously in other texts, they need reiteration. I will be discussing concepts that fly in the face of much of what the patriarchy we live under would have us believe. We live embedded within the patriarchy. The dominant discourses of this patriarchy color our assumptions, beliefs and prejudices through language, education and socialization. Women and men need to constantly and consciously recognize and reflect on how we have been affected by these discourses. We need to replace the old ideologies with ones that are more conducive to our mutual survival and growth.

I believe that new ways of being in the world are needed, ways that truly value the feminine. This requires us to think about ourselves and the world we inhabit in new and critical ways, to re-construct how we think we know the world and how we think we know ourselves. Jaggar (1989) writes, “The reconstruction of knowledge is inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves” (p. 148). This reconstruction is difficult and needs to be repeated, to be taught to each generation, not to be forgotten. It cannot be allowed to be dismissed, legislated against or extinguished by force.

By discussing these concepts (which are essentially feminist thought) as implications for nursing, I make a political statement, and in the process, open up this way of being in the world to readers who might not otherwise have been exposed to it in this context.

### **Empowered nursing**

Women need to continue to re-define what is meant by “strengths” in women and recognize that traits mis-labelled as “weaknesses” in the dominant culture are in reality the strengths/traits that may well advance all of society, benefiting men as well as women. Women need to continue to learn to recognize and to value our strengths, and see them as valid (Baker Miller, 1976, 1986). For example, in the patriarchy we live under, strong need and desire for connection with others has been mis-labelled as “dependency”. To be “dependent” in a dominant culture that values autonomy, power and control over, is to be defined as weak, deficient or deviant. On the other hand, to value the initiation and maintenance of connection to others, to value empowerment rather than power over, might rather be recognized as traits humankind needs now in order to survive and thrive. Where have the hallmarks of the patriarchy led our world? Aggression against others, self-enhancement at any cost, the destruction of the environment and the domination of many of the world’s people is not leading us to a happier, more fulfilling , healthy future.

Women have been labeled “passive” by the dominant discourse. Much of the work women do is not recognized as “action” by the patriarchy because it is in the service of promoting development in others, not as a way toward self-enhancement at the expense of others. However, considered another way, working to promote development

in others can be seen as being “active”. Women who actively pursue their own goals may or may not be perceived by men as doing “real work” if it involves caring for others, especially the elderly, children and other women. There is a myth that nurses who work in areas where there is an abundance of machinery, for example, the intensive care ward, must be “better” nurses, they must know more, have more skills. These nurses *are* skilled and knowledgeable. However, I wonder if the perception of these nurses as “real” nurses as opposed to nurses who work with new mothers (another myth is that “anybody can work Post Partum”), or the elderly, has arisen out of a dominant culture enamored by machinery, one that seems to put more faith in machines than in people? What message does this send to practicing nurses and to nursing students deciding where they want to practice?

Empowerment in nursing, rather than power over, is a concept that values connection. In a grounded study of sixteen female nursing students, Boughn & Lentini (1999) found both “a desire to care for others” and “an interest in power, both for themselves and for others” (p. 156) as major motivating factors in the career choice of these students. The students perceived that nursing would provide opportunities to empower themselves and their clients, for example by continuing on with their education and eventually educating others, by working with organizations to reshape the profession and to foster independence in patients. I’m not sure how many people in the general population equate nursing with power and empowerment. How did these nursing students decide that nursing was a way to power for self and empowerment of others?

Falk Rafael (1998) discusses her findings regarding the characteristics of empowered caring by nurses. Empowered caring involves recognition of the oppressed status of women as caregivers and the imbalance of power that is embedded in our society and that needs to be addressed. The knowledge and skills of nurses are valued. Power is viewed as a change agent of society and culture. Empowered nurses use both traditional power bases, that is, association with people perceived as having the power to effect change, as well as colleagues. They cultivate multiple alliances, including but not limited to “nursing organizations, unions, nursing leaders, mentors and each other to find strength and support” (Falk Rafael, p. 38). Politicians, journalists and other types of caregivers are also enlisted to give help and support. Nurses feel empowered both by advancing their theoretical nursing education and by taking power in the clinical setting to protect, maintain and improve health care. These nurses feel a personal power that enables them to respond to or initiate change in a constructive and even transformative way. Nurse and client are “equally in relation... in determining the nature of their relationship and in making health care decisions” (p. 40). Empowered caring “often requires us to defy the restricted roles and behaviors that have been imposed on us [as nurses]” (p. 41). Empowered nursing sounds almost like the definition of feminist thought.

“In considering our practice as nurses we must listen for both the dominant and non-dominant discourses in the voices of women and in ourselves...we... live immersed in dominant narratives. Only by recognizing our complicity in sustaining these narratives will we be able to disrupt them, and to generate new possibilities for understanding the

experience for the woman and for ourselves” (McIntyre, Anderson & McDonald (2001) p. 61).

### **Recognizing and valuing emotions**

In our Western culture, one of the important dichotomies promulgated by the patriarchy is the one that contrasts “reason” and “emotion”. Reason, the ideology tells us, equals the intellectual, the cultural, the scientific, the universal, the public, the male. Emotion equals “the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private, and, of course, the female” (Jaggar, 1989, p. 129), that is, everything that the patriarchy considers weak and unimportant. However, feminist writers and researchers (Baker Miller, 1986; Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Griffin, 1982; Howard, 2001; Jaggar, 1989; Rose, 1990) discuss the social construction of emotions. We are taught appropriate ways to express emotions based on our status in society, and like most other teachings, the different ways emotions are felt and expressed within the culture are prescribed in an effort to maintain the status quo, that is the dominance of some and the submission of many. Once we understand this concept, it becomes easier to understand why women and other minorities are portrayed by the dominant discourse as more emotional, not so “in control” of our feelings, not as reasonable or mature. Everyone has emotions, but some are not able to recognize or to express them, even in cases where it would seem appropriate for men as well as women to do so. This appropriate display of emotion would seem to be beneficial for a society, and today there are many men, who might be considered part of the dominant structure, who are making attempts to “get in touch with their emotions”, other than the one accepted male emotion, anger. However, these men

run the risk of being labeled as not “real men”, both by other men and by some women, who, due to the indoctrination we all have received about how men are “supposed” to act, feel uncomfortable with men who express emotion. Women who present an unemotional, logically driven exterior, may be labeled as “not real women” by this same discourse (Davies, 1995; Jaggar, 1989).

It would seem that people need to be encouraged to recognize, accept and express reason and emotion, and to realize that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive, but that are both necessary to live a mutually tolerant and growth-oriented life. Women need to recognize and accept that the kinds of emotions Jaggar (1989) terms “outlaw emotions”, that is, emotions that are not conventionally acceptable for certain groups to express, like women expressing anger, may in reality be the emotions that are most appropriate to express in certain situations. These outlaw emotions can often be the ones that tell us there is something wrong with the way we are being treated, although we may not be able to name it at the time. These emotions may be the impetus women and other oppressed groups need to be able to start viewing their oppressed situatedness differently, more accurately, and then to work to change the inequalities they are now able to see. Jaggar writes, “Just as appropriate emotions may contribute to the development of knowledge so the growth of knowledge may contribute to the development of appropriate emotions” (p. 147).

As I spoke with some of the women in this study, this concept of being able to recognize and express emotions appropriately, especially the emotion of anger, became a recognizable strand in the conversations, especially in Kate’s case. She found it very

difficult to express her anger after a lifetime of learning to repress it. "Ideology is capable of masking many different kinds of appropriate angers" (Griffin, 1982, p. 284). Traditionally, anger is the emotion men have used against women. Anger contains the (sometimes) unspoken threat of aggression and injury or even death. "Anger is intimidating; indeed, that may be part of its evolutionary function. An angry person can do you physical harm; and angry tongue can slice you into emotional ribbons. Either way, anger will leave you bleeding on the sidewalk. Anger gives its possessor control" (Howard, 2001, pp. 324-325).

When Kate was able to recognize her anger as appropriate, she was able to start re-constructing her life after her traumatic marital break-up. Her anger fuelled her energy to further her education, to begin the difficult but growth oriented process of introspection that could help her become a more centered, self-knowledgeable person and healthier in body and mind. When women first begin to seriously explore their inner thoughts and feelings, often the first feelings to be recognized are those of anger, resentment or hatred, those that women have learned do not fit into the acceptable range of female emotions, especially if directed at men. In fact, these may be some of the first authentic emotions, the outlaw emotions, that a woman discovers, and can be a strengthening and motivating force (Baker Miller, 1986). Griffin (1982) writes, "But if I own my feelings and trace them to their origins, they lead me to a self-knowledge that is liberating and healing" (p. 288). Kate is living this concept of using "outlaw" emotions to help guide her growth.

This concept of being able to appropriately name and express emotions has nursing implications. It is socially acceptable for men to express anger, and in the case of a temporary or permanent loss of function or a health disability or disease, anger is one of the appropriate emotions. Are nurses more accepting of a male client expressing outrage at his situation, than a female client who expresses her anger? Might female nurses experience more distress in having to deal with an angry female patient, because as women, we are not as used to women expressing anger, and it makes us more uncomfortable? “Although a woman... is located in her own particular reality, she also resides in, and is complicit with the cultural stories...” (McIntyre, Anderson & McDonald, 2001, p. 53)

Are women clients able to accept their feelings of anger, or do they misinterpret them as sadness, vulnerability, increased need for connection or other emotions, all of which may be valid in the situation, but are not seen as anger? A woman experiencing a loss of health who does recognize her anger needs to be able to give herself permission to express it and as nurses, we need to consciously clear a space for her to be able to express it. A woman expressing anger should still expect to be cared for, instead of possibly thinking she needs to “weigh the odds” that her anger may alienate the nursing staff enough so that her care is jeopardized. Interestingly, men also seem to “weigh the odds” that expressing strong emotions might jeopardize their health care (Cameron, 1992). Anger, expressed in a way that does not damage those around and that is appropriate to the situation, can be a catalyst for change, a motivator towards increased physical, emotional or mental health. Griffin (1982) writes, “And in the end it is only when

feelings are accurately named and explored that we cease ultimately to destroy ourselves, in body and mind, with our anger” (p. 285).

Nurses need to examine and be aware of our own perceptions regarding the expressing of emotion in our clients and in ourselves. The expression of authentic emotions can become part of the healing process. It is dangerous for a person to judge what are “appropriate” emotions for another to have and to express. It has to be remembered that we as caregivers may never know even the partial story of the lives our clients live, that is, their particular situatedness. It is this particular situatedness that may result in expressions of emotion that may or may not be understandable to someone else. Culture and socialization also play huge roles in directing the expression of different emotions. This becomes important as our client base becomes more multicultural. “Appropriateness” in how emotions are expressed varies from culture to culture as well as individual to individual. As health care providers, nurses need to listen closely to what the clients are telling us, including how they express themselves emotionally. If the nurse is uncomfortable with this process, it is important for her to attempt to discover the root of this discomfort and when possible, to resolve issues in her own life that might increase her own health and comfort in various situations. As Kate has shown, this acceptance of emotions can be freeing and healing, both for client and caregiver.

### **Shedding new light on women’s experiences**

We need to continue to critically examine the mis-labeling of the experiences of women and to recognize where this mis-labeling has come from and why. Rose (1990) studied “the healthy functioning of women’s psychologic strength – inner strength – from

[the women's] own perspective" and concluded that "To gain authentic and valid understanding of inner strength requires a study grounded in female experience that elaborates, describes and explains women's behavior in an androcentric world" (p. 57).

More studies that focus on women and how they construct knowledge and experience the world are needed if we are to more fully understand the unique qualities that women possess. Phenomenological approaches that emphasize contextuality, the lived experience of everyday life, non-reductionism and reflexivity leading to increased understanding of the researcher herself and of the people who reflect her area of interest seem to be most appropriate for many, but not all, of the practice situations a nurse may find her/himself in. The focus of phenomenological research on increased understandings of the meanings of situations for people creates opportunities for nurses to find new or different, more relevant meanings in nursing experiences with clients. This expanded understanding can then be communicated to other people, promoting appropriate changes to practice and how we as nurses view clients (Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000).

### **Listening to women's conversations**

Levin (1989) writes that people need "to practice a thinking hearing: a thinking which listens, a listening which is thoughtful" (p.17). Nurses need to ask, "Do we really listen to our clients? Are we hearing what they want to tell us? Do we clear a space for clients to be able to tell us how their world is, what they need from us, or by our actions, words, and gestures, rob the client of her voice, silence her"?

To actively listen to another person is to stop and give that person my whole attention. I try to attend to not only her words, but her body language, the things she may

not be saying. I try to hear differently, more deeply, more interpretively. "Being vulnerable is difficult to manage. It makes it difficult to ever disclose your true state of being" (Cameron, 1992, p. 179). Clients of the health care system may experience increased feelings of vulnerability because they have lost the ability to control some part of themselves or to care for themselves. In our society, where control and power are central to the dominant discourse, is that loss of control and power perceived by the client and her caregivers as making her somehow "less than", living under a different layer of oppression, that of physical or emotional dis-ability? People who enter the health care system as clients become marginalized. "...the consequences... can range from having reduced access to resources and opportunities to being denied validation of one's understanding and interpretation of one's own experience" (McIntyre, Anderson & McDonald, 2001, p. 48)

As a nurse, I need to be aware of my client's possibly altered perception of herself in terms of her agency and of my own possible perceptions and assumptions regarding her. I must reflect on my attitudes in a way that brings to light ideas that may or may not be valid in respect to her situation. I need to be aware of the ideologies of the patriarchy we live under that value power, dominance, control and the suppression of emotion over the traits of showing emotion, being connected to others and caring for others.

"...we have less control over what we hear, and...hearing is inherently a less control-driven organ... It is easier for us to shut our eyes than close our ears. It is easier for us to remain untouched and unmoved by what we see than by what we hear" (Levin, p. 32). When I am with a woman who is experiencing pain, I see her facial expressions,

her grimaces. I watch her movements and gestures. But what I see does not affect me nearly as much as what I hear. The sound of her groaning or sobbing or swearing reaches me at a deeper gut level that affects me more than the visual information I gather from her. I may want to shut out the sounds that are so disturbing, but short of leaving the area, I cannot. If we nurses closed our eyes and only listened to our clients, would we, as Levin believes, be able to hear more fully, without the distraction of what we think we see?

“Hearing is intimate, participatory, communicative... hearing has been the representative of our feminine spirit...” (Levin, p. 32). To sit and truly listen to another person may appear to be “doing nothing”. In a society that dictates that “doing something is better than doing nothing”, to take the time to sit quietly with another may be judged as “wasting time”, not acting, and the opposite to activity is passivity. So sitting quietly and listening may be mis-defined as being passive. But listening to another authentically and respectfully may be the most active thing a person can do at that moment. When we do this we are communicating to the speaker that she is perceived as a person with value, who has a life outside of her present situation, who has important messages to communicate and that we are ready to acknowledge those messages, no matter how uncomfortable they may be to us (Cameron, 1992).

On another level, are we listening to ourselves, do we really hear what we say to clients, how and what we are communicating? Do we realize the power of language, the ability of a word to affect a situation? When I hear a nurse say to a new mother “I’m just going to steal your baby for a minute to do her vital signs in the nursery”, I wonder about how the nurse hears what she is saying. I wonder if she realizes what a powerful and

heart-stoppingly fearful word “steal” is to a new mother. The new mother, while recognizing the validity of the nurse’s request, may be conjuring up images, remembered news articles, made-for-television movies about babies being stolen. Is there some inner psychic alarm clanging inside this mother’s heart and head that she is trying to push back down as “irrational”? Is it just me feeling all these emotions irrationally? The new mother does not give any sign of distress. Am I blowing this phrase out of all proportion? How does my history as a mother affect how I interpret this communication? Conversely, does the situatedness of the other nurse blind her to the power of the word “steal” in connection with new babies?

We need to clear a space for women (including our women clients) to tell about their lives, what they see as important to them, what they think they need to regain or maintain health. When we are truly in conversation with another person, we may be better able to understand how they have constructed their world, how they function embedded within the dominant discourses and what influences they use to guide them. What parts of the dominant ideology do they acquiesce to and what parts do they fight against? “The tensions that arose in the women’s stories are best understood in the context of the complexity of their lives. One such tension was the difference between what the woman made central in her life and what society makes central... A woman constructs her story in the context of a particular life, whereas the societal construction considers only the general, ‘as if’ there were a universal social and material reality” (McIntyre et al., p. 52). Do they see the medical discourse as one they need to surrender to, or one that they can work with to achieve their own version of health?

How is the way my life is constructed conducive to or detrimental to the health of the clients I care for? Do we as health professionals feel we have the time to really converse with our clients or has the nature of the system itself eroded the time we all need to connect in a relational narrative? What do we see valued in the health care system today – time to spend with clients – a relational way of being – or the “bottom line”, get them in – get them out – “drive-through health care”?

### **Conclusion**

I began this study with the purpose of speaking with women about events in their lives that they identified as major turning points, and how these life changing experiences had affected how they found themselves situated in their worlds. I wondered about how language has been used by the dominant discourses in our Western culture to define status, rights and privileges and who does and does not have power and control. I was interested in the concept of “voice”: who has it, how does the patriarchy attempt to control women by robbing us of our “voice” and how have we regained it? I assumed I would find strengths in the women I spoke with, and I did. However, I came to realize that the concept of “strength” is also defined by the patriarchy. The women in this study exhibited traits I have learned to recognize as strengths, even if the patriarchy may define them differently. These are the strengths of initiating and maintaining connection, of working to promote development in others, the strength of co-operation, of compassion, of fierce parental love and of caring for others. They also displayed many of the strengths defined as such by the patriarchy, for example, control of their own finances, the confidence to buy and sell property, to travel, to further their education, to work in the

profession of nursing that may not be perceived as high-status by the dominant discourse, but that will become essential for many in society at some time. The women have had the courage as well as the need to seriously reflect on how their lives have progressed, and have been able to make changes in their lives that greatly increase their levels of health and well-being. They have faced adversity and succeeded in constructing a life that suits them, for the most part.

As I reflect on all I have learned throughout the course of my research, I find I have a renewed faith in the power of authentically conversing with another person. In order to be authentic, I will need to continue to think, read and practice recognizing the influences that guide the ways I interact with others including the clients I care for within the health care system. “Conversation... becomes the only alternative to ideology, mystification, and alienation of women from their experience... Speaking together, in personal voices and mutual narratives, women gain access to their own particular healths” (Gadow, 1994, p. 306).

We need to continue to learn to value difference, to see difference not as “less than” or “other” but as a way to expand our boundaries of thought, to learn from each other and to de-marginalize groups or individuals. The stereotype of the dysfunctional single-parent family fails to account for the potential and the strengths that researchers like Ford-Gilboe (2000) have documented and Lyn, Laura and Pam have shared from personal experience. Considering the increasing number of single-parent families in our culture today, more research is needed to consider how the functioning of single parent families affects the health status of family members as well as individual general well-

being. There are many different kinds of families outside of the prescribed nuclear family that work very well to raise happy healthy members who may possibly be more aware of different possibilities in their own lives because of the different roles their parent has needed to adopt. As Ford-Gilboe writes about the process of the discovery of strengths in people and situations that, at first glance, may not seem to hold much promise, “This process implies a willingness to disband stereotypical beliefs about families from specific groups and to be open to the uniqueness and possibilities that exist in even the most difficult of life circumstances” (p. 56).

I have truly learned from the women who participated in this study that strength comes in many different forms and even accepting vulnerability in self is a part of being strong. I am reminded that women are strong in their own ways, and these ways are more suited for the continuance of humankind than the aggressive, self-enhancing power and control we have been traditionally taught to regard as strength. I am reminded that learning and growth can be hard and painful, but even so, our goal should be to always strive to learn and grow. Sometimes the most beautiful world opens up to us on the other side of a hard lesson learned.

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**APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM**

Research Project Title: Turning Points: Women Speak about  
Events that Changed Their Lives

Investigator: Robin J. O'Connor

Faculty of Nursing Supervisor: Dr. Marjorie McIntyre

**This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, please feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.**

You are invited to be part of a study where women will talk with me about something experienced in the course of life that has changed the way you have chosen to conduct the way you live your life. As a nurse reflecting on what you have shared with me, I am better able to understand the life-experiences of others, and of myself. This will allow me to become more sensitive to the needs of others in similar or even dissimilar situations and ultimately to give more perceptive and sensitive nursing care.

The conversations will likely be 1-3 hours long. They will be audio-taped so that I can listen to them, reflect on what you have shared with me, and be written out to be examined more closely.

You can choose a code name to identify yourself. That code name will be used on the written manuscript so no one but I will be able to identify you in the written transcripts.

The transcripts will be used, in whole or in part, in my thesis, and may be used in presentations, teaching situations or scholarly publications.

You may want to share personal journals, artwork, poetry, photos etc. to help me understand your experiences in a richer way. You can decide when you would like these things back. If you allow me to keep them in my possession throughout the study, they will be returned to you at the study conclusion.

During the study, the audio-tapes and written manuscripts will be locked in a filing cabinet in my office. All the tapes will be erased three years after the study is finished. The written manuscripts will be destroyed after three years. The computer files concerning the information you give me will be password protected, which means only I will have the password that allows the files to be read. These files, including your name and code name will be deleted after three years.

Our conversations can be held anywhere we will both be comfortable and have privacy.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. Consent to participate in the study includes consent for our conversations to be audio-taped. Consent also agrees that any or all information you share with me can be used by me in my thesis or in subsequent teaching situations, presentations or scholarly publications. Your identity will always be kept strictly concealed.

You are free to withdraw from all or part of the study at any time. In the event that you suffer injury as a result of participation in this research, the researcher or the University of Calgary will provide no treatment or compensation for you.

If you become emotionally distressed during the conversational interview, a referral to a qualified health care professional will be suggested to discuss your concerns. Any expenses associated with such a referral will be your responsibility and not those of the researcher or the University of Calgary.

You still have all your legal rights. Nothing said here about treatment or compensation alters your right to recover damages.

**Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. 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 without jeopardizing your health care. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matter related to this research, please contact:**

Robin O'Connor B.N., M.N. (c)

289-0638

Dr. M. McIntyre

220-8847

**If you have any questions concerning your rights as a possible participant in this research, please contact Pat Evans, Associate Director, Internal Awards, Research Services, University of Calgary, at 220-3782.**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator and/or Designate's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Witness' Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date**

**A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**