TRUE COLORS:
THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF FULFILLING LIFE PATHS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Clinical Psychology
Specialty in Somatic Psychology

by
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This is to certify that the dissertation entitled:

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is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Clinical Psychology (Specialty in Somatic Psychology).

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Abstract

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This qualitative study investigated the interconnection of fulfilling life paths, women, and the body. Drawing upon traditional theories of fulfillment, positive psychology, feminist and diversity studies, as well as somatic psychology, the research explored how women experience fulfillment and what role, if any, the body plays in helping women find and navigate fulfilling life paths. Following an interpretive phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis, combined with case studies and informed by intersectionality and somatic awareness, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven women aged 46-71. The participants' experiences indicated that women's experiences of fulfillment are linked with the following: (1) a sense of *connection with something bigger* than themselves; (2) *oppressive forces* stemming from sociocultural, religious, and family beliefs and behaviors; (3) the process of *crisis, conflict, and metamorphosis*; (4) discovering the meaning and means to live *true to self*; and (5) *bestowing life learnings* to others. The findings help to place women's experiences of fulfillment within a sociocultural context, pointing towards the importance of addressing both internal and external sources of conflict. A tri-level understanding of the body's role in fulfilling life paths is also discussed, which includes physical, sociocultural, and internal/experiential dimensions.

Acknowledgments

Coming to the end of this journey and looking back, I am somehow struck that writing a dissertation takes longer than creating an actual human being! Yes indeed, this has been a long pregnancy and birth, with innumerable hours sitting alone with myself in front of my computer. Yet I am grateful for the many "midwives," helping hands and companions that have accompanied me in this journey – sometimes through long talks, sometimes offering quiet steady support at a distance. Without these companions, I simply would not have made it to the point of writing these very words of thanks.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> "Just sheer life cannot be said to have a purpose, because look at all the different purposes it has all over the place. But each incarnation, you might say, has a potentiality, and the mission of life is to live that potentiality."
>
> – Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 1988

As evident in popular culture's extensive self-help literature and media dedicated to women's issues, women are searching: searching to discover what fulfillment means and how to manifest it in their lives (Gore, 2010; Huffington, 2006; Orman, 2007; Perle, 2006; Robertson, 2008). The study of the quest for fulfillment is not new, harkening its psychological roots to Maslow's concept of self-actualization (1943) and Jung's theory of individuation (1989). Spiritual searches for enlightenment, mythology's tales of the hero's journey, and aboriginal rituals of initiation echo throughout time and inform our understanding of this universal yet diverse quest (Campbell, 1988). Fulfillment refers to the experience of something as deeply satisfying: of meeting one's potential. Fulfilling life paths bridge inner and outer worlds, reflecting both an internal experience and its external manifestations in everyday life; perhaps found through creative expression, work, spirituality, relationships, some combination of all of these, or something else all together. Most of the foundational literature and cultural archetypes of fulfillment are based on men's perceptions and experiences, or rigid and generalized notions of what it means to be a woman. Yet what of women's journeys toward fulfillment in particular? How are women finding their ways in life – in themselves, with others, and in the world at large? And where does the body fit into these experiences of self-discovery and its expression? These questions unveil fertile and timely ground for exploration.

My exploration of fulfillment addresses the larger issue of what it means to be a woman in the United States at this point in history amidst the early 21st century. As we touch down on the other side of this second millennium, many doors have opened to women supporting greater possibilities for self-actualization. Growing awareness of sexism and the oppressive nature of gender socialization has instigated changes in role expectations, social policy, and general attitudes toward women and men alike (Miller, 1986; Rountree, 2000; Tong, 2009). These changes are indebted to feminism, civil rights, and other social change movements which have challenged deeply entrenched views and social structures that create barriers to "the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness."

Change has come, and yet that change is partial and not comprehensive. The barriers to self-knowledge and self-expression as women still exist – both inside and out. With open doors come new challenges. For example, the traditional feminine ideal of wife/mother/homemaker no longer dominates the American status quo of expectations for many women. Yet the pressures to marry and have children live on, now in addition to pursuing a career; all by a certain vague but ever-present age (Miller, 1986; Rountree, 2000). Women face the new lofty standard that they can "have it all," *should* have it all, and are deeply flawed if they do not (Baker & Greenberg, 2007; Levy, 2009; Mack, 2007). These pressures and unresolved conflicts can manifest as depression, anxiety, physical health issues, eating disorders, and relationship conflict (Chesler, 2005; Ehrenreich & English, 2005; Debold, Tolman & Brown, 1996; Worell & Goodheart, 2006). How do women find their way through internalized standards to discover what is uniquely right for them? As they identify their chosen paths in life, what challenges do women face along the way – psychologically, physically, spiritually, financially, in

relationships, as well as in the social institutions in which they engage? And how do they reconcile those challenges in their ongoing quest for fulfillment?

In addition to the complexities of internal pressures and social expectations, women's identity remains centrally tied to the body. Throughout history, women have been objectified as bodies to be conquered for male pleasure and power (Butler, 1993; Eisler, 1995 & 1995; Price & Shildrick, 1999). Women have been equated with the body as reproductive vessels, exploited through prostitution as commodity and economic gain, and dehumanized by violent crimes throughout the world. Current statistics on violence against women in the U.S. report the shocking yet sober reality that one out of three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused during her lifetime; and one in every six women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape (Washington State Department of Health, 2010).

Side by side such violence, women have been trained to equate themselves with physical beauty as defined by a patriarchal gaze. Some would argue that the quest for physical perfection, and the consequential stigma and mistreatment when that perfection is not achieved, is more stressful than ever before (Carr, Friedman & Jaffe, 2007; Carr, Jaffe & Friedman, 2008; Smolak, 2006; Wolf, 1992). The cultural ideal of thinness prevails, and the proliferation and normalization of cosmetic surgery heightens youthful beauty standards. According to a YWCA report released in 2008, women spend an average of $7 billion annually on cosmetics and beauty products (YWCA, 2008). Cosmetic surgical and non-surgical procedures have also been on the rise, particularly among women of color: 11.7 million were performed in the U.S. in 2007, almost one-quarter of which were performed on African American, Hispanic, and Asian American

women (a 13% increase from the year before). In addition, unhealthy eating habits have become the norm among women. According to a study by the U.S. Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health (2008), 67% of women between the ages of 25-45 (*excluding* those with actual eating disorders) are trying to lose weight; 53% of those dieters are already at a healthy weight and still trying to lose weight. An estimated 1-5% of women experience an eating disorder in their lifetime; and 85-95% of people with eating disorders are women (National Association of Anorexia Disorder and Associated Disorders, 2012).

As a combined consequence, women tend to guard their bodies against threats of exploitation and danger, yet simultaneously obsess over their bodies in efforts to achieve socially prescribed ideals of femininity and beauty (Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005; YWCA, 2008). The toll on women's lives reverberates, from diminished emotional well-being to health consequences, economic instability, and abusive relationships. Such physical, emotional, and interpersonal scars endure due to abuse and trauma, socialization, stigma, and self-perception. As a result, women often disassociate from the body and the potential wisdom and power it provides (Borynsenko, 1996; Johnson, 2009; McKinley, 1995 & 2011; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 1995).

At the same time, the mind-body connection is becoming increasingly recognized and accepted within academia and popular culture alike. The exploration, understanding, and practical implications of the interplay between emotions and physical health are on the rise (Harrington, 2008; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006; Northrup, 2006; Pert, 1997; Ryff & Singer, 2008). The field of somatic psychology provides a growing resource of body-based methods for healing and personal development, as well as specialized branches

which address trauma and its residues from a psychoneuro-biological perspective (Damasio, 1996; Gendlin, 1981; Levine, 1987; Mindell, 1982 & 2007; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 1995). Yet outside of a psychotherapeutic or healthcare context, does the body contribute to women's experiences of fulfillment and their means to achieving fulfillment in their lives? Given the unique challenges women face in relation to their bodies due to socialization and oppression, do women experience their bodies as a potential resource, guide, or tool for finding and navigating fulfilling life paths?

Bringing transparency to the motivations behind this research, the current study has also been fueled by my own journey: what I seek to create in my life, my perceptions of what is timely and significant in U.S. culture, and what I hope to contribute to the field. I am a white woman, raised by lesbian mothers amidst a "third wave" feminist generation (Tong, 2009). Many ideological and practical doors have been opened to me about what fulfillment can look like and how to get there. In addition, the body has been an integral part of my life path, studies and profession. Still, I have found the journey confusing and arduous. Based on my research and professional experience as a therapist, I am not alone. These opportunities, yearnings and frustrations have compelled me to explore other women's experiences of fulfilling life paths – in all their diversity – as a way to honor and learn from their stories and extend that learning. Such personal motivations potentially bias the study, yet also enhance insight into the topic and synergy with participants. Self-reflexivity has been integrated throughout the study in order to bring awareness to the ways in which my own sociocultural background, values and beliefs shape the research process (Cole, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lincoln &

Guba, 1985; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008; Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001) (see Appendix A: Researcher Self-Reflexivity).

To clarify the parameters and intent of the study, I am not interested in comparing women and men. Such comparisons presume that women and men are innately and distinctly different, failing to acknowledge the social construction of gender, as well as the vast and significant diversity amongst women themselves (Bohan, 2002; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy & Belenky, 1996; Jordan, Hartling & Walker, 2004). The women-versus-men question prioritizes and generalizes gender differences often to the exclusion of race, class, sexual orientation and other marginalized experiences that greatly contribute to the complexity and diversity of identity, world views, and experience. Instead, I am interested in the breadth and depth of women and their experiences of fulfillment, and in particular, the potential ways in which their bodies inform their experiences of fulfilling life paths.

This study explores the interconnection of fulfilling life paths, women, and their bodies. It focuses on what fulfillment means in the lives of women and what role the body may play in helping women pursue fulfilling life paths. The research is informed by diversity studies and feminist theory and ties together the traditions of humanistic psychology (as well as its contemporary, positive psychology) with the emerging field of somatic psychology. Through instrumental case studies explored from a phenomenological perspective, this study's aims are two-fold: to contribute to the field of somatic psychology in particular and clinical psychology in general by broadening theoretical understanding of women's paths of fulfillment; and to enhance clinical knowledge for assisting women in their journeys toward fulfilling life paths.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

> "What a man [*sic*] *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization…the desire for self-fulfillment…the tendency…to become actualized in what he is potentially…the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming."
>
> – Abraham H. Maslow, *The Theory of Human Motivation*, 1943

Theoretical Roots of Fulfilling Life Paths

First termed by Goldstein in 1939 (Noppeney, 2001), the concept of fulfillment finds its psychological roots in Maslow's theory of self-actualization (1943, 1970 & 1999). Maslow conceives of self-actualization as the intrinsic and natural motivation of humans toward growth and achievement. The term refers not only to a general momentum towards development, but to the specific trajectory of one's own self-expression. This expression grows out of unique tendencies and potentialities within each individual. As Maslow (1943) explains, "When we ask what man [*sic*] wants of life, we deal with his very essence" (p. 18). According to Maslow, these personal innate tendencies stir within, creating yearnings and frustrations until they find fulfillment.

Propelled by progressive motivations, self-actualization arrives as the final stage of Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs." The first four foundational areas include the following: (1) physiological needs – breathing, food, water, sex, homeostasis, excretion; (2) safety – security of body, employment, resources, morality, family, health, property; (3) love/belonging – friendship, family, sexual intimacy; and (4) esteem – self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect from others. According to Maslow (1943), progression through the hierarchy comes as "a gradual emergence by slow degrees from nothingness" (p. 14), in that most often each level of need must be satisfied (at least in part) before one moves on to the next. As the culminating level of the four prerequisite basic needs, self-

actualization involves the realization of one's potential, requiring both inner exploration and outer action. Based on 20 years of research, Maslow (1970) identified the key characteristics of self-actualized individuals as follows: acceptance and realism; problem-centering; spontaneity; autonomy and solitude; continued freshness of appreciation; and peak experiences. Maslow and other "stage" theorists have been widely criticized for a rigid ranking of needs/values and set order of life phases, as well as an ethnocentric, male, and upper-middle class bias (issues addressed further below) (Alderfer, 1969; Bohan, 2002; Hofstede, 1984; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). Yet, his theory presents a valuable orientation, particularly due to the emphasis on fulfillment as linked with one's unique potential, as well as learning and self-development through hardship (Maslow, 1999; Ryff, 2000).

While Maslow addresses the prerequisites and outcomes of self-actualization, Jung's (1962 & 1989) theory of individuation more thoroughly describes the self-exploration and psychological development inherent in fulfilling life paths. Individuation refers to the inner transformation towards wholeness, a teleological process by which one's conscious self (or ego) confronts and integrates the personal and collective aspects of the unconscious (unknown experiences within individuals and society). Similar to Maslow's developmental slant, Jung describes individuation as the task of the second half of life, after one has established family and career. Once these basic "external" needs are met, one faces "internal worlds" in order to find meaning within and come to terms with mortality.

Jung views individuation as an ongoing life process, requiring individuals to take back projections, differentiate from family and cultural pressures, and learn to stand on

one's own two feet. In his memoirs, Jung (1989) describes his own *auseinandersetzung* – or "having it out with the unconscious" – in which he delved into artistic forms of exploring the psyche and engaging with the unconscious through "active imagination." He explains, "I had to let myself be carried along by the current, without a notion of where it would lead me" (p. 196). This current might also be referred to by Jung as the Self, or the organizing principle of the psyche, which strives to bring the many aspects of unconscious life into awareness. The Self reflects the destiny of an individual: "an archetypal image of man's [*sic*] fullest potential and the unity of the personality as a whole" (Jung, von Franz, Henderson, Jacobi & Jaffe, 1964, p. 163).

Finally, Jung's (1989) version of fulfillment emerges through the tension between human limitations and a connection to the unbounded possibilities of the infinite:

> The more a man [*sic*] lays stress on false possessions, and the less sensitivity he has for what is essential, the less satisfying is his life…We count for something only because of the essential we embody, and if we do not embody that, life is wasted. (p. 325)

In other words, Jung attributes a fulfilling life path to an individual's ability to discover and live that which holds fundamental importance – *to embody one's essence*.

In addition to Maslow and Jung, other philosophers and contemporary psychologists also connect fulfillment with one's essence. Echoing Jung's teleological orientation, Hillman (1996) links fulfillment to the acorn theory: that each person is called into this world by the seed of her unique daimon. Hillman describes the daimon as the "soul companion" given to each of us before we are born:

> It has selected an image or pattern that we live on earth…[and] guides us here; in the process of arrival, however, we forget all that took place and believe we come empty into this world. The daimon remembers what is in your image and belongs to your pattern, and therefore your daimon is the carrier of your destiny. (p. 8)

For Hillman then, it is the daimon within each of us that directs one's sense of fulfillment. This calling towards one's essence and its expression "may be postponed, avoided, intermittently missed…[or it may] possess you completely. Whatever; eventually it will win out…The daimon does not go away" (p. 8).

Hillman explains that these personal mythic patterns can be recognized in early childhood and that everything in one's life – including heartache, supposed accidents, mysterious intuitions and other disturbing phenomena – are indeed symptoms of and assist in the daimon's fulfillment. He argues that the daimon is not something one develops *into* but rather inherently *is*. Nonetheless, Hillman advises people to recognize the daimon as fundamental to human existence and align one's life with that calling, embracing everything as reflective of that calling.

Campbell (1988) also connects fulfillment to the essence of one's being. In his words, Campbell guides people to "follow your bliss" by going "where your body and soul want to go. When you have the feeling, then stay with it…Grab it...and don't let anyone throw you off" (p. 118). He notes that honing the "feeling" of such a path requires self-analysis, following one's intuition, meditating on true happiness, and ultimately "learn[ing] to recognize your own depth" (p. 118). According to Campbell, following one's bliss leads to synchronicities and worldly opportunities. Like Jung, he describes an

integral connection between the personal and the collective, in that "by saving yourself, you save the world" (p. 149).

Turning toward more recent trends in psychology, positive psychology cultivates the original missions of humanistic psychology by focusing on what makes life worth living (Seligman, 2002). This new movement advocates for a shift away from psychopathology, the predominant post-World War II orientation within the field of psychology, toward an emphasis on mental wellness, which values subjective experience on both individual and group levels. In other words, positive psychology aims to "catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst of things in life to also building positive qualities" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). In this vein, positive psychology suggests that a fulfilling life stems from the following: increasing positive emotions about the past, future, and present; identifying and utilizing personal strengths in work, love, and parenting; and ultimately finding meaning by using those strengths in service of a larger purpose (Seligman, 2002).

To highlight a few examples from the extensive empirical research on positive psychology that are particularly relevant to the topic of fulfillment, Myers (2000) emphasizes the importance of religious faith and close personal relationships in promoting happiness, as opposed to economic growth and income. Diener (2000) and Peterson (2000) address how individual values, goals, and outlooks mediate between sociocultural conditions and subjective well-being, whereas Schwartz (2000) argues that cultural norms and values, rather than an over-emphasis on self-determination, are important for life satisfaction. Dweck's (2006) research on motivation demonstrates the importance of fostering "growth mindsets" (success based on hard work and learning)

rather than "fixed mindsets" (success based on innate ability) in order to cultivate a less stressful and more enjoyable life. And Ryff (2008) has created a multi-dimensional model based on the concept of eudaimonia, or "striving toward excellence based on one's unique potential," which links psychological well-being to self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy (p. 14).

The work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990), one of the world's leading positive psychology researchers, shows how fulfillment connects with the concept of "flow." Based on 25 years researching the subjective phenomenology of intrinsic motivation, Csikszentmihalyi found that optimal experiences share the following conditions and characteristics: balance between challenge and skill level; clear goals with immediate feedback; intense and concentrated focus on present moment activity; merged action and awareness; loss of self-consciousness; sense of control and ability to respond; altered sense of time; and gratification through experience itself. Flow has been studied in and applied to such diverse arenas as art and science, leisure, sport, education, business, and politics (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Research indicates that the experience of flow is consistent across culture, class, age, and gender, as well as types of activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). From a flow perspective, a fulfilling life path would be one in which flow is cultivated and experienced consistently throughout multiple areas of life, yet is dynamic such that challenges and skills change to reflect ongoing growth toward actualizing one's potential.

The Body's Place in Fulfilling Life Paths

What place then does the body have in this discussion of fulfilling life paths? Maslow (1943), Jung (1989), Hillman (1996), and Campbell (1988) all emphasize the unconscious and organic nature of motivation, self-actualization, and individuation, as well as an essential force within. Interestingly, the original conceptualization of self-actualization finds its roots in Goldstein's (1939) holistic understanding of mind-body unity, neuropsychology, and organismic theory (Noppeney, 2001; Pini & Pribaz, 2007). Implied throughout all of their writings we find an integral link between one's essence, the body and fulfillment; thus, we see the precursors of somatic psychology within these "fathers of fulfillment." They speak of the body as a vehicle for the unconscious, in that it bypasses the limitations of the ego and cognitive thinking, revealing the realms of non-verbal, emotional, intuitive, and creative impulses. Indeed, somatic psychology builds upon the understanding that the body and mind reflect one interconnected experience and aims to further psychological change and development towards more fulfilling experiences of life by fostering somatic awareness (Foster, 2004; Hanna, 1970; Mindell, 1982).

The field of somatic psychology seeks to rebalance an historical split between mind and body, one which has favored rational/cognitive thinking over senses/feelings, oppressing and repressing those thoughts/feelings/experiences deemed unacceptable according to family, culture, and internalized standards. Instead, somatic psychology gives precedence to one's lived experience, manifesting in the present moment as felt through the body, and views the body as a source of information, intelligence and indeed one's essence (Caldwell, 1997; Hanna, 1970; Knaster, 1996). In other words, the body is

conceived of as a present-moment access point for working with somatic experiences and their associated neurological, psychological and interpersonal patterns.

This recognition of the body's wisdom has been conceptualized in various ways, such as Gendlin's (1981) "felt sense," Mindell's (1982) "dreambody," Aposhyan's (1999) "natural intelligence," and Damasio's (1996) "somatic markers," among others. From a somatic psychology perspective, alienation from the body cuts people off from their whole sense of self and relates to mental and emotional distress, physical illness, relationship conflict, and addictive behaviors (Knaster, 1996). Such alienation is fed by cultural values, early relationships with primary caregivers, and individual patterns of marginalizing somatic experiences. As Miller (2005) hearkens, "We may ignore or deride the messages of the body, but its rebellion demands to be heeded because its language is the authentic expression of our true selves and of the strength of our vitality" (p. 207). Similarly, the field of somatic psychology shows that getting in touch with body experiences fosters holistic healing, self awareness, decision-making abilities and empowerment.[1]

The connection among somatic experience, self awareness, and sense of direction is particularly relevant to this study's question of the body's relationship to fulfilling life paths. Knaster (1990) describes the body as a "total communication system" and "constant feedback process," providing an interface between internal experience and external environments (p. 57). Accordingly, she discusses how the ancient traditions of native cultures respect the body as a means of survival and literal navigation, as well as spiritual path-finding; such as the African !Kung San's ability to sense with their bodies

[1] For a comprehensive discussion of historical, sociocultural, familial and individual levels of body alienation see: Bernstein, 2008; Eisler, 1995; Harrington, 2008.

the location of water, the Masai's awareness of the presence of animals long before actually seeing them, and Polynesian wayfinders' navigational practice of sitting naked on the bottom of canoes in order to feel the swells of the current.

The works of practitioners such as Beck (2001), Bernstein (2008), and Mindell (2007), among others, indicate that the body's path-finding ability is not lost within modern civilizations, but rather exists as a "natural inheritance" and the "birthright of every human being" (Mindell, 2007, p. x). Indeed, they help to show that somatic awareness is directly linked to one's potential, purpose, and path in life. Beck (2001) suggests that although people adopt "social selves" that conform to external standards, the body reflects our "essential selves" (authentic visceral responses) which can be used as a guiding compass toward "the ultimate realization of one's potential for happiness" (p. xv). While this guidance is readily available, she forewarns that the difficult task of integrating and following the body's messages involves healing emotional wounds, identifying and changing unconscious beliefs and relational patterns, as well as hard practical work, learning, and persistence. Applying similar concepts to professional life, Bernstein's (2008) doctoral research investigated the ways in which body awareness becomes a form of wisdom amidst the process of major career transitions. She found that in ill-fitting work situations, employees felt contracted, anxious, and ungrounded; whereas more fulfilling work led to feelings of expansion, ease, and groundedness in their bodies. However, although Bernstein's research indicates that the body serves as a resource for enhanced self-awareness, most research participants did not attend to their embodied experiences until necessitated by crisis.

While Beck (2001) and Bernstein (2008) help to show that somatic awareness is directly linked to one's potential and path in life, Mindell (1993, 1995, 2002, 2004 & 2007) expands the implications of somatic awareness by illustrating how personal paths are connected with collective phenomena. From a Process Work perspective (the method developed by Mindell and colleagues; also referred to as process-oriented psychology), the body is one of many vehicles to the unconscious. Like dreams, body and non-verbal experiences (physical symptoms, unintentional or repetitive movements, accidents, and subtle sensations, for example) serve as sources of information for those experiences marginalized by personal identity, as well as family and cultural values. Thus, exploring somatic processes offers the potential for expanding not only *inner* awareness, but insight into cultural patterns, power structures, and social dynamics in the *outer* world as well. Indeed, from a Process Work perspective, one's personal sense of fulfillment is thereby indelibly linked with systemic issues and thus the potential for global change (Mindell, 1996).

Building upon his original conceptualization of the "dreambody," Mindell (2007) takes the body's path-finding ability further with a trans-disciplinary walking meditation practice that connects physics, shamanism, psychology, and Taoism. He shows how one's life path actually contains many paths, manifesting as somatic inclinations to move in various directions (called "vectors") which represent the individual and systemic polarities, conflicts, and potentials that structure one's life. The sum of these various vectors comprises one's overall purpose and life path; although they may change from moment to moment, "zig-zagging" us through life, the overall direction remains the same. Mindell explains that it is the somatic experience while walking these vectors – the

feelings, thoughts, voices and images that arise through the body – that provides information and guidance about one's life path.

Somatic psychology's "cousin" field of neuroscience helps to substantiate the theory and experiential approaches of somatic psychology. The work of both Damasio (1996) and Lehrer (2009) provides scientific evidence in support of the holistic body-mind premises of somatic psychology and psycho-neurological processes related to fulfilling life paths. Through his research with individuals who experienced brain damage to the orbital frontal cortex (OFC), Damasio discovered that rational processes actually require emotional awareness. In addition, emotional awareness stems directly from a connection to body sensations. Thus, his "somatic marker theory" demonstrates that decision-making, often considered a completely cognitive endeavor, is intimately connected with body experiences and corresponding feelings. With regard to fulfilling life paths then, Damasio's work raises intriguing possibilities when investigating the role of the body in women's experiences of fulfillment.

Lehrer (2009) also shows how the body is associated with effective decision-making. He explains that emotional and unconscious processes are communicated through overt and subtle body signals, as well as bio-chemical rushes related to pleasure/ pain feedback. Relying on rationality alone diminishes the range of internal cues key to successful decisions. He explains that "every feeling is really a summary of data, a visceral response to all the information that can't be accessed directly…feelings are often an accurate shortcut, a concise expression of…decades' worth of experience" (p. 23). Lehrer argues that people need to use both sides of the brain (cognitive/rational and emotional/intuitive) and allow for the uncertainty, debate, and mistakes that come by

fostering such openness to a diversity of viewpoints, inside and out. The research of Damasio and Lehrer affirms the holistic approaches of somatic psychology, echoing the need for integrated awareness – including cognitive, emotional, and somatic resources – in the process of identifying and cultivating fulfilling life paths.

The Presence and Absence of Women

While theories of self-actualization, individuation, and somatic awareness lay a comprehensive foundation for the discussion of fulfilling life paths, they also expose a pressing gap in the literature of women's experiences in particular and provoke the controversial issue of gender differences. On the one hand, theories related to fulfillment presume the existence of a self: caring for and developing the self (Maslow, 1943 & 1970); getting in touch with and being transformed by unconscious aspects of the self (Jung, 1962 & 1989); or accessing an essential core of the self (Hillman, 1996; Campbell, 1988). On the other hand, some feminists contend that such conceptualizations of the self are based on a male norm that favors individualism and neglects gender differences. This feminist perspective argues that women have unique "ways of knowing" that are more relationally and somatically attuned than men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986/1997; Brown, 2003; Hall & Hansen, 1997; Josselson, 1996; Peck, 1986; Surrey, 1993). Others have criticized such feminist arguments for perpetuating gender essentialism and neglecting diversity amongst women, thus advocating for a postmodern perspective that both gender and "the self" are socially constructed phenomena (Bohan, 2002; Enns, 1994) and that discussions of identity need to be broadened to include the "intersectionality" and multiplicity of other social categories, such as race, class, sexual

orientation, and physical ability (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy & Belenky, 1996; Jordan, Hartling & Walker, 2004).

For example, well-known for his research on adult life development, Levinson (1999) proposes that women pass through the same phases of life as men, yet what women face and how they experience those phases can differ greatly – from men and also among women. However, critics argue that Levinson's generalizations fail to elucidate the complexity of those differences. In other words, how gender socialization shapes and complicates the careers, life dreams, and mental health of women (Carr, 1997; Kittrell, 1998; Minter & Samuels, 1998) and the unique developmental tasks faced by lesbians, for example, with regard to identity, coming out, and external and internalized homophobia (Wheeler-Scruggs, 2008).

Feminist theories themselves have been – and are still – growing in their awareness of diversity and how a homogenous understanding of women perpetuates oppression. Through this growing awareness, many feminist perspectives seem to be steering away from an emphasis on gender differences alone, instead encompassing the complex and overlapping interplay of cultural and identity diversity as a whole (Butler, 1993; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy & Belenky, 1996; Jordan, Hartling & Walker, 2004; Worell & Goodheart, 2006). Some of these perspectives argue that current developmental models need to value affiliation, a self-in-relation, as the foundation upon which satisfaction and achievement is based and redefine individuation to encompass both connection and competence, such that all people – regardless of gender – are supported to grow and thrive in the full range of their potentials (Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005; Miller, 1986). Going further and expanding upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) foundational model

of "nested systems," the feminist ecological model offers a "representation of multiple dimensions of human existence, of real-world complexity, of multiple modes of living and ways of knowing, of multidirectional interactions between the person and her or his contexts, and of direct, contiguous, and distal influences" (Ballou, Matsumoto & Wagner, 2002, p. 118). In other words, the authors bring together multiple levels of reality – including individual, micro, exo, macro levels; age, gender/sex, race/ethnicity, class; time/history and planetary/climatic influences – in order to present a theoretical model that recognizes the complexity and co-creating factors that contribute to people's actual lived experiences.

Looking at the questions of self and gender from the perspective of positive psychology, most studies place importance on individual attitudes and behaviors rather than interpersonal and cultural relations (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005; Peterson, Park, Hall & Seligman, 2009); or make broad generalizations about women, oblivious to the diversity within women's experiences (Baker & Greenberg, 2007). Although positive psychology's orientation parallels feminism's rejection of the male dominated medical model and psychology's emphasis on pathology, the positive psychology movement has not yet done well in integrating feminist theory into its paradigm. On the one hand, positive psychology's emphasis on personal strengths and intentional strategies can be viewed as a means of empowerment and resilience (O'Leary & Bhaju, 2006; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sheldon, Abad, Ferguson, Gunz, Houser-Marko, Nichols, & Lyubomirsky, 2010). Yet this orientation focuses on individual change and can easily fall prey to reinforcing the (internal and external) status quo and invalidating the impact of socialization and oppression, instead "blaming the victim" if she is unable to gather her

internal resources and assimilate. Although researchers give lip service to many forms of sexism and racism for example, they basically disregard their impact by citing studies that state happiness and psychological well-being are not actually influenced by gender, ethnicity or other socio-economic differentials, such as income, health, occupation, or education (Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2006; Seligman, 2002). Despite substantial evidence that women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with clinical depression (Mayo Clinic, 2010), most studies within positive psychology argue that women test as happy or happier than men, and that life stressors related to gender have little effect on women's well-being because of their ability to adapt to difficult circumstances (Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2006; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987; Strickland, 1992). Such paradoxical findings have been explained by pointing towards women's high affect intensity, meaning that women experience more extremes in both positive and negative emotions, as well as psychological strengths that boost overall well-being despite lows in certain dimensions of mental health (Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2006; Ryff, 1995; Seligman, 2002).

However, other research within positive psychology grants greater socio-economic and cultural complexity to the question of fulfillment. For example, studies show different experiences of "flow" at work and home for professional and blue-collar women, indicating the need for challenge and sense of mastery in their activities and environments; factors that are indeed complicated by access to financial resources, types of job, power relations, education and training (Alison & Carlisle Duncan, 1988; Moneta, 2004; Wells, 1988). Ryff (2000) discusses how increased age and lower socioeconomic status decrease subjective reports of meaning, purpose, and growth. In addition,

perceived discrimination among both women of color and white women was found to be a negative predictor of psychological well-being (Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2003). Based on such outcomes, Ryff highlights the fact that fulfillment is "not exclusively a function of individual commitment and responsibility: [its] presence, or absence, in people's lives is also influenced by larger social structural forces" (2000, p. 135).

My views on the issue of the self and gender reflect the complexity of these co-existing perspectives. While I agree with Maslow, Jung, and Campbell that journeys toward fulfillment reflect psychological and spiritual development, I simultaneously align with Bohan (2002), Enns (1994) and others who are critical of the tendency of such traditional conceptualizations of the self to disregard social context and undermine the significance of external and internalized oppression. In addition, although I am eager to explore the experiences of women in particular, I disagree with Josselson (1996) and the gender essentialist propensity of some feminist theory which presumes women share bottom-line "feminine" commonalities without acknowledging the construction of gender, the immense diversity amongst women, and the powerful influence that race, class, sexual orientation, and other marginalized experiences exert on identity, life experience, and worldview (Cole, 2009; Goldberger, 1996; Jordan, Hartling & Walker, 2004; Rountree, 2000; Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2003). Bohan (2002) says it well when she argues,

> All women do not experience reality in the same way…there is no universally representative woman. Rather, women's experiences vary widely depending on historical, cultural, political, and personal circumstances…the construal of gender as a set of traits within the individual

> risks victim blaming and diverts attention from the social and historical origins of the qualities that are culturally defined as "feminine" and from constraints that shape women's experience toward these qualities. (p. 81)

Still, in support of research based on women's subjective experiences, Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" suggests that it is exactly because of the social construction which reinforces sex and gender roles that we must, at times and when appropriate, center on women in order to gain insight into their unique and complex realities (Landry & MacLean, 1996). Clearly, the lives of women need to be conceptualized as an important umbrella of experience which captures a diverse range of influences, identities, perceptions, values, callings and barriers toward fulfilling life paths.

Going one step further to address the presence of the body in this question of women's experiences of fulfillment, we can see the complicated nature of conceptualizing the body itself. Where does one's body begin and end? Is the body simply a composite of physiological functions that enable or limit the experience of fulfillment? Is it an individual experience, based solely on one's private inner and outer landscape, reflecting personal history and intrapsychic phenomena? Or does the body actually capture and reflect relational phenomena, including not only family and other interpersonal encounters, but indeed the social values and cultural standards in our immediate environment and beyond?

The question of women's experience in relation to somatic psychology runs up against the above challenges. Although the field of somatic psychology acknowledges the need for diversity awareness, its principles in practice tend to focus on personal/family history, rather than the influences of social and cultural context. Especially given recent

developments in neuroscience, somatic psychology places great emphasis on the power of the caregiver-child dyad in shaping psychoneurobiological patterns of identity (Schore, 2001; Siegel, 2001). Likewise, somatic theories and strategies generally espouse the belief in an "authentic" or "core" self, linked to oppressed and repressed impulses of the child, and locate that self in the body as an idealized connection to reclaim and return to (Johnson, 1994). With only few exceptions addressing the interconnection of culture and soma (Debold, Tolman & Brown, 1996; Goldberger, 1996; Johnson, 2009; Mindell, 1996; Mindell, 1995, 2002, 2004 & 2007), such a tendency within somatic psychology to focus on the individual disregards the social construction of self and gender – a blind spot that leaves the field weak in its ability to recognize and work with embodied experiences of cultural values and power dynamics.

This study attempts to address the complex interface of essence, somatic awareness, and social identity as related to women's journeys toward fulfilling life paths. In my view, all three levels co-exist as parallel realities: a guiding core, alongside a lived experience that can be felt through the body, alongside the social constructs that shape one's identity and relationship with the world. The gap of attention to women, social context and diversity within the theoretical foundations of fulfillment, as well as somatic psychology, indicates that the fields' growing edge lies in the realm of the *social body* – how cultural beliefs, social structures and power relations are embodied and influence fulfilling life paths. In an effort to help fill these gaps in the literature and further theoretical and clinical insight into women's actual experiences of fulfilling life paths and the role the body plays in those journeys, this study explored the following questions:

How do women experience fulfillment? And what role, if any, does the body play in helping women find and navigate fulfilling life paths?

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Methodological Orientation

Grounded in the qualitative tradition, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) serves as the main method of inquiry for exploring women's experiences of fulfilling life paths and the role of the body in finding and navigating those paths. In addition, this research uses multiple descriptive case studies as an instrumental means of focusing on the topic of fulfillment, women and the body. Case study provides an approach to gaining in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon from the unique viewpoint of an individual's perspective and experience (Willig, 2001). Rather than producing broad generalizations, the idiographic particularity of case studies offers a rich and textured doorway into the complexity and diversity of human experience. While phenomenological approaches diverge into various forms (such as transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic), the interpretive branch is particularly well-suited to this study, in that it offers a compatible approach to case study and recognizes the role the researcher plays in interacting with the participants, data collection, and analysis processes (Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001).

According to Patton (2002), phenomenological inquiry "seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon" (p. 482). Like case study, phenomenological orientations are concerned with the *particularities* of human experience: What is the lived experience of this person in relation to this particular phenomenon? How does this person "perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104)? Approaching research from this perspective, the researcher

attempts to get inside each participant's world – to see through her eyes, feel through her insides, understand how she comprehends and makes sense of her reality. By doing so, one aims to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon of study, or as Van Manen (1990) describes, "That which makes some-'thing' what it *is* – and without which it could not be what it is" (p. 10). (The specific steps taken to achieve these aims are described in detail in the data analysis section below.) In combination, case studies and IPA are particularly well-suited to this research in that both approaches share an interest in the contextual and subjective experience of reality – how people make meaning of their experiences and put them together to form an overall worldview (Patton, 2002).

To enhance the IPA approach to this particular study, the methodological framework, data collection and analysis methods are also be informed by intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994) and embodied writing (Anderson, 2002 & 2003). As discussed within the literature review, intersectionality refers to the overlapping nature of different aspects of one's identity, as well as the social and historical contexts in which experience is embedded; such that one's gender is recognized as inseparable from class, race, sexuality, and other social privileges and inequities. Rather than privileging one aspect of identity as dominant, intersectionality acknowledges that all of these influences work together to create meaning and shape lived experience. Such awareness heightens sensitivity to the complexity that exists *within* women and the diversity that exists *amongst* women. These understandings of intersectionality guided participant selection, data collection and analysis phases, as well as the self-reflexive practices of the researcher.

In addition, embodied writing (Anderson, 2002 & 2003) brought somatic awareness to the research process and reflects an essential component of this study's research question: How does *the body* relate to these experiences of fulfillment and its creation? Bringing the present moment as experienced through the body into the research process, embodied writing has been incorporated to enhance the analysis process, as well as researcher self-reflexivity, as evident in the embodied description of the pivotal life experience that inspired this research (Appendix A: Researcher Self-Reflexivity). Somatic awareness has been woven throughout the data collection process, in order to guide the researcher in the interviews and help participants connect with their embodied experience of fulfillment (see Appendix D: Experiential Exercise and Appendix E: Interview Questions). In addition, the method of Embodied Transcription (described in detail below) and somatic awareness infuse data analysis to assist the researcher in gaining an embodied understanding of the participants' experiences (Brooks, 2010). Together, these body-oriented practices help to make for a cohesive methodological orientation that is congruent with the questions guiding this research.

Participants and Sampling

In alignment with a phenomenological approach, purposive sampling methods were employed to recruit five to ten women who were interested in the topic and eager to explore and share their personal experiences of fulfillment. Not necessarily fulfilled in all aspects of their lives, the sample instead sought to include women who resonated with the quest of leading a fulfilling life path, in an effort to provide rich data for the exploration of what that means, what has facilitated this experience, and what role the body plays in the journey. The sample was limited to "mature" women (defined as 45 years or older) to

narrow the parameters and focus the data on those who had a significant amount of life experience upon which to reflect.[2] In recognition of the multiplicity of identity and the valuable contribution of diverse sociocultural backgrounds (intersectionality), the sample also aimed to include various social identities (race, socio-economics, sexual orientation, physical ability) and current circumstances (employment, relationship status, children) (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994). In addition, to provide an enriched understanding of the participants that integrated somatic awareness, participation was limited to those women who were willing and able to be interviewed in-person.

Participants were gathered through referrals from colleagues and outreach (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Eligibility was determined according to the following criteria: (1) interest in the topic and willingness to reflect on one's experience and share personally; (2) 45 years or older; and (3) willingness and ability to meet in-person in a mutually agreeable location. All participants were administered a brief phone screening by the researcher in order to determine eligibility (see Appendix B: Screening & Demographic Questionnaire). If the participant met the required criteria, the researcher proceeded by asking a series of questions to collect demographic information, including the following: race/ethnicity, religious/spiritual orientation, sexual orientation, relationship status (and history), whether she had children (biological, adopted, children of partner, etc.), employment status (and history), educational background, physical ability issues, and economic status. In an effort to not bias the sample, participants were also asked about previous training in body-related fields, so as to include those with and without experience in somatic awareness. The potential participant was also given the

[2] Note: Because of this age parameter, most of the participants were born within the "baby boomer" generation (1946-1964). Thus, the results of this study reflect the cultural issues of this period of dramatic social change. The historical significance of this generational cohort is discussed in the final chapter.

opportunity to ask any questions about participation in the study. In addition, this phone conversation aided the researcher in determining that the participant spoke English (although not necessarily her first language), had the ability to self-reflect and express herself clearly, and was willing to commit to the interview process.

Based on this demographic information, the researcher created a chart in order to ensure that a diverse combination of sociocultural identities and current circumstances were represented (See Table 1: Participant Demographics). This chart subsequently informed the ongoing process of recruitment, out of which a sample of seven women were invited to participate in this study. My goal was not to recruit one woman for each category for two main reasons: (1) identity is not one-dimensional, but instead made up of many overlapping sociocultural characteristics and multiple roles; and (2) doing so would amount to tokenism and the assumption that one person's experience can speak for or represent an entire group, which is not the case (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994; Mindell, 1995). Rather, within each person exist many roles and identities; and within each role or group exist many different experiences and perspectives. Thus, my goal was to gather a sample of women that included various overlapping roles, ages and sociocultural backgrounds, so that the data represented a realistic sample of women and was enriched by multiple voices and viewpoints.

However, as evident in the table below, it is important to acknowledge that the sample is skewed and does not reflect the larger population as a whole in the following ways: none of the participants were affiliated with the most common religions in the U.S. (such as Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Muslim traditions); all of the participants have at least a high school education (indicating a higher socio-economic status than national

averages)[3]; and all of the women have some level of exposure to body-based learning experiences (indicating potentially greater somatic awareness that most women). (For an in-depth discussion of participant demographics, see Appendix F). The results are not meant to draw conclusions for women in general nor any one category or group, but rather reflect the diversity and complexity of a small sample of overlapping identities within and amongst women. Following an idiographic orientation, phenomenological studies engage a somewhat small sample size (no more than ten participants) for a relatively long amount of time (at least 2 hours) (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). A sample of seven women with the above stipulations allows for both diversity and substance by providing a potential range of experiences of fulfillment, yet still containing the amount of data in order to encourage in-depth explorations.

[3] According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2009 approximately 87 percent of the population 25 years old and over had completed at least high school and 30 percent had completed a bachelor's or higher degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

PARTICIPANT	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7
AGE							
45-55					X	X	
56-65	X		X				X
66-75		X		X			
RACE							
White	X	X		X	X		X
African-American						X	
Hispanic			X				
RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY							
Science of Mind				X			
Pagan				X			
Vedanta			X				
Spiritual	X				X		
Other		X				X	X
SEXUAL ORIENTATION							
Heterosexual	X	X			X		X
Lesbian			X	X			
Bi-sexual						X	
RELATIONSHIP STATUS*							
Married		X(H)	X(L)	X(L)			
Divorced	H/H	H	H/L	H	H		H
Single	X				X	X	X
CHILDREN**							
Yes	B	B/M		B	A		B/F
No			X			X	
EDUCATION							
Bachelor's degree (in progress)	X						
Bachelor's degree		X			X	X	
Doctoral degree			X	X			X
Body-related	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
EMPLOYMENT							
Employed	X	X	X	X		X	X
Self-employed		X	X	X	X		X
Semi-retired				X			
INCOME***							
10,000-24,999						X	
25,000-49,999	X				X		
50,000-74,999				X (J)	X		X
75,000-99,999					X		
100,000-149,999			X				
150,000-200,000		X (J)					
PHYSICAL/HEALTH ISSUES							
Yes	X	X		X		X	X
No			X		X		

NOTE: *H = heterosexual marriage/divorce; L = lesbian marriage/divorce
**B = biological; M = children by marriage; A = adopted; F = foster
***J = joint income

Ethical Protection of Participants

At the onset of each interview, each participant was welcomed and appreciated for her willingness to participate in the study. I explained the intent of the interviews, specifically encouraging the participant to follow her own interests in exploring the topic, alongside my questions. In addition to the aims of data collection discussed above, this helped to foster respect and a conversational atmosphere that was co-created by both the interviewer and interviewee, rather than directed solely by the researcher and interview questions. I provided each participant with informed consent in order to explain the nature and intent of the research, potential benefits and risks, parameters of confidentiality, and freedom to withdraw (Kvale, 1996; Rudestam & Newton, 2007) (see Appendix C: Informed Consent).

Although this study focuses on a seemingly positive question, I was aware that the interviews might evoke difficult feelings and memories related to the topic of fulfillment, lack thereof, and challenges faced on one's life path. In order to enhance safety and attend to these ethical concerns, the participants were also informed that they were free to share as much or little about themselves as felt comfortable, that they did not have to answer questions, and could pause or stop at any time. I invited the participants to contact me, my committee chairperson, and/or the Head of Research after the interview in the event they have questions or concerns. I explained that I could provide referrals to therapists if they wished to pursue additional support. I also made sure to ask if the participant had any questions after reviewing the informed consent before beginning the interview. Finally, as discussed above, I conducted a member check by providing a draft of the individual sketch to each participant and invited them to provide feedback and/or

expand upon, clarify, or add something to their experiences. This member check contributes to accuracy and respect for participants, and also enhances the study's credibility (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008; Willig, 2001).

Self-Reflexivity of the Researcher

IPA acknowledges that the role of the researcher is far from an objective observer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001). Therefore, personal reflexivity is embedded throughout this study in an attempt to honestly reflect upon the ways in which my inclinations and presence have fueled and co-created the research process and outcomes (Berg & Smith, 1985; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008). Throughout the preparation, sampling, data collection and analysis phases, I have maintained journal entries to foster a practice of personal reflection and ongoing self-awareness of my values, biases and experiences, as well as their potential influence on the research process (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The journals also helped me to digest what I was reading, see overlaps and contradictions in literature, as well as highlight the filter through which I began viewing life in general. Journal writing helped to bring awareness to my research question, its impact on my views, and my receptivity to "unintentional research," or relevant resources and information that appeared in spontaneous ways.

In addition to journal writing, I took myself through the screening and interview processes as a way of putting myself into the participant's role to see what it felt like to go through those steps. Doing so helped me learn more about my own experiences through this format and made them transparent, so that I could also put them to the side and more readily focus directly on the participant, regardless of the similarities to or

differences from myself. Self-reflexive practices have helped to bring awareness to my motivations for this research, my experience in the role of researcher, and how my own relationship to the topic has evolved over time. Although the study has not adopted a heuristic methodology (Moustakas, 1990), my own experience and reflections have been integrated throughout the research as part of self-reflexivity in order to provide transparency and enhance the study's credibility (see Appendix A: Researcher Self-Reflexivity).

Data Collection

In order to create a format that invited personal and detailed exploration of the phenomenon under study, data collection included one-on-one interviews conducted in-person and lasting approximately two hours, with the option of follow-up if necessary (Kvale, 1996). Following a semi-structured format, the interviews aimed to cultivate and co-create in-depth exploration of the research topic via the following: creating an inviting atmosphere through attitudes of respect, openness, and passionate curiosity; integrating pointed yet open-ended questions; and fostering enhanced reflection through clarifying and nuanced follow-up questions (Appendix E: Interview Questions). Because of the somatic orientation of the research topic and methodology, the interviews were intentionally conducted in-person so that the researcher could more readily attend and respond to the non-verbal information of participants, such as gestures, physical posturing, facial expressions; as well as paralinguistic cues of intonation, volume, rhythm, pauses, and breathing patterns (Aposhyan, 2004; Caldwell, 1997; Diamond & Jones, 2004; Mindell, 2002). This information, as well as the researcher's awareness of her own somatic experience, helped to guide the interview by highlighting significant

moments, emotional responses, and areas worthy of further investigation. The interviews were conducted in a mutually agreeable location. In most cases, we met at the participant's home or office; one participant chose to meet at my office. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher (See Embodied Transcription below).

After welcoming the participant and addressing informed consent, the interviews began with an experiential exercise which invited each participant to create a picture that captured her experience of fulfillment or a fulfilling life path (see Appendix D: Experiential Exercise). The participant was given creative arts materials including colored markers, crayons, pastels, colored pencils, and paper. The drawing could be as abstract and/or representational as the participant wished, whatever she wanted to create. Once complete, the participant was asked to share how her drawing related to her experience of fulfillment and/or a fulfilling life path.

This experiential exercise was inspired, in part, by Brooks' (2007) research on women's experiences of intentional childlessness. In her research, Brooks found that the drawings revealed significant information about the thoughts and feelings behind their choices and also provided an excellent segue into the interview questions. The exercise was also informed by Process Work theory and methods that use drawing and other forms of non-verbal awareness to understand the meaning and essence of experiences (Kavanaugh, 2007; Norgaard, 2009; Weyerman, 2007). Similarly, the intent of the exercise in the current study was to provide an opportunity for each woman to explore and express her experience of fulfillment (or a fulfilling life path) in a non-verbal way,

thereby helping her to access her lived experience of fulfillment and providing a non-cognitive doorway into the interview topics.

Talking, the most common form of verbal expression (as opposed to singing or sound vocalization), tends to activate cognitive realms and conceptual understandings of experience – in this case, what one *thinks* about fulfillment (Ogden & Minton, 2000). From a somatic psychology perspective, engaging in verbal dialogue is linked with top-down processing, which places importance on thinking and insight (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006). Drawing, on the other hand, serves as a channel of communication that by-passes verbal cognition, instead accessing non-verbal, right brain, holistic expression – in other words, what one *feels/senses/experiences* about fulfillment.[4] Referred to as bottom-up processing, this entry point allows words and understanding to emerge out of the non-verbal realm of creative expression (Ogden & Minton, 2000). Although this exercise did not directly ask participants to draw their somatic experience of fulfillment, drawing often aids people in "dropping down" into a subjective feeling-oriented experience, helping them more readily access somatic awareness. In line with the methodological goals of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Patton, 2002) and Embodied Writing (Anderson, 2002 & 2003), this initial exercise served as a gateway into a more experiential and holistic expression of each participant's *lived experience* of fulfillment, and provided a natural way to proceed with the semi-structured interview format.

As discussed above, I approached the interview process with the intent to provide a safe and inviting space in which the participant felt free to explore and share her

[4] Other channels of expression that facilitate bottom-up processing include dancing and other forms of movement, singing and other kinds of sound vocalization, and somatic awareness techniques, such as focusing, mindfulness, and Process-Oriented Psychology, among others (Gendlin, 1981; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Mindell, 2002).

experience of fulfillment and a fulfilling life path. The experiential exercise aided in making the participant's subjective experience central and also elicited content to initiate our conversation. Just as the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words," so these drawings captured a view into each participant's experience of fulfillment that opened up into stories, feelings and thoughts rich in detail. In this sense, I was responding to her experience rather than solely directing the discussion – she served first, so to speak, and I inquired further. As Patton (1990) explains,

> The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind… but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed… Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. (p. 278)

Indeed, my efforts as an interviewer aimed to draw out and deepen what was already there in each woman. While I created a set of questions and topics to guide the interview, I strove to explore and further each participant's experience by paying attention and responding to both the verbal content and non-verbal information communicated. The participants' stories often lead quite naturally into interview questions. I steered away from insider lingo or polarizing language that required conceptual knowledge or presumed social/political views: for example, rather than asking a participant to describe her "felt sense" or "somatic experience," I simply asked "what is that like in your body?" or "when you talk about that, what do you notice in your body?" Rather than using words like sexism or feminism, I asked questions like "what barriers have you faced related to living a fulfilling life?" or "how has your identity as a woman influenced your experience of fulfillment?" (Kvale, 1996; Willig, 2001). I based my questions on the participant's

own words, asking her to explore and explain what she meant in order to deepen understanding. As noted earlier, I also paid attention to non-verbal cues, such as gestures or body posture that punctuated, amplified or illustrated what she was saying; facial expressions that indicated additional thoughts or feelings; and paralinguistic cues, like sighs, big breaths, long pauses, whispers, or tone changes that added other layers of information. Enhanced by my own clinical background and training, somatic awareness helped me track non-verbal signals as they were happening in the moments. Such signals indicated substantive experiences worthy of further exploration and/or helped guide the mood and pace of the interview, assisting me as researcher to resonate with the participant's emotional experience, which enhanced the relationship with participants, quality of the interview, participants' reflective process, as well as ethical awareness of the researcher.

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed personally by me as researcher according to Embodied Transcription and IPA methods (Brooks, 2010; Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). Based on my own previous research experience, although transcribing requires a grueling commitment of many hours, I actually enjoyed and had gleaned valuable insight through the transcription process by listening and re-listening to the recordings, attending to multiple sources of paralinguistic information beyond verbal content (i.e., pauses, intonation, volume, emphasis, laughter, breath, etc). I therefore chose to transcribe the interviews myself not only due to financial limitations and the costly expense of employing a professional transcriber, but because I recognized the importance of "sitting with" and re-experiencing the interviews as part of the analysis

process. When I later discovered Embodied Transcription, I eagerly adopted this method, as it validated my own understanding, gave a structured format for utilizing the transcription phase as an intentional means of pre-analysis, and also integrated somatic awareness on the part of the researcher (Brooks, 2010).

Embodied Transcription (ET) uses Voice-Recognition Software (VRS) to create a means of more efficiently transcribing data, while also acknowledging the value of using the researcher's somatic experience as an epistemological tool. As Brooks describes, "Influenced by performance art, feminism and postmodernism, the iterative cycles of Embodied Transcription include processes of vocalization and resonation which may foster 'knowing in the body', and serve to enrich and deepen the researcher's understanding of collected data" (p. 1). ET methods recognize that analysis begins in the transcription phase and deepens this process by using the researcher and her somatic awareness as a channel for enriched understanding and insight into the participant's lived experience.

ET consists of the following three cycles: (1) Revisit and Repeat, which involves listening to the interview while simultaneously speaking the conversation into VRS, yet also pausing to note nonverbal elements, words that stand out, and the researcher's own emotions/senses; (2) Revision, which includes adding punctuation, assigning attributions to the participants, and spotting incorrect passages, enabling the researcher to explore the text through reading; and (3) Refinement and Reflection, which allows another auditory check for punctuation and language corrections, this time noting overall impressions, stories and surprises.

ET gave me a rich and coherent sense of the interview, making me feel close to the participant's experience of fulfillment and leaving me with words, sounds, and feelings still quite alive in my own body. Thus, I used embodied writing to segue into the text-based IPA approach (Anderson, 2002 & 2003). This allowed creative space to feel, move and dance the feelings and impressions I was left with, out of which I wrote a "somatic synopsis" for each participant's interview.

The IPA approach to data analysis establishes a clear structure that also allows room for creativity (Patton, 2002). I chose this method because it provides an orientation congruent with the overall framework, data collection process, and original research question of my study. IPA assists the researcher in gaining a broad overview and gradually elucidating the core meanings of another's experience by finding the significant patterns and themes evident in the data. As Van Manen (1990) explains, "The insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience" (p. 77). IPA also encourages an integrated practice of self-reflexivity, in order to bring clarity to preconceptions and the researcher's role in the research process, thus promoting a rigorous, fresh, open, and self-aware approach to the data analysis.

In order to enter into and make sense of the interviewee's phenomenological reality, interpretive phenomenological researchers approach the data analysis through various phases of contemplation: (1) epoche; (2) phenomenological reduction, (3) imaginative variation; and (4) synthesis of texture and structure (Patton, 2002; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003; Willig, 2001). *Epoche* involves becoming aware of assumptions and biases, in order to gain genuine curiosity about the phenomenon itself. Rather than

attempt to rid myself of personal involvement in the topic, I instead became *curious* about my own interests, thoughts, and feelings (see Appendix A: Researcher Self-Reflexivity). As discussed above, such self-reflexivity helped me to realize that my curiosities and understandings of fulfillment and a fulfilling life path may very well be quite different from the participants'. I felt more cognizant of what I was bringing to the study and its influence on the research process, which also stimulated my excitement and interest in what I would discover.

Phenomenological reduction aims at grasping the phenomenon under study as a whole, in order to begin to get a feel for *what makes this what it is* (Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001). To help me enter into each participant's experience of fulfillment, I first transcribed each interview following the Embodied Transcription method (Brooks, 2010). As discussed above, this not only served the practical function of creating a written document to analyze, but also promoted "in-depth living with the data" by listening and re-listening to the interview: helping me to identify repeated words, phrases and themes; para-linguistic cues, such as tone, pauses, volume, and laughter; as well as my own somatic awareness as researcher (Patton, 2002, p. 487). After completing the transcript, I listened to the interview once again while reading the text, in order to gain a fresh and holistic perspective on the participant's experience in its totality. I simultaneously highlighted key words, phrases and passages, beginning to grasp and make sense of the emerging themes. As described above, I then wrote a somatic synopsis of the interview based on embodied writing (Anderson, 2002 & 2003). Such repeated listening and readings began to create a sense of clarity about the emerging patterns. After I completed this first stage for each of the interviews, I moved on to *Imaginative Variation.*

Imaginative variation breaks down the overall picture of experience into thematic clusters, in order to organize the various elements into a meaningful structure and connect the themes with textual illustrations (Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001). I read through the transcript once again, to re-orient myself to the interview and be reminded of significant words/ phrases/passages and repetitions. At this stage, I began to recognize various groupings, and coded the data accordingly. I then returned to the text and matched up key passages to illustrate each part of the whole picture. In addition, I added labels that captured the essence of each cluster, based on the participant's words, brief quotes or descriptive labels, checking to ensure that the emerging themes made sense with the original data. I then created a summary table, listing the cluster label, themes, associated quotes or words, and corresponding page numbers.

I completed these first three stages of analysis for each interview, so as to respect the dual nature of this research: in-depth case studies of each individual participant, which were then brought together through composite analysis. Once I had summary tables for all of the seven participants, I essentially repeated the *Imaginative Variation* stage, but this time through a cross-comparison of all of the participants' clusters and themes. Patton's advice on creativity helped to guide the twists and turns of this stage of comparative analysis: "Be open…generate options…diverge-converge-integrate…use multiple stimuli …side-track, zigzag, and circumnavigate…change patterns…make linkages… trust yourself…work at it…play at it" (2002, p. 514). Refreshing myself by taking another look at each individual somatic synopsis and thematic chart, I then took a step back to view the whole, noting obvious overlaps, similar words or phrases, as well as more subtle underlying patterns that seemed to weave through and connect all of the

interviews. Again and again, stepping in to look deeply, stepping back to gain the overview, and drawing diagrams to map out the commonalities and diversity within the participants' experiences. Like panning for gold, I sifted through the data to distill the overarching themes that captured the shared experiences, along with their variations, gradually revealing the nuggets that reflected the essence of these women's experiences of fulfillment.

The comparative phase of *Imaginative Variation* lead to the final stage of data analysis, *synthesis of texture and structure*, which provides an interpretive map of the phenomenon in question (Patton, 2002; Willig, 2001). As Van Manen (1990) describes, "The essence…re-awakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller and deeper manner" (p. 10). In order to make implied patterns explicit, I then pulled out quotes from each participant's interview that illustrated the five over-arching themes and four minor themes gleaned through the analysis process. Major and minor themes were differentiated both in terms of quantitative and qualitative "weight" or emphasis; meaning that both the number of times a given theme showed up among participants (individually and as a group), as well as the emotional significance given to that theme, determined its classification. Before writing the composite analysis sections, I returned to each participant's experience and wrote an individual sketch of each interview, in order to provide a separate depiction of each woman's story as a whole unto itself before describing the collective level of composite themes.

One of the dilemmas I felt while analyzing the data was taking each woman's story apart, pulling it into pieces, and connecting those pieces with other women. Although I think it is valuable to look at the overlaps and differences, I also have a belief

that those individual nuggets do not mean much unless they are connected with the individual journeys; meaning each theme can mean many different things and manifest in different ways depending on who you are, your story, where you come from, personal and family history, the beliefs you have developed, needs and values. There may be overlapping themes, but the nuance of those themes takes on significance when they are linked to or grow out of unique personal experiences and discoveries. I have addressed this dilemma by giving space for both the individual stories and the collective themes, thereby helping to place those themes within the context of both the personal and the collective.

To enhance the credibility of this study, I consulted with my committee chair at various stages of analysis to discuss the data and their meanings, as well as get advice on my discernment of the composite themes. Involving others in the analysis process enhances the quality of qualitative research, diminishing bias and providing a cross-check of interpretations (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003; Willig, 2001). I also conducted a member check by emailing each participant a copy of the individual sketch written to summarize the interview and capture the most salient aspects of her experience of fulfillment. I invited the participants to respond with comments, feedback, and clarifications. All of the participants expressed appreciation and confirmed that their sketches reflected their experiences of fulfillment; four of the participants also responded with brief clarifications or additional information so that the sketches better represented their experiences. This follow-up contact with the participants provided an additional source of information that served to enhance credibility (Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Willig, 2001).

In the two results chapters that follow, individual stories, structure, thematic detail, and textual illustrations come together and point toward the *essence* of women's experiences of fulfillment and the body's role in finding and navigating fulfilling life paths. Chapter Four presents individual sketches in order to introduce and honor each participant's individual experiences of fulfillment before discussing the composite themes that emerged through comparative analysis, which are discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter 4: Results
Interview Sketches

Before going on to present the composite themes that emerged from analyzing the interviews as a whole, and in order to honor and represent the integrity of each participant in her own right, this chapter bridges intersectionality with each woman's experience of fulfillment through an individual "sketch" of her interview (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994). The sketches that follow are based on each of the interviews conducted with the seven participants in this study. Interviews took place from December 2010 to February 2011, each lasting approximately two hours. One participant agreed to meet for a follow-up interview to cover additional topic areas that were not addressed during our first meeting. All interviews were successfully digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. As discussed in the methodology chapter, each interview was transcribed according to Embodied Transcription methods (Brooks, 2010). Once all of transcriptions were completed, each interview was then independently analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Patton, 2002), informed by intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994) and Embodied Writing (Anderson, 2002 & 2003). Lastly, a cross-comparison analysis was conducted for all of the interviews in order to discover emergent composite themes, which will be presented in the chapter that follows.

Each sketch begins with a brief demographic description of the participant, followed by a summary of the interview capturing the spirit and key elements of each woman's experience of fulfillment. (For an in-depth discussion of participant demographics, see Appendix F.) A member check was conducted, such that all of the interview sketches were reviewed and approved by each participant and additional comments were incorporated. To honor confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for

everyone, either chosen by the participant or myself at her request. All of the women began the interviews by participating in an experiential exercise which involved creating a picture that captured their experiences of fulfillment or a fulfilling life path. The drawings served as a non-verbal means of expression that allowed the participant to connect with her own subjective experience before entering into verbal dialogue. While the drawings were not directly included as part of the analysis process, they did contribute meaning and were often referred to throughout the interviews. Each participant's drawing is shown below as part of the individual sketches, and commented on where relevant.

Individual Sketches of Participants

Kara – Radiation

Kara is a 57 year old heterosexual white woman, divorced twice and currently single, with one daughter from her first marriage. She is completing a Bachelor's degree in communications, with a certificate in conflict resolution, and works as a manager for a medical clinic, as well as a mediator. She has studied in body-related fields[5]*, such as kinesiology, energy work, and psychic development. She describes herself as spiritual, not religious.*

I meet Kara at her home and am instantly drawn to the beautiful view of Mount Hood off her balcony, where humming birds greet us, even on this wintery day. She serves me tea in her cozy living room, as we settle in on her couch to explore her experience of fulfillment together. As I explain the experiential exercise, she chimes in, "It's pretty simple. I probably don't need 10 minutes to do it." And then says with a big laugh, "I take that back. I'm having too much fun!" Fun would prove to be a strong aspect of Kara's experience of fulfillment.

[5] Note: For all of the participants' biographical descriptions, the phrase "studied in body-related fields" captures a broad continuum of educational experiences, from experiential learning as a client, patient, or group member to more formal training contexts.

Illustration 1: Kara's Drawing

"Radiation…" Kara explains. "That's where I fulfill myself. I radiate." As Kara elaborates, she uses words and phrases like:

- creative, birthing, explosion, release
- builds and builds, reaches maximum critical mass, needs to be put out there
- who knows what it's going to be, not your problem, letting it go, no responsibility, freedom, no guilt
- force, not soft or gentle in any way, very powerful

She clarifies that for her fulfillment is not about *what* she is doing, but rather about a feeling that permeates everything. She explains that the above qualities describe her "essential way of being":

> That's me…in whatever I happen to put me with or in or whatever. And that's fulfilling to me…It's not, ya know, it's nice to have something you want to drink, it's nice to go on a beautiful walk and enjoying nature and all of those things, but they're too small, I guess. What I *want* is to feel *this* while I'm doing *that*.

It becomes clear that a deep experience of life is key to Kara's sense of fulfillment, an experience that makes her feel a heightened awareness of all her senses, her own and others' energy, and intuition.

Before I even ask Kara about the relationship between her body and fulfillment, she explains that her body is a source of guidance, confirmation, and validation; something she is learning to trust more. The guidance she receives through her body makes her feel "connected with something bigger," a feeling of not being on her own. While Kara says she has always felt intuitive and paid attention to the signs that flashed at her, this relationship with her body was not supported by her parents or religious upbringing. Raised as a Christian Scientist[6], she explains

> You don't even believe you have a body… not a healthy way to grow…I feel like I was spiritually abused because I was really not in touch with my physicality at all...So I have learned about the physical world completely on my own, not from my family of origin.

Kara described a pivotal life experience that served as a powerful catalyst and drastically changed her relationship with her body and life path. When Kara was 35 years old, she was in a life-threatening accident that left her with severe injuries and chronic symptoms. Her symptoms were "poo-poohed" by the medical system, so although skeptical of natural medicine, Kara spent ten dedicated years of going back and forth between allopathic and alternative healthcare, following her intuition, until she finally found an alternative practitioner who gradually helped her get her health back.

Kara emphasized that she felt like there was "no choice" about this path, in that her symptoms drove her to find relief. She felt like she was dying and simply had to find

[6] Christian Science is a system of religious thought and practices based on the Bible and writings by Mary Eddy Baker that espouse "resolving difficult challenges with health, relationships, employment, and so on through prayer" (Christian Science Board of Directors, 2011).

a way to stay alive. As if "something reached out and grabbed me," she felt forced to focus on her health crisis, a path that eventually "turned into this spiritual practice…an opportunity to go deeper and work on myself."

Although Kara did not consciously choose this path, at some point she made a decision to "follow it with intent" and had to "work through the life that I was surrounded by." She described her devastation and anger when her marriage of 15 years fell apart – she thought he was her soul mate and that they would be together for the next 50 years. "Looking back now," Kara reflected, "I think what I've discovered is I was minimizing myself to be with him, and it wasn't until I maximized myself that I could see that."

Kara's sense of maximizing herself grew out of this pivotal life crisis and is central to her experience of fulfillment. She described how fearful she has been throughout her life, and how this fear eventually drove her back to school and motivated her interest in conflict resolution. Kara wanted to be able to "have relationships and communicate with anyone without feeling minimized or overpowered." Kara views this experience of fearfulness and sensitivity to others as a "woman's problem," in that women tend to minimize and hide themselves out of fear and oppression.

What began as a dramatic health crisis transformed Kara's path and also gave rise to her professional calling. Following her goal to serve as a model for others, Kara is teaching women to stand up for themselves through pay negotiation, addressing the abuse of power, and bridging disparate views through her work as a conflict mediator. Just as she felt that something reached out and grabbed her, directing her on her path, Kara now wants to become that force for others – grabbing them – helping them "wake up" to themselves. Kara explained the importance of owning her own power:

> I want my world to reflect back to me what I'm feeling and what I know I am to be…that I'm a strong woman and that I have a lot to offer…I am a presence…Unless I play my part as a fully functioning person, a presence, there's no way the world would reflect back to me what I am.

Kara finds fulfillment in giving back to others the gift of all she is discovering about herself and life.

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Lou – Individual Pursuits of Curiosity

Lou is a 71 year old heterosexual white woman, divorced once and currently married, with two children from her first marriage and others by marriage. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Art History, works as a training consultant, and also teaches career/transition workshops. She has studied in body-related fields, such as yoga, Pilates, psychic work, and somatic-oriented psychology. She describes her religious/spiritual orientation as "unknowing, searching, but not vibrantly."

I meet Lou at her beautiful and spacious home in the hills over-looking the city below. As she prepares us a fresh pot of coffee in her colorful kitchen, she refers to a mutual acquaintance (who suggested her as a participant) and his wife who recently died. As if a prelude to what's coming, Lou expresses appreciation and admiration for their spirit of continual growth, even amidst the process of getting older and facing death.

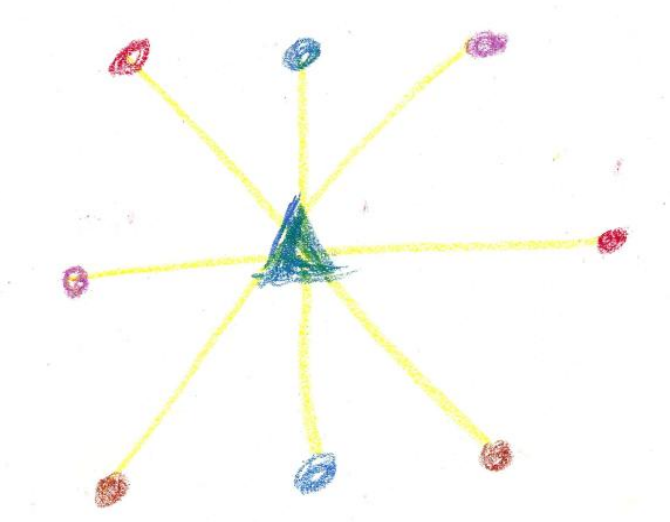

Illustration 2: Lou's Drawing

Lou discusses her experience of fulfillment through the filter of aging – in particular, the impact of *beliefs* about aging. She explains that her journey is an ongoing one, in that she still has multiple "arms of interest:"

> I think I must've thought at one time that when you got to be at an age that I am, that I would sort of have it together and figured out. I really don't have it together at all…I'm probably feeling more comfortable being the age I am, but I still have all this myriad of things left to do, that are unexplored or started or certainly that I'm not finished with.

Yet Lou describes how her desire to continue to explore new things contradicts family messages and "myths about the Golden Years" that say

> *You're supposed to retire. You're supposed to not want to work anymore… you're supposed to sit down, you're supposed to be quiet, you're supposed to be pleased with where you've been and not want to go anywhere again…Or you're supposed to not keep searching*…and that's not what I want to do. I don't want to be retired. I want to continue to look at new things to do, to explore and to be a part of.

Lou's internal struggle with these powerful myths becomes all the more clear when she describes them as "self-limiting messages that can also come from the inside out as well as the outside in."

In contrast to these beliefs about aging, Lou talks about older years as a time to investigate possibilities and "pursue what you *really* want." She emphasizes the impermanence of life, that "time is certainly more measured at this state of life because it isn't endless anymore." She is interested in changing the patterns that have steered her life, doing more "individual pursuits of curiosity," and testing those pursuits by asking herself, "Is this something that's worthwhile? Is it time well spent?"

For Lou, these pursuits are especially linked to her professional life, working with groups and corporate trainings. With great passion, she talks about a non-profit group she recently started, based on "soul searching about aging, staying active and conscious in

this last act of our lives." As a trainer and facilitator, Lou says she becomes a "vehicle" for others' learning and change:

> It actually makes my heart beat faster. I feel it deeply, a pleasure, just a pleasure, it's an absolute pleasure. And in a way, perhaps a form of intimacy. So there's that feeling of stepping closer, not necessarily with that person, but you're just closer to the energy that happens when someone discovers something, when someone says, yes this has worked for me, or it made a difference or I used it and here's what I got. There's just a tremendous sense of pleasure that you had a part in that. It's not that you made it happen for them, but you had a part in bringing it to them and guiding that piece. So that's real satisfying…that really brings, gives me a pump feeling and a sense of life.

Key elements of Lou's fulfillment are connected with the activity, pleasure and intimacy of taking part in others' discovery processes, especially groups. She explains that "in my own personal life, I'm probably not as intimate of a person, in one-on-one…I'm more reserved." So it makes sense that retiring into a "quiet living space" would not be fulfilling for her. Yet Lou explains that as she's gotten older, she no longer just keeps "going going going…to kind of keep the curiosity about what's out there." She now seeks a "healthy balance" of outward engagement and inward reflection time – sitting, knitting, reading – which she finds "grounding" and helps her process her thoughts.

Going further into Lou's experience of fulfillment, she reflects on the burdens of role obligations and the "responsibilities of living where you are known." She explains that she loves going places where she is anonymous because she feels "exceedingly free." Lou admits that she hates the role of caregiver and aspects of aging and death, feels a loss of intimacy in her marriage, and struggles with the reversal of roles as her husband ages. She feels pressure to fulfill these roles and expectations, yet vacillates between expressing distaste for the changes and feeling a need to "let go" and accept them.

While aspects of aging have created barriers to her experience of a fulfilling life, Lou also describes how getting older has brought a sense of self-acceptance that ripples out from her looks into her professional life as well. Aging has made her more comfortable with her appearance and feel less pressure "to look phenomenal all the time" because "the internal judgment is tuned down:"

> I don't feel that pressure…I can now be, well I think I am much more, not sure of myself or assured. This is not going to come out right. It's like, I know it will work. Like doing a workshop before I would feel like I had to prepare, prepare, prepare and then be really working so it goes well. And by letting go and relaxing more and being more in the moment in workshops now, because I know they'll work, I trust that it's all going to come together in a really positive way for each participant. That just feels really much different than it did. And it's very satisfying. Talk about again more physical…It's just more of a letting go of, not having to have everything be put into place, but letting go and just letting it go as it goes. So it's more just letting the process have more flexibility, more room, more spontaneity…and the intimacy comes back.

This lack of judgment towards herself enhances Lou's experience of fulfillment by bringing relaxation, a letting go in her body, and a feeling of intimacy with others.

When I asked Lou more about how she arrived at this experience of fulfillment in her life, she talked about desperation, her professional path, and discovery-by-chance:

> I think all of it is discovery for me, I really do. I think I have been extremely fortunate in the fact that I was able to work in a field, I just fell into it, that allowed me the exposure to fulfillment. I mean, it wasn't planned…Mine was all just really by chance…Number one of desperation …getting divorced, having to go to work. *What can you do?* Well I knew how to work. I mean, I knew I could work because I came from a real strong work background. So it was just going into, *well what do you like*?...So it just fell into place…it was by chance that all of this came into my, to me. I didn't make it happen…I didn't seek it out. Well, what I sought was employment and a regular paycheck because I had two children to support and myself…And the fulfillment just was a part of the work. So it just really fell into place, that this was something that I looked forward to. I liked it. I felt good afterwards.

Although Lou emphasizes how her sense of fulfillment "just fell into place," she also referred to barriers she had to negotiate along the way, including male-dominated companies, professional dead-ends because of the prejudice against women, and the struggle "for women to be able to even be seen as valuable." Perhaps as a kind of balance to the sexism woven throughout her professional path, Lou also attributes her experience of fulfillment to the web of "connectiveness" in her life, particularly her friendships with women, and the unexpected doors of opportunities those connections have opened.

As we brought our time together to a close, Lou reflected on a personal regret that has turned into a source of inspiration and learning about fulfillment:

> I think in many cases I gave up too soon. It's not giving up. I mean, I was willing to not finish a lot of things because it was hard, so I would give up. And I would say, if I were going to send a message or live my life over, I would not give up. Just an example, I wanted to go to a particular college after I finished my high school…I really wanted to go there, but I didn't fight for it hard enough, and so I didn't go there. And of course it changed my entire life. But every time I even hear the name of that college, it still…I think it was really, I should've…I would've done well to have gone there. I didn't know how to stand up for myself enough at that time. And at other times, I didn't know how to stand up for myself. So learning to stand up for yourself more, and to have more tenacity, not giving in. That would be it.

This sense of tenacity – not giving in and learning to stand up for herself – now guides Lou in her ongoing experience of living a fulfilling life.

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Susana – True Colors

Susana is a 56 year old lesbian Hispanic woman, born in a south American country with mixed European descent, divorced twice (first to a man, second to a woman), currently married (to a woman), and does not have any children. She holds a Ph.D. in psychology, works as a clinical psychologist and faculty member, and is the president/founder of an eldercare company. She has studied in body-related fields, such as somatic-oriented psychology, dance/music/drumming, massage, energy work, alternative medicine, and drug/alcohol treatment. She practices the spiritual tradition of Vedanta.

I meet Susana at her office in a high-rise professional building in the heart of the city. She has just finished with a client and has a dinner appointment following – this is a busy woman with an active schedule! From the moment she told me she wanted to participate in this study, I could feel Susana's warmth, depth and exuberance for life. As we settle into her couch, she embraces this topic and our time together with the same genuineness and enthusiasm.

Illustration 3: Susana's Drawing

Reflecting on her drawing, Susana slowly describes how fulfillment comes through the expression of one's true colors:

> You have this interior light, you have your divine essence somewhere, like in a shell…So you have a shell and [your divine essence is] covered, and you go on and on, and it's like you are all inside and then finally you find a way out where you can show your true colors [laughter]. And that light follows your true colors…I see the fulfillment inside being, being truthful to that light, at the same time that you are without, and letting that come from the in to the out in a truthful way…It comes in many ways and forms, the partnerships that you form, the work that you do, the way that you work. Truthful to yourself. That's fulfillment for me.

For Susana, being true to herself means being real, respecting what she really feels, and also risking expressing that to others whether or not they approve. Being truthful to herself makes her feel full – we laugh as she points toward her voluptuous bosom, as if to prove her point. Although she does not have children by choice, this fullness feeds her personal and professional relationships, giving her an attitude toward life that she can nurture and give to others.

Susana goes on to describe her life journey – the many pivotal points that have helped her discover her own true colors:

> I started detaching myself from the role that I thought I needed to perform, and I started discovering more what I wanted – what made me happy – nobody's right or wrong, what the society expects from me, from my mom or my dad or the family or the psychological association or the schools.

Beginning in her 20s, Susana realized she was living according to family, cultural and professional expectations. Supported by ongoing therapy, she started to make "big revolutions and big wars and quantum leaps" in order to break away, find and prove that "I am who I am." She abruptly broke off her first engagement, then followed an unconventional professional path, facing the disappointment and critical reactions of friends and family. Years later, after marrying her first husband, becoming well-

established in her career, and living the life of the "rich and famous," she broke away from this "comfort zone" and fell in love with a woman. Although Susana tried to rationalize having multiple hidden relationships, she got so physically sick that she realized she had to clear her conscience. Susana ended up getting divorced, leaving her country of origin, coming out as a lesbian, and marrying her new partner.

Although falling in love and deciding to be with a woman served as a powerful "aha moment" that made her feel more fulfilled and true to herself, Susana also describes the pain of the homophobia she faced in coming out:

> That was really a scandal...My family has some ties to the society and the status quo, so it was like, oh my God, the latest gossip in society was that Dr. [her last name] was 'one of those' [lesbians]. So it was like *fuck you*. So it was one of those again – I do what I feel is real and truthful to me. And you don't want me, that's fine. You don't want me in your circle anymore, that's fine…It wasn't confusing. It was very clear. It was painful because you see that the other people are judging you, people that you like or you love. Even my mom stopped talking to me for a while.

Eventually Susana moved to the U.S. because of the "sense of freedom" she experienced as a lesbian, in contrast to other countries where public affection was considered rude and "in your face." She described having a strong "spiritual call" that gave her a sense of absolute knowing and courage to "start from scratch again," uproot and move to a U.S. city that is gay-friendly.

Several years later, when Susana's second marriage ended, she faced a serious depression, unsure of where to go or what to do next. At that point, Susana realized that all those "big revolutions" had given her a sense of her strength and power, but that she could now find "softer ways" of being true to herself. She no longer wanted the pattern of "leave and lose," breaking away to prove her sense of self. Instead she decided to stay and build a sense of home – in herself and with others – where she was. When I asked

Susana what helped her through this extremely difficult time of her life, she explained it was a "combination of divine help with human power." Even though shattered, Susana had a strong belief in her own power to pick up the pieces and put them back together. Alongside her own strength, she had faith in "something bigger than me that can hold and nurture me."

One of the ways Susana feels this connection to her strength and "something bigger" is through her body. Interestingly, it was during this difficult and transformative time in her life that Susana "came to terms" with her body as well. She explained that she had always had a "corporeal" sense of her energy, but she also had a life-long conflict with her body. Bombarded by media and other messages mandating the importance of being skinny, Susana had been on diets since she was 12 years old, facing perpetual inner and outer criticism for being "chubby, fat, big, whatever." Finally, after going to exercise and diet extremes to achieve her ideal size and fit the cultural standards, Susana realized she didn't want to "pay the price." Instead, she asked herself what *really* made her happy, which led to a sense of ownership and self-acceptance. She explained,

> [Fulfillment] makes us know the divine, but it's also *body* energy…Once I take ownership – that's *my* energy, *my* center, *my* well, like the well that I can pull – that makes me feel, okay this is it. *I have it*. If you say, what is what you have? I don't know. *I have it*. I have what it takes to be me, to be fulfilled, to get it all…It's empowering…If you come to terms…to who you are, including your body, you *find* your body…That becomes a source of power and energy and identity.

Susana realized that not until she let go of the body that was *not* hers was she able to feel what she actually *did* have. Until our interview together, Susana said she hadn't made the connection that taking ownership of her body actually helped her build a stronger identity and experience her body as a resource in expressing her true colors and feeling fulfilled.

Reflecting on what she has learned throughout her life and her wisdom for other women, Susana emphasized the importance of letting go of the need for others' acceptance:

> It's damned if you do, damned if you don't. If you are not true to yourself and trying to please others…because by pleasing others, you are pleased. But by pleasing others, then you are not yourself and you suffer. So it's a paradox. You get trapped…There is always somebody who doesn't like me, no matter what. So why bother?! [*Laughter*] Why bother trying to please anybody…We are so much playing a role that the patriarchal culture designed for us, that we think if we ever break away from that, we will never be accepted, tolerated, loved, supported, liked – and that's true! But the other way is true as well. Even if you conform to the role, there is always somebody that doesn't like you or you're not doing it good enough, so why not put all the energy into it and do what you want and forget the rest?!...There is always someone who will support you, admire you and love you, but you will not find those until you find yourself. It's not that easy. You pay a price. But it's a meager price compared to feeling all that power and all that energy and all those great things.

For Susana, finding and living your true colors – risking the loss of outside approval – is the matrix and backbone of a fulfilling life path.

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PJ – Creating My Life

PJ is a 66 year old lesbian white woman, divorced once (to a man) and currently married (to a woman), with two sons from her first marriage. She holds an N.D. in naturopathic medicine and works as a naturopathic physician and faculty member. She has studied in body-related fields, such as naturopathy, nursing, energy medicine, homeopathy, and emotional release work. She practices the traditions of Science of Mind and pagan spirituality.

I meet PJ at her home, which I soon discover is the place she and her partner/wife found after doing a "visioning" exercise: a ritual about "what we want to see in our life, what we want to create in our life." As we sit in her home office and explore fulfillment together, it becomes clear that creating the life she wants is central to PJ's experience of a fulfilling life path.

Illustration 3: PJ's Drawing

Like the cobra in her drawing, PJ sits up tall and opens her chest wide:

> I feel like I am at the peak of my life right now…so much more than ever in my life before, fully in charge of my life, of what I've created, rather than someone else creating it or directing me to what I should do…Now I'm doing something that is totally mine. I've created it!

Working as a nurse since her early 20s, throughout her life PJ was directed by medical institutions and – predominantly male – doctors. "The men were all assholes and they were very oppressive, particularly in my era of time," she explained. "If you didn't do the job right, you got reamed. Or, if they liked you, they wanted to go to bed with you." She now works as a naturopathic doctor, "seeing the kind of patients that I want to see…not just seeing anybody who comes through the door." She also teaches, has started a non-profit group, and is writing a book about women, health, and the medical system.

As we talk more, PJ shares the shocking and tragic reality of how this significant theme and shift from *being directed* to *creating life* has permeated much more than her professional life. Facing tragedy at a very early age, PJ tells me that her mother

committed suicide when she was just five months old. Her father was away serving in World War II, so she spent the first five years of her life in foster care. When her father did return, he sexually abused her until he died when she was 16 years old. These early traumas, PJ explained, laid down beliefs that "I can't trust that I am going to be taken care of," as well as feelings of unworthiness and an inability to say no to abuse in subsequent relationships.

In addition to these personal tragedies, PJ spoke about the influential power of "cultural myths" and messages toward women that shaped how she felt about her body, herself in general, and the traditional path she initially followed:

> Women in this culture have not been encouraged to love their bodies at all, on a lot of different levels. I mean, the advertising industry for sure… You're imperfect, so buy this product or do this and it will make your body more perfect. You know, makeup, body lotions or whatever!…So I just never felt that I was very together because you're always comparing yourself to something in a magazine or a billboard or some craziness. And you kind of believe it. And when all of your friends are doing it, you just get caught up in that sweep of this is what you're supposed to look like, this is what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to get married, you're supposed to have babies, you're supposed to do all that, take that path, which is the path that I took early on.

Although PJ felt that she got sucked into that "cultural sweep," her experience gradually changed when she divorced her husband and began listening to herself. Through individual therapy and peer counseling groups, she learned that "it's okay to listen to your intuition, to listen to your heart, what your heart's speaking" and "[got] in touch with my feelings, that my feelings were valid…and how to release some of the old hurt feelings of my childhood." Listening to herself has enabled PJ to pay attention and adjust to her body's needs – physically and emotionally – and also stand up for herself and create strong boundaries in relationships.

In part, PJ attributes her current experience of fulfillment to having gone through "the dungeon" of life, as well as a "fortitude" that has helped her make it through "the underside and back, back up again." She describes this sense of fortitude as a resilience, an "inner strength" that she can tap into, something in her core that gets re-strengthened through the process of going through devastating experiences. PJ explains that this core strength contributes to her fulfillment by giving her the feeling that she can indeed create what she wants in her life.

PJ also emphasized the power of belief – "belief can color everything" – and that what you believe is true about yourself and the world, you continue to attract. So she makes a conscious effort to cultivate intentional beliefs – safety, contentment and trust. PJ explained that daily practice helps her to foster "intuitive knowingness," set clear intentions, and then "let go" so that the "spirit, universe, whatever" can provide. This includes differentiating the past from the present by continually reminding herself that "this is the truth now; it wasn't true then, but this is now, and it is true now." PJ shared a poignant realization that liberated her from the drive of unconscious beliefs:

> The piece I got about my mother is that I could not save her. I could not save her when I was baby and I cannot save her now. And with that realization came the opening of, I don't need to do critical care nursing anymore! Because what I feel I was doing was continually trying to save her…It was driving me. [Realizing that] was the best day of my life.

"Awakenings" such as these have made PJ more conscious of what has been directing her life, thus freeing her to pursue and create a more fulfilling path.

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Anna – The Garden

Anna Seavey is a 52 year old heterosexual white woman, divorced once and currently single, with one daughter who is adopted. She has a Bachelor's degree in History of Religion, and runs her own business as an event planner. She has studied in body-related fields, such as fitness, body image, and physical/energy awareness. She describes her religious/spiritual orientation as "actively spiritual, though not connected to a group."

I meet Anna at her new tiny warehouse office; a fun, busy, lively environment which she shares with a marketing and advertising group. She greets me…with her red hair, red pants, an artistic wrap, and little jacketed dog in her arms. Anna is as striking as the huge glittery ring on her finger. Yet when we tuck into the boardroom for some privacy, I discover in her another energy entirely.

Illustration 5: Anna's Drawing

"Fulfillment is best expressed for me in my garden," Anna explains. She describes how she finds reassurance and a greater sense of awareness – about herself and life as a whole – in the wisdom of the garden:

> I think that's why I enjoy my garden so well is that process of the seasons and the opening…The promise of the spring and what happens, and then the fullness of summer, and then the recognizing the beauty of the death of the fall and the winter, and then how that comes around again…The *eternal promise* and just the length of the process as everything in the garden matures and becomes either taller or stronger or dies off. I really like that.

Anna's "spiritual connection" with the seasonal change of her own and others' gardens brings her an overwhelming sense of gratitude, making her feel that "everything is exactly how it's supposed to be. Everything is perfect. Not perfect [like] a perfect color, but perfect in the way that it *just is*."

When I ask Anna how she experiences this sense of fulfillment in her body, I'm struck by how quickly and vividly she responds saying, "Oh, it's wonderful. It's like silvery liquid running through my veins or cool water being poured on me. It's refreshing and relaxing and almost anesthetizing." In contrast to her ordinary identity (speedy, caffeine, movement, entertainment, high energy), Anna's sense of fulfillment is linked with calm, placidity, and pleasant exhaustion – "the pause" that comes when she sits down, steps back, takes in and appreciates life.

Anna explains that the reassuring calm she receives from the garden is all the more important right now amidst this "sea change" in her life.[7] She is feeling a lot of worry, anxiety and discomfort related to her business and finances, her teenage daughter and their changing relationship, as well as the inevitable death of her aging dog, who has been a "complete and total companion" for her. Interestingly, these same elements greatly contributed to her experience of fulfillment after an earlier time of difficult transformation in her life.

[7] "Sea change" is a term from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, meaning a profound transformation.

About 10 years ago, Anna went through a "really devastating breakup," from which she was "completely blindsided and *seriously* shaken." She explained, "I did not necessarily want to feel better. It was all dark, it was all bad." Anna emphasized that although she somehow climbed out of that "dark well," it was not done with any intention. Rather, "It's that classic example of falling into the river and then somehow just going with it and then it turns out it's where you wanted to go."

Yet, as we talk more, Anna describes key ingredients that helped her navigate that devastating time of her life:

> I had a really good friend who, he discovered his wife having an affair at almost exactly the same time. We were on the same trajectory. And people would say, *Oh, you'll get over it, they weren't right for you guys, you'll come to see and it'll get better*. And it was so refreshing for the two of us to be together and say, I'm not gonna get over it and I hate him and I want to kill them and this is how I think I'm going to do it! [laughter]...Just someone to be angry and mad and hurt and to share the darkness with, and not have to get over it or make the best of it or take the high road or be understanding or…just to be in the trailer court of pain…It was really satisfying. It really helped.

Rather than force a positive spin on her breakup, Anna found support in someone with whom she could share the darkness and express her raw and real feelings.

During this time, Anna also broke through a kind of internalized sexism. Anna explained that growing up in a family where "the women have been the ones who are more interesting, more powerful, more respected and loved," she always felt good about being a woman. At the same time, she recognized that she had taken on other messages about women's dependence on men and decided she was no longer going to wait for a man to enable her to do what she wanted with her life. Anna elaborated about that pivotal time in her life:

> *I'm not going to wait around. I'm just going to do it myself.* But truly I don't know what the 'it' was, but it was kind of like, whatever it is, I'm just going to go do it. And I think before I had always had the conscious or unconscious assumption that there needed to be, you know *my husband* or *my boyfriend* involved for me to get a house, have a child, do something scary like start my own business.

Anna went on to start her own business, buy a house, get her special dog, and adopt her daughter. Doing these things contributed to her fulfillment by giving her a sense of personal security and gratification – an appreciation and pride for what she was able to bring into her life.

Although she tends to roll her eyes at meditation-type rituals, Anna now eagerly awaits daily emails based on the spiritual card readings of her friend who is recovering from cancer. She passionately describes their powerful impact, pronouncing that "*every day* one of those is written *personally* for me." Especially as Anna faces the current turbulence in her life, this intentional daily practice helps her feel grounded and focused, echoing the calm and reassurance of the garden.

Before we say goodbye, Anna expresses how this interview makes her realize "what is important and what works" in life:

> Being thoughtful is important…and directive and also…grounded faith, having faith that things are good and happening at the right time…It's not just that I'm holding the thought in my head, but that I feel it all the way through, *into the roots*.

This connection with her body – feeling things into her roots – does not necessarily come easily for Anna. Yet she is giving priority to experiences that help her access this means to fulfillment – dancing salsa, working in the garden, and planting her feet upon the ground as she opens her palms to receive the email meditations from her friend.

"Something else takes over," she explains. "I have to not think and that's a really fun place to be…it just feels so good."

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Gemma – Conviction of the Heart

Gemma is a 46 year old African-American woman, who describes her sexual orientation as "you love who you love" (bi-sexual). She is currently single, has never been married, and does not have any children. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Human Studies, emphasizing mental health human services, and works as a receptionist and spa attendant. She has studied in body-related fields, such as pre-nursing, body education, drawing, voice, and self-awareness practices. She describes her religious/spiritual orientation as "all about the love."

As Gemma and I sit down in my office, she expresses her excitement about the synchronicity of this interview – she loves learning about herself and the topic is right in line with her own self-explorations. Nonetheless, she's honest about her fear of the unknown of what might come up, especially emotions. I welcome her emotions, yet also support her boundaries – as it turns out, two themes connected with her experience of a fulfilling life path.

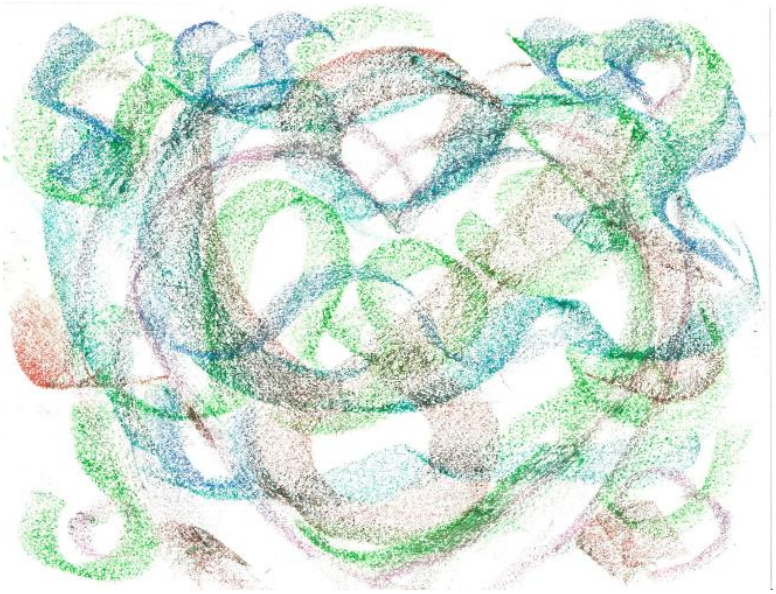

Illustration 6: Gemma's Drawing

Opening her arms and chest wide, Gemma experiences fulfillment as release, flow, self-expression and expansion, accepting and allowing whatever comes to come:

> Like touching something and then knowing it's time to move on from that. It's taking these different turns and going in and out. Just flowing through it and knowing that this is where I'm supposed to be, this is what I'm supposed to be doing…There's nothing wrong. There's no *wrong* about it. There's just…everything I do is just out of love. Love of knowing who I am, love of exploring life, trying different things, getting out of what other people are gonna think.

Gemma explains how the feeling of fulfillment puts her in contact with "that child inside" – something she feels pressured to move away from as an adult, especially in the face of others' judgments and expectations. But she realizes, "That kid was awesome…*still* is awesome. And I like that person…that child overcame *a lot*, went through *a lot.* Only to become aware that wow, that kid was okay." Essential to Gemma's experience of fulfillment is not only the feeling of free flowing expression, but all she has gone through and overcome to love and accept herself.

Gemma describes the silencing atmosphere within her family, and its complex connection with both racism and abuse:

> My family moved to an all-white neighborhood, so we were the only black family in the neighborhood. And so we automatically felt that, or at least my parents did, that we had to you know put up this kind of [long pause] *view* for people to see, but not really see who we are. Otherwise we'll be judged. And it will be unfairly. We will be unfairly judged.

Growing up, Gemma felt a continual pressure to maintain the family's appearance in order to be accepted within the potentially ostracizing and condemning environment of racism.

Simultaneously, within her family she was given the message to keep silent and not express herself – to "close the drapes" of both her house and feelings – in order to

hide her father's physical, mental and emotional abuse. Gemma described the closeted nature of her father's "serious anger problem":

> My dad had this poster. And it was in the closet. It wasn't actually, people couldn't see it. You'd have to open the closet see it. But it was one of those black, those velvet posters. And it was this big huge caveman with this big huge club. And it said, though I walk through the shadow…the valley of death, I will feel…I will *fear* no evil because I am the meanest son of a bitch in the Valley.[8] And that was like my dad. But people didn't see it, you know what I mean?...If you opened up the closet, that was the only way…I remember opening up that door and going, wow that was so him. That is him. He was, he was mean.

Her father's meanness and abuse made Gemma hyper-vigilant to the subtle signs of his mood and gauge her own behavior accordingly. Yet by the age of ten, unwilling to let him continue to hurt her family, Gemma stood up to her father. She described how she had to perpetually become "bigger than life" (literally and energetically) to confront a man who was "so out of control and unsafe;" yet it also made her shut down so as to not feel fear. Gemma became the "black sheep" – her family allowed her to protect them but also shushed her, as if she made things worse by standing up to her father. No one protected her from her father's abuse. And, as Gemma explained, although she could stand up for others, it was not until many years later that she began to stand up for herself.

Gemma described how this pattern of caring for others and neglecting herself repeated throughout her life. Several pivotal experiences connected with health, depression, and relationship crises helped her learn to care for herself – by standing up for herself – in intimate relationships and also within the medical system. She expressed how she gradually learned to show her vulnerability, ask for and accept others' help,

[8] Refers to a quote from the bible (Psalm 24.3): "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

appreciate her care-giving tendencies as a gift, yet also make boundaries so as to not automatically take on others' "stuff."

Another significant turning point occurred in her mid-thirties, when Gemma followed a "calling" to move to another state. Upon her first visit to the area, she said she knew, "I'm supposed to be here…Energetically it just felt right…It was like *ahh*…this big expansion!" Gemma makes a sound like the heavens are opening up, her arms and chest open wide, just as when she described her drawing. Although scared about the risk of letting go of the security of a home and great paying job, Gemma realized, "I wasn't really doing anything. I was just, not even really living, just kind of sitting there waiting for the next day to come, not really experiencing."

Spurred on by the crisis of "9/11" which made her realize her love for this world, she followed the call to move and went back to school. Gemma knew she wanted to "create the life that was right for me." In the process, she felt validated for who she is:

> I just thought there was something wrong with me…[but I realized that] I'm not really as messed up as I thought…I was the black sheep of my family, and come to find out I was actually the healthy one…because I'm like questioning why are we, why are we doing this. Let's fix this, let's *do* something, let's do something different.

Her teachers expressed confidence in her and saw her gifts, making Gemma believe in herself.

Over time, Gemma has also come to understand the significance of body size in her life. As a large woman weighing approximately 400 pounds, she has received a lot of negative attention about her weight; from her family, society in general, and particularly from her father. She realized that her weight made her feel protected and safe, helping her muster the energy and size to be able to confront her abusive father. And because her

weight bothered him so much, it also served the purpose of rebellion, a way to say "fuck you."

Yet Gemma expressed how her weight has also been a gift that has made her look inside herself and examine her beliefs:

> My body is like the layers of pain, I guess, all these negative beliefs that I've held onto as being true. And I feel that every time I break open or shift these beliefs, that I'm actually working on removing a layer of my body…I don't think that [my weight] limits me. It's my *belief* and the fact that I believe what they've taught me or what society limits. That's how I'm limited – not by my body.

Gemma emphasized that it is others' beliefs and expectations that create worry, stress and the desire to numb herself through food. "But," she declares, "I don't want to be numb. I want to feel. And the only way that I can feel is by understanding how it's contributed to my belief systems." By bringing awareness to those beliefs and her reactions to others' perceptions, Gemma feels her own strength and is able to discover what is true for her. Doing so, Gemma feels empowered to create her own path of fulfillment, whatever that may be.

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Lizzie – The River

Lizzie is a 65 year old heterosexual ("as far as I know") Irish-American white woman, divorced once and currently single, with two children, as well as two foster children for 1-2 years during her marriage. She holds a Ph.D. in Depth Psychology and works as a therapist, supervisor, faculty member, and teacher of adult learners. She has studied in body-related fields, such as Feldenkrais, breath work, and yoga. She describes her religious/spiritual orientation as a "soul orientation, living soulfully."

Lizzie and I make ourselves comfortable on the coach in her living room – surrounded by art she has created, artifacts she has collected, and a library of intriguing books. She lights candles and serves me hot tea and chocolate, infused with spicy chilies.

Like the soulful yet sensual atmosphere she creates, we begin to explore her soulful sensual experience of fulfillment.

Illustration 7: Lizzie's Drawing

The growing tree, now in its winter season; the alchemical vessel, burning strong with its fire; and beneath it all, the river, constant in its flow. These images come together to capture Lizzie's experience of fulfillment at this point in her life.

> The river…it's like always been there. It's been there in my ancestors, it will be there in my grandchildren. It's a matter of tapping into that river. It's bigger than I am, it's bigger than my generation. It's the flow of life… that I feel I felt as a young child. And that I've never, well I can't say I've never lost touch with it, but it's always been there. So when I do remember it, it's like I never forgot it…I *have* forgotten it, but when I remember it, I remember it. I know it was there even when I forgot it.

Although Lizzie says her experience is beyond words, she feels the river in her heart area – at times as expansion, other moments as tears, and sometimes rage inflamed, for example, by the global oppression of women. Lizzie describes the river as life force, the divine, the eternal presence of nature, and "I guess it's what I would call soul." This

undercurrent runs through her ancestors, her little girl self, and future generations. Like a balm during terrible times, her experience of "the absolute truth of the river" has been heightened at moments of crisis – such as having uterine cancer and facing the death of her dear friend – as well as by aging itself. Lizzie says she carries the "consciousness of the river" as grandmother and also as teacher.[9]

Although no longer a practicing Catholic, Lizzie expresses gratitude for her religious upbringing. She fondly remembers attending 6:00am mass with her father at the mission church from the time she was five through her teen-age years. As if transported back in time, she vividly recalls "the power of the early morning darkness, the details and textures, sounds and smells of that church, and the closeness of my body to my father's body." Those formative experiences gave her images and stories that allowed her to go "underground to the interior world, to the soul world." Lizzie recognizes the "seeds of her vocation" as a depth psychologist in her early childhood years exploring other realms.

At the same time, however, Lizzie discussed how religion and her family upbringing separated her from her body:

> I lived in those other worlds and those other stories more than I lived in my own body…I mean I did not have a body when I was little. Little Catholic kids did not have bodies…I remember I had soul and I had mind. And those were important to my parents. But I don't remember any awareness of my body as a child, other than if I did something wrong and I got in trouble or I got hit or something, then I would be aware through suffering of my body. But I don't remember experiencing joy in my body as a child. I may have, but I just don't remember it…The use of my body to express myself, that wasn't really important.

[9] In her own words, Lizzie quotes *The Saviors of God* by Kazantzakis (1960): "The ancestors are moving in her blood. One face fades away and the new face shows up, but it's the same. And the ancestors cry out, *Finish our work, finish our work. We didn't have time. You finish our work*."

Even though she can now recall those morning masses with "visceral clarity," Lizzie explained that because her body was not acknowledged, she had to learn to be in her body, to "get on the planet." Indeed, there was a long period when she would have preferred to die because this realm was so unsatisfying. Yet she emphasized that her sense of disconnection was about far more than her body alone: "Through years of Jungian analysis, I scraped and scratched and crawled my way into relationship with myself, my body, and the world."

Lizzie attributes her experience of fulfillment to "meeting my demons." Referring to the alchemical vessel in her drawing, she explains

> Out of the mud grows the Lotus. This sludge, this dark stuff at the bottom of the vessel, the gold is hiding in there…I cannot find it without going through the muck and uncovering my own dark history with my family, but also places I didn't like myself very much.

Although Lizzie did not want to elaborate on her family history, she emphasized that the transformative process of therapy, as well as strong friendships especially with women, have enabled her to face those demons. She felt held without judgment in her darkest moments and loved through them, making it possible for her to love and accept herself. In turn, Lizzie has been able to offer love and acceptance without judgment to others, infusing every aspect of her life – her work as a therapist and teacher, as well as her integrity-driven and conflict-embracing relationships with colleagues and friends.

Lizzie describes how "meeting her demons" is an ongoing journey; something she no longer fears but rather embraces. No longer living her "family story" of having to "do life solo," she now feels that "I am in a different story…I have so much at my back, so many people at my back, so much divine presence at my back…just my home is at my

back. Everything conspires to support me." She experiences herself as "embodied," meaning:

> It's about being fully present. It's about feeling myself holding this cup in my hand and feeling my feet on the ground, feeling myself connected to my environment, hearing my voice, sensing you in the room. It's like I can place my focus anywhere and find myself, which is not always been the case. It's like I can focus on my breath or I can focus on my feet or I can focus on the energy between us, and I can find myself. That's a really interesting thing to say [laughs]. I've never quite said it like that before… It's like why I think I'm a good therapist and a good teacher…Because I'm embodied, I have access to everything around me. Whereas when I'm disembodied or distracted or floaty or not present, I don't have access to very much, except for maybe *mya mya mya mya* [sounds of mind chatter]…my mind.

Lizzie's ability to confront what is "off-kilter" (within herself, others, and relationships) feeds her sense of embodiment, and vice-versa. Both contribute to her experience of fulfillment, which is realized through her professional path.

Although Lizzie expresses surprise for the gift of "stumbling upon" work that is so profoundly meaningful for her, she describes how "my work has always in some ways been the beloved for me." Fueled by the encouragement and support of her team of colleagues, Lizzie uses her own fire to ignite the fire in her students, "making sure they have a sense that they can make a difference in the world…teaching people to do the work that will take them out into the world in ways that I never got to go."

As our time comes to an end, Lizzie realizes that when she reflects on pressing world issues, like the global suffering of women, her heart fills with rage – in the same area where she felt such expansion in her heart when she remembered her little girl self. This heart rage inspires her work as a teacher, in that "that's all I know what to do with that rage, is to create something." Just as the ancestors of the river beckon her to continue

their work, Lizzie finds fulfillment in flowing and surging onward like the river through her students, friends, family and loved ones.

Chapter 5: Results
Composite Themes

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the analysis process began in the early stages of transcription, following the method of Embodied Transcription (Brooks, 2010). The initial phases of analysis focused on each participant's individual experience of fulfillment, approached through the methods of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Patton, 2002), intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994), and Embodied Writing (Anderson, 2002 & 2003). Chapter Four introduced the participants and presented the results of the individual analysis, capturing each woman's experience of fulfillment and the body through the sketches of each interview. After the analysis of each individual participant's experience, a cross-comparative analysis of all the interviews was conducted in order to gain an overarching understanding of the women's experiences of fulfillment and the body as a whole, common themes and patterns, as well as divergent features.

This chapter presents the five major themes that emerged out of the comparative analysis and illustrate the essential aspects of women's experiences of fulfillment and the body's role in helping women to find and navigate fulfilling life paths:

- *Connection with Something Bigger*
- *Oppressive Forces*
- *Crisis, Confrontation, and Metamorphosis*
- *True to Self*
- *Bestowing Life Learnings*

These themes build upon each other, especially the last four, in that they illustrate a process of growth that leads to enhanced awareness of self, the personal meanings of fulfillment, and the ability to pursue fulfilling life paths. However, the themes are not necessarily linear or sequential, but rather appear to spiral round throughout the women's

lives, reappearing and repeating in an ever-deepening way. The themes are first summarized below, then illustrated in detail with direct quotes from the participants.[10]

A core pattern in living fulfilling paths, all of the participants described a *Connection with Something Bigger* than themselves in relation to their experiences of fulfillment. This sense of spiritual union emerged out of body experiences, bonds with nature and callings to particular environments, and powerful feelings that carried them beyond their usual identities and feelings about themselves. In addition, participants also described the importance of intentional practice in order to cultivate and sustain these connections.

The second major theme illustrates the many ways in which *Oppressive Forces* influenced the participant's experiences of fulfillment and life paths. Through cultural, religious, and family views and behaviors, participants discussed how oppression manifested in various forms throughout their lives: beauty and body image; religion and the body; role expectations and boundaries; sexism and work; homophobia; racism; and child abuse. These oppressive forces also became internalized, such that the women took on others' beliefs and attitudes as their own, creating a foundation and maze of experiences and expectations that shaped their identities, relationships, and life choices.

Waking up to these external and internal oppressive forces leads to the third major theme: *Crisis, Confrontation, and Metamorphosis.* The participants described pivotal moments and experiences throughout their lives that were catalyzed by crisis. Health and relationship crises spawned significant transformations that shaped their understanding of fulfillment and course of their lives. These transformations were also facilitated by

[10] Note: Many of the quotes in this chapter, as denoted by an asterisk (*), are intentionally repeated or elaborated upon from the individual sketches to highlight their salience within the larger thematic context.

confronting internal suffering and external conflicts, often intertwined with oppressive beliefs, relationships, and systems. Saying no to those oppressive forces and standing up for themselves with others served as powerful instigators in shaping fulfilling life paths, creating a metamorphosis of belief systems, identity, and inter-personal patterns.

These experiences of metamorphosis through crisis and confrontation served as the building blocks for the fourth major theme: *True to Self*. The participants explicitly described the importance of being true to themselves as a means toward fulfillment. According to the women in this study, being true to self was facilitated by the following: listening to their feelings and bodies; recognizing, discerning and honoring multiple aspects of themselves; being willing to face disapproval; and a growing experience of self-love and acceptance.

The last major theme illustrates the connection between fulfillment and *Bestowing Life Learnings* to others. The participants' stories revealed the transformations and insights gained through significant struggles and hardships. These personal learnings traveled with them and became a source of purpose and direction for their lives – out of pain, oppression, crises, confrontations, and risks were borne wisdom and power. The participants' experiences of fulfillment were fed and fueled by offering those life learnings to others.

Connection with Something Bigger

Although none of the participants currently practiced conventional religious traditions, all of the women described a *connection with something bigger* in relation to their experiences of fulfillment (see Appendix F: Tables 1 & 4 for religious/spiritual orientations). Several participants referred directly to spirituality at some point during

their interviews, yet three of the women spoke about their connection to something bigger in a more general sense. Instead of naming this connection as "spiritual," these women described an energy they felt tapped into, a feeling of acceptance, or a guiding presence. While this theme surely evokes associations to what many people would consider spirituality, this distinction is noteworthy, in that framing this theme specifically as spirituality does not accurately reflect the diversity within the women's actual experiences and language.

It is also interesting to note that not one participant made a direct causal link between fulfillment and "something bigger" by saying, for example, "I feel fulfilled because of, or attribute my life path of fulfillment to, a connection with something bigger." Instead, through exploring their diverse paths and experiences of fulfillment, each woman got in touch with a feeling of being connected with something larger than herself. In other words, the *lived experience* of fulfillment seemed to give rise to this feeling, regardless of religious/spiritual orientation or a preconceived link between fulfillment and "something bigger." Two of the women described practicing within various spiritual traditions, which usually suggests an intention to connect with a source of life larger than oneself. Yet I found this theme particularly interesting because of the authentic and varied ways in which it arose in the moment for each woman.

Connections through the body. The participants described *connections with something bigger* in relation to their bodies, nature, other people, as well as strong feelings. While all of the women were able to express what they were feeling in their bodies as they discussed different elements of fulfillment during the interview, only some directly linked their connection with something bigger to their bodies. Kara's experience

of fulfillment was directly linked with the guidance she receives from her body. She emphasized that she gets physical signals letting her know if she is on the right track or not:

> It gives me a sense that there is something greater than me. It gives me a sense of being connected to more than myself. I don't feel isolated and alone. I also get from this guidance ecstatic rushes, body rushes sometimes, which I would interpret and feels like a loving embrace. Like sometimes you know when you want nurturance from something? Or you're just like celebratory? It's like something is celebrating with me, but it's not me. It's separate from me. I know it's not me. I'm not doing this to myself. It's really interesting. It's like if something nonmaterial could touch me and I could feel a little bit, that's what it's like…I really feel like I'm on a path and being lead.

Kara explained that although she has felt a sense of intuition throughout her life, she is only more recently experiencing and beginning to trust this connection with something bigger as a source of guidance.

Like Kara, Susana also discussed a strong body feeling related to her experience of fulfillment that made her feel connected with something bigger:

> First, the word that came to me was backbone. But then I had an image of a well. So, like a source of something, like a well of something, of strength …And I feel it here [puts hand on solar plexus]. Fulfillment gives me that sense of *centeredness* that holds me.

Susana emphasized how fulfillment makes her feel full and able to hold and nurture others. However, especially during harder times in her life, she calls upon her faith in divine help – the divine mother in many forms – as a source of support for herself, which she experiences as "something bigger than me that can also hold me and nurture me."

Anna also found a connection to something bigger through her body. Asking herself for inner guidance at one point in her life, Anna was surprised by the answer she received:

> *What are the things I have to do before I die to feel like I've gotten what I've needed?*...Dance salsa more!…The interesting thing, and this is where the mind part comes in and I'm in my body…is that if I concentrate on what the step is or what the movement is, I can't do it. And what I have to do is let my body do it on its own, and then I can do it and do it well…I really have to *not think* and that's a fun place to be and it just *feels so good*…Something else takes over.

Anna expected a much more "profound" answer to such a deep question, yet she discovered that the answer she received was indeed quite profound. For Anna, salsa dancing helped to let go of her thinking mind and surrender to the wisdom of her body, which gave her the experience of being connected with something bigger than herself.

Connections through nature and environments. Many of the participants spoke of pivotal moments in nature or specific environments which contributed to their sense of a fulfilling life path and gave them an experience of being connected with something larger than themselves. Two women described "callings," or distinct moments of feeling guided and knowing they needed to move to a new city. Susana had a powerful experience in nature that inspired her to move across the world to a new country:

> I remember having this spiritual experience where we crossed [a bridge] and stopped on the other side. There is still this little tree and I call it 'my tree'…And I saw for a moment *everything*. The bridge, the cars disappeared, and it was just this infinite blue, like a turquoise and greens, for a moment. You can explain the whole thing physically…because I was looking at the sun. But whatever it was, for me it was like a call.

Gemma described a similar experience of feeling a strong calling towards a specific location. While helping a friend move to a new city, she recalled feeling that:

> I'm supposed to be here…Energetically it just felt right. It felt like, it was like *ahh* [makes sound of heavens opening up, while simultaneously opening arms and chest wide] this big expansion…This is where I'm supposed to be…And then I came up to visit another time and it hits again. This is where I'm supposed to be.

For these women, their connection with something bigger related to the guidance they received through "callings," as well as their connection to a specific environment.

Two women emphasized that their relationship with nature was not only essential to their experience of fulfillment, but also made them feel connected with something bigger than themselves. Anna described how the garden – both literal and metaphorical – best captures her experience of fulfillment. Not only does she love the "pleasant exhaustion" after a long day of intense gardening, but she also feels deeply reassured by witnessing the seasonal changes of the garden:

> Just that natural progression of new sprouts coming up. Some make it, some don't. Some bloom larger this year, last year maybe not so much… It's all the natural state of being in flow and that's very reassuring like… this is *what it is*.

The calming reassurance Anna receives from the garden gives her a sense of greater awareness and gratitude, a feeling of acceptance and "perfection" in the way things are. It also serves as a source of guidance, as if something is telling her to not worry, not to push herself into a state of anxiety about the future, and instead just focus on the present moment, look at her surroundings, and feel the reassuring calm that comes from the natural flow in the garden of life.

Although Lizzie did not emphasize nature in a literal sense, contact with "the river" is core to her experience of fulfillment:

> I don't know if I can really find words for that. I can find some words that aren't enough…I could say life force, I could say it has something of the divine it, it has something of the eternal presence of nature. I guess it's what I call soul.

For Lizzie, the presence of the river makes her feel connected with something bigger than herself, something that flows through her from her ancestors and onward into future

generations, including her own offspring as well as her students and clients. She described this connection as a "knowing," something enduring, that has always been with her and is always present. However, Lizzie feels tapped into this connection more profoundly at certain times, such as moments of crisis or near-death experiences. For example, speaking of her dear friend who faced an unexpected terminal illness, Lizzie expressed:

> She got this terrible brain disease and she just collapsed at one point. It looked like a stroke, but it wasn't. And I flew down and I walked in the hospital room and she looked at me and she said, *There is nothing but love* [tears]. And it's like in that moment, we were in the river [laughter]. It's like there wasn't any moment of not understanding her, or not….It was like, that was the absolute truth of the river, that when we get in our most terrifying moments, if we can find that river then…then what? I don't know, but I've found it in terrible times.

For Lizzie, her connection with the river makes her feel connected with something bigger than herself; a link to her ancestors, the source of life, and a balm of true wisdom.

Connections through strong feelings. Other participants described how their experiences of fulfillment stemmed from strong feelings that made them feel connected with something larger than themselves. Lou described the "energy of discovery" and "web of connectiveness" she feels in her work with groups and friendships with women. As Gemma explored her experience of fulfillment, she described a strong feeling of unconditional love – especially for herself – acceptance and permission to freely express herself and follow what feels right in life, without judgment or pressure to live up to others' expectations. Their respective experiences of fulfillment stimulated strong feelings that took them beyond their ordinary identities and into a feeling of connection with something bigger.

Connections and intentional practice. Finally, some participants emphasized that the sense of being connected with something bigger, while present in their experience of fulfillment, does not necessarily come easily or naturally. Instead, this connection required intentional practice through daily rituals. Rattled by the discontentment of her childhood and bombarded by cultural messages to forever "scramble after the next best thing," PJ talked about the importance of intentionally cultivating trust and contentment, a feeling that "all is well:"

> I have really made a conscious effort and thought and intention to allow myself to feel content. So I do more lately, more regularly, gratuities, what I am grateful for, because it really helps me stay in this place of contentment. And the place of contentment means that you lose the angst about things…Staying focused with it and staying committed to the idea and every day, not just once a week, let's say at service on Sunday, but every single day…to get to know the belief. Because I think that's what belief is. Belief is, you continually keep it moving inside and that you don't put a stop to it.

For PJ, her connection with something bigger transformed from mere words into true belief through a commitment to daily practice.

Anna also emphasized the importance of tuning into this experience on a daily basis, rather than letting her normal worried self take over. Although Anna explained that she had always been resistant to meditation and other "woo-woo" types of things, as noted in the above sketch, she now eagerly awaits daily emails based on the spiritual card readings of her friend who is recovering from cancer**:**

> Now it's gotten to the point where every day I look for it, and *every day*, it's *astounding*, but *every day* one of those is written personally for me… It's very, very powerful. It's incredible…When I read it…I always make sure to have both feet flat on the floor, to be sitting up straight, to breathe, to have my palms open…I'm really sucked into it, no question about it [laughter]…It's just your basic meditative position, to be open to receive the information.*

Anna explained that she is learning that not only is the daily practice important, but also that she takes time to truly feel the messages she receives. In her words, “It's not just that I'm holding the thought in my head, but that I feel it all the way through…into the roots.” For Anna, feeling these messages all the way through into her body helps her to integrate her connection with something bigger, bringing this theme full circle back to the body.

Forces of Oppression

Throughout the interviews, in various forms and degrees, all of the participants spoke about oppression and illustrated the many ways in which external messages and expectations influenced their experience of fulfillment, as well as finding and navigating fulfilling life paths. Oppression refers to the excessive or unjust use of power to control another being; or the feeling of being negatively impacted, burdened or weighed down by another person(s), culture, or belief system (Chesler, 2005; hooks, 1984). For these women, oppression surfaced directly and indirectly throughout their lives through cultural, religious, and family messages and experiences.

Oppression took a range of forms from broad messages about looks and body image to general expectations about their identities as women, who they should be and what they should do with their lives. Oppression was described as sexism in the workplace, role obligations within family structures, standards based on age, religious beliefs and practices, racism and its complex impact on family life, as well as homophobic and heterosexist messages about who they should be in relationship with. Some of the women also spoke of physical, mental, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse, and how those enduring traumas shaped their identities, relationships, and life paths. The messages and experiences of oppression were sometimes overt, sometimes subtle and

insidious, and often internalized as part of the women's own psyches and norms. In all these ways, forces of oppression seeped into the very foundation of their journeys, becoming part of the soil out of which their life paths and understandings of fulfillment grew.

The ways in which the participants talked about oppression illustrate its pervasive nature. Oppression was often described not as an isolated experience or issue, but as a general mandate about how they should be that came from many directions, or a perpetual undermining undercurrent with many tendrils. Gemma experienced this oppressive force as constant judgment: "It was always like, *stay in the lines, don't go out of the lines.* And if I went out of the lines, it wasn't good. Or if it wasn't matched up with something else, it wasn't good." Susana expressed the feeling of being "damned if you do, damned if you don't" because women are "playing a role that the patriarchal culture designed for us." Similarly, PJ described the feeling of getting sucked into a "cultural sweep" stemming from media messages that make women feel imperfect, dislike their bodies, and think they need to buy products to forever change or improve who they are. Yet, as illustrated so vividly in her individual sketch, PJ also talked about how this powerful force ripples out beyond body image into norms for behavior, self-concept, social and family roles:

> I just never felt that I was very together because you're always comparing yourself to something in a magazine or a billboard or some craziness. And you kind of believe it. And when all of your friends are doing it, you just get caught up in that sweep of this is what you're supposed to look like, this is what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to get married, you're supposed to have babies, you're supposed to do all that, take that path, which is the path that I took early on.*

These penetrating messages made PJ give in to what she "should be doing" according to cultural and family expectations. Echoing the experience of many participants, such pressures diminished her ability to listen to herself and increased her fear of the consequences if she did.

Beauty and body image. When asked about their experience of the body as related to fulfillment, many of the participants immediately started talking about looks, weight, and body image. As illustrated above, most participants referred to the body – *women's* bodies, particular – as a lightening rod of oppression, due to cultural prescriptions about beauty. Because the body was often tied to their identities as women, feelings about the body seemed to spill over into feelings about themselves in general.

Susana related her lifelong conflict with her body to perpetual cross-cultural media messages that women "should be skinny… *period*." From 12 years of age until only recently, she tried all types of diets and medical treatments to lose weight. Although she said she eventually found her own style, her weight and those messages were always "something bothering me in the back of my mind." Susana emphasized that while she "came to terms" with her body, that "doesn't mean that I love it. I just came to terms, like in negotiation, a compromise."

Gemma also discussed the oppression she experienced in relation to her weight, demonstrating how beliefs about the body are delivered through families and people in general. Gemma explained,

> My body is like the layers of pain…all these negative beliefs that I've held onto as being true…My family, my mother and father have a really big issue with [my size]…I've tried to do what they want me to do, but that's not really gonna work. They want me to lose weight. They're worried about…that something's gonna, that I'm gonna have a heart attack, or they see it as limiting me as a person. And I think in a way I believe that, but I

> don't think it's *true*. I don't think that *that* limits me. It's my *belief* and the fact that I believe what they've taught me or what society limits, that's how I'm limited. Not by my body…It's just all this expectations and beliefs and worry and stress. Because what do I do when I let these things affect me? I'm putting something in my mouth…to numb...I don't know, I'm pretty happy. I look in the mirror, and I'm like yeah, it's all good…The only time I get a different feeling is because someone else has made me feel like I'm not okay, that I'm not good enough or they've said something to me.*

Gemma attributed the real problem of size to belief systems and expectations about the body, not the weight itself per se, especially when those views are internalized and turned against oneself.

The issue of internalizing oppressive belief systems will be discussed in greater detail below, however other participants described contradictory feelings about cultural beauty standards. For example, Anna expressed a chronic sense of dissatisfaction with herself and her looks:

> I've always been, had that kind of feeling of not being satisfied…There's only been like rare periods of time where I felt really good about how I looked, how I felt, what I was doing. And that certainly affects everything.

She also talked light-heartedly about the increased challenges of aging because of "certain vanities I have as a woman…coloring my hair, bleaching my teeth, plucking weird hairs, dry skin…having to exercise more and eat less." Although Anna referred to the discontent, self-doubt, and insecurities she experienced throughout her life, she did not attribute those struggles to cultural ideals about the body, nor did she experience beauty standards as oppressive. In fact, she described herself as a feminist who wore "dresses and heels and makeup," and viewed her feminine identity as supporting her sense of security: "I've always felt pretty secure in feeling…feeling my own gender, that I am very female…Yeah, I've always been pretty girly and really liked that."

Lou also expressed conflicted feelings about looks, especially in relation to the social stigma of aging:

> It's curious where the body is at my stage of life, because it still is important that you have an outside appearance, of how you appear in the world. But from another point, you're not as concerned about that…So I think with each phase of life, particularly women, have the ability to adapt to a different image than maybe they had before in their 20s and 30s. So I like having an imaged look, but yet it's not as much wrapped around probably sexuality as it was in earlier life…I think it's very easy to become invisible as you get older…I think there's a fear of being discounted because you're of a certain age. Maybe it's just our society, but 'oh she's too old.'

Like Anna, Lou did not experience cultural standards of beauty as particularly oppressive; rather, Lou felt oppressed by the additional layer of ageism that discounts older women because they no longer fulfill those cultural ideals.

Religion and the body. Oppressive experiences of the body did not center entirely on beauty. Some of the participants described their experience of the body – or the *absence* of the body – within the context of religion. Returning to Kara's story as quoted in the previous chapter, because it is such a pointed example of religious oppression, Kara felt that she had been "spiritually abused" because she was so out of touch with her physicality:

> Growing up in an environment where there were no boundaries…I went from boundaryless, *physical* boundarylessness…You don't even believe you have a body…not a healthy way to grow…So I have learned about the physical world completely on my own, not from my family of origin. And Christian Science, I think, killed both my parents. My mom died of breast cancer. She waited till she could see it puckering the skin of her breast before she did anything. And my dad had high blood pressure all his life and had a massive heart attack at 54, and he *knew* he had high blood pressure.*

Kara found the absence of the body and physical awareness not only oppressive but dangerous. Based on her experience growing up in a religion with strong beliefs and

prescriptions about healing illness through prayer, the disavowal of the body was life-threatening, even deadly.

Although Lizzie recognized the value of her religious upbringing, in that it helped her connect with the "soul world," she also described the stark absence of the body within religion. "I did not have a body when I was little," she explained. "Little Catholic kids did not have bodies…I had soul and I had mind…But I don't remember any awareness of my body as a child."* Lizzie described her body as a source of punishment, not of pleasure or self-expression. Her disconnection with her body contributed to years of suffering, due to feeling cut off from herself, other people, and the world in general.

Also growing up Catholic, PJ discussed how those religious beliefs and messages made her override her emotional and physical needs, creating a fear and pressure that her value and survival was completely up to her. "It was always about the working harder. You're good if you work harder, that whole Catholic thing…*Work harder, work harder*," she imitated with a stern voice. "*If you're idle it's the devil's workshop*, or some nonsense like that." Religion served as a force of oppression that contributed to PJ's tendency to drive herself and push through pain and discomfort, rather than listening to her body.

Role expectations and boundaries. The participants' experiences showed the oppressive nature of role expectations, exacerbated by a lack of boundaries. Many of the women spoke about the outer and inner pressure to adopt a care-giving role – within friendships, family systems, and professional spheres. These roles and relationships diminished their sense of fulfillment when they were unable to establish necessary psychological and practical boundaries to support choices more congruent with their true wishes.

Kara recognized a heightened sensitivity to others and lack of boundaries both within herself and women in general:

> Part of that story is that I'm very, very, *very* sensitive, empathically so…I was boundary-less and I didn't feel protected in groups, even in inter-personal intimate relations. It was too easy for me to not even know who I was and where my boundaries were. I didn't have any. I really didn't…I think this is a real woman's problem, *hugely* a woman's problem. There are a lot of women out there who are very, very sensitive. They don't realize that they're not owning their boundaries. They're not taking charge of themselves. Not in an overpowering way, they're just not taking charge of themselves. They're getting ripped and torn and pulled a million different ways, being everything to everyone, and that's really really common.

Echoing Kara's perceptions, Gemma described how her sensitivity and sense of responsibility for others made her take on the role of "counselor" toward family members and others in her life:

> I was a hermit for a long time…It's difficult for me to be around people because I was always feeling that their stuff was my stuff. And I had a hard time just putting…learning that their stuff was *their* stuff. I thought that I had to take on other people's stuff, so that I could then help them…you know, growing up…I was the counselor and everyone came to me for what should they do. And so I felt like, well if I feel what they're feeling and I take that on as my own, then I can help them to look at it in a different way. But I think the problem with that is that that wasn't *my* stuff. That was *theirs*. And I can't really help them unless they want help. I can't give advice to people unless they ask me.

Gemma's lack of emotional and relationship boundaries made her either retreat into herself in isolation or over-extend herself in an effort to help others.

As mother, wife and nurse, PJ discussed how these role obligations took away the time and attention needed to explore what fulfillment meant to her:

> All the time that I was a mother working, doing life as full as you can do life, having two active boys, and I was working part-time and then full-time as a nurse all those years. There's no room for anything. You can't even think for yourself at that point because you're just going…I have a house, two children and a job, and then a husband, and then a yard and

> stuff [laughter]. You don't even have time to think about things for yourself, about what it is that you really want.

PJ showed how the caregiving roles typically assigned to women took away the time, energy and awareness necessary to tend to her own needs and reflect on the meaning of fulfillment for herself. Interestingly, Lou also described feeling oppressed by role expectations, but tended to frame the problem as her own inadequacy, rather than her actual dislike, disinterest, or outright rejection of the role. For example, she said, "I'm not a great caregiver," explaining that she felt "unprepared…not particularly gifted at it… not compassionate …unskilled." Yet she later admitted, "I hate this…it's like shit, I didn't want to do this." Lou's case illustrates the strong internal and external pressure to fulfill role expectations and the difficulty participants found in establishing boundaries to support themselves. The participants' growing ability to step outside of role expectations and develop boundaries contributed to their experiences of fulfillment, as discussed in *Crisis, Confrontation, and Metamorphosis* and *True to Self*.

Sexism and work. Some of the women discussed the impact of sexism within work environments. Participants described sexism in the form of male-dominated companies and professional fields, hostile treatment, harassment and exploitation, barriers to advancement, and beliefs about women's roles. Notably, the two oldest women (PJ at 67 years and Lou at 71 years) were the participants who most emphasized sexism within the work place, perhaps highlighting generational differences in attitudes toward and opportunities for women.[11] Two other (younger) participants also referred to gender in the workplace, yet did not directly frame their discussion in relation to sexism.

[11] Because not all women were specifically asked about sexism in the workplace, follow-up research would need to be conducted in order to ascertain inter-generational differences.

Kara (57 years old) talked about having to strongly advocate for a reasonable salary, as well as coaching other women to negotiate for adequate wages. And Anna (52 years old) discussed feeling much more free and at ease working with a group of men now that she is older, in contrast to the insecurity she had around men as a younger woman. All of these examples speak to the overt and subtle ways in which sexism and its internalization affect workplace dynamics.

Although Lou said she learned from the difficult work experiences she had and appreciated the national and international exposure she gained because of them, she also described how women were not seen as having value within the corporate world. These deep-seated attitudes toward women resulted in a "frustrating obstacle course" because of the uninteresting work assigned to women and lack of career advancement. As Lou noted:

> I've worked for some companies that I wouldn't want to work for again, but that also was useful. I worked for a company that was very autocratic and male-dominated, so I learned a great deal from that…The barriers were working for the companies where I realized it was dead-end and that it was prejudiced...for women to be able to even be seen as valuable…I worked for a company that was very military-based, I mean they even called themselves lieutenants and sergeants …It was a total military mentality and very autocratic in how they treated people, particularly women. There was no place [for advancement]. I mean, women were just beginning to move into titled positions…this would've been in the early 80s…So those obstacles were frustrating and uninteresting and I didn't want to stay there. I didn't want to be part of that culture. And yet that culture allowed me, it put me in some positions where I learned a great deal…I got exposure from the job to a variety of interesting experiences. But the job itself was very much an obstacle course, and [I was] greatly thrilled to leave, just thrilled to leave.

As noted in her individual sketch, PJ also discussed sexism throughout her career as a nurse, describing the mistreatment and sexual exploitation by men in the medical field:

> I didn't like or feel any of the people in my medical career were someone I could look to, because the men were all assholes and they were very oppressive, particularly in my era of time. They were *very* oppressive. If you didn't do the job right, you got reamed. Or, if they liked you, they wanted to go to bed with you.*

Both Lou and PJ illustrated how sexism places women into compromising positions, pressuring them to tolerate mistreatment and exploitation in order to gain experience and further their careers.

Homophobia. Homophobia refers to the fear of same-sex love, homosexuality in general, and people perceived as gay or lesbian; manifesting as negative attitudes and behaviors, discriminatory policies, and outright violence (Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 1987). Out of seven participants, two identified as lesbian (Susana and PJ) and one as bi-sexual (Gemma). Given that the majority of women identified as heterosexual, it is understandable that homophobia did not appear as a predominant sub-theme of oppression among the participants. Yet the oppressive force of homophobia and its impact on fulfilling life paths deserve attention as a significant experience.

Susana, a 56 year old multi-ethnic Hispanic woman, discussed the dramatic and painful reaction of her friends, family and community when she came out as a lesbian. As part of a well-known family, her coming out sparked a public scandal. Susana described how everyone turned against her, that she became the "latest gossip" and was outcast from her circle of friends and community: "It was painful because you see that the other people are judging you, people that you like or you love. Even my mom stopped talking to me for a while." After leaving her home country, Susana moved to Europe with her partner, yet encountered another form of homophobia within the restrictive social atmosphere:

> We were out, but there was no kissing in public, no holding hands in public. You know those type of things, it was kind of trying to be in people's face. It wasn't [considered] being truthful, it was to be rude.

Such insidious and recurring forms of homophobia drove Susana across the globe in search of freedom and acceptance within a more broadminded community.

Racism. Out of the seven women interviewed, two participants were women of color (Gemma and Susana). Like homophobia, racism also appeared as a significant sub-theme within these participants' experiences. Racism can be defined as "the intentional or unintentional and unconscious use of the mainstream race's political power against another race with less social power…a negative value judgment [that] legitimizes exploiting and downing others" (Mindell, 1995, p. 151; see also Davis, 1983). As illustrated below, another troubling aspect of racism is that its sometimes subtle yet pervasive impact goes unrecognized, leaving instead a covert feeling that is often internalized by marginalized communities and used against themselves.

Gemma, a 46 year old African-American woman, talked about the early impact of racism on her sense of freedom and self-expression. With many pauses, revealing the difficulty in explaining this destructive dynamic, she discussed the complex experience of growing up as the only black family within an all-white neighborhood:

> It's a black family trying to…I definitely think my parents were trying to improve the education of their children. They were trying to put them in a better place. At least, I know my father was trying to do better for us. And so he…it was important that we keep up this certain appearance, so that it would be okay for us to be there…[as if] we were all very happy, no problems, everything was…life was good, even though it was difficult. And I would say, it *was* difficult. We didn't have…We were living in a middle-class neighborhood, but we weren't able to really….We didn't have financially, we really didn't have the money to…we were just like barely making it.

Gemma described how her family was ruled by a fear of being unfairly judged by others. She felt that her father took this fear to an extreme by making the world seem like a very scary place, with an underlying message that "you don't show people who you really are because they could do great harm to you and hurt you." Gemma experienced a pressure fueled by the oppressive forces of racism to silence the truth of her own feelings and hide her family experience in order to fit in, make a good impression, strive for a "better life," and redress long-standing racial inequities. Echoed by research on embodiment and the somatic implications of oppression (Johnson, 2009; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006), such oppressive forces made Gemma grow up feeling "confined…pushed down… suffocating." As discussed in the next section, these feelings were intertwined with and amplified by the abuse she experienced from her father.

Child abuse within families. Abuse was discussed in many ways throughout the interviews – as mental, emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse, as well as power abuse in general. Abuse refers to the use of power to harm another being. Abuse can be intentional or unintentional, is often not acknowledged by the abuser or abusive system, and can be perpetrated by individuals, groups and organizations. Abuse is enabled by an imbalance of power, meaning those who are abused have less relational or structural power and do not have the physical, mental, psychological or contextual support to recognize the abuse and/or defend themselves (Miller, 1997). Those who are abused often feel a dependence or loyalty to the abuser or abusive system, making it all the harder to challenge or leave the abusive dynamic. All of the types of oppression already discussed illustrate forms of cultural and religious power abuse, usually perpetuated by family systems. This section focuses specifically on child abuse within families.

As discussed in the section on racism above, the oppression Gemma faced growing up due to racism was exacerbated by the mental, emotional and physical abuse she was experiencing within her family. Gemma described her father as "very mean…out of control…and unsafe," with a "serious anger problem." Growing up with his extreme and erratic temper made her hyper-vigilant to subtle signs that she or her family members might be in danger:

> If something set him off…and you were never quite sure what would set him off…You know, you had to be just really, you had to be really…God, how do I explain this? You had to be aware of all signs…like you had to be able to feel, okay what kind of mood is he in right now? Can I talk to him about this?

Gemma's family responded to the abuse by keeping silent, suppressing their feelings, and not letting others know what was going on. Expanding upon her description of the family atmosphere and its messages from the previous chapter, Gemma explained:

> Nobody ever you know, spoke up. Everybody was just silent. *Just take it all in, it's better not to talk, it's better not to express yourself, don't cry*… When my father would get upset, we automatically knew to go and close all the windows, close the drapes…You don't let people know, you just don't…you don't let people know your business…Well, it was just that *people are gonna judge you.* All the time, *people are gonna judge you.* And if you do something wrong, you're gonna be judged and most likely are gonna be judged unfairly.*

Although Gemma found the courage and strength to stand up to her father in order to protect her family members, no one protected her and she was unable to stand up for herself. Gemma suffered numerous consequences – becoming the black sheep of the family, gaining weight for protection and rebellion, and shutting down in an attempt to feel fearless. The early and chronic experience of abuse made it difficult for Gemma to care for herself or stand up for her needs throughout the years to come.

PJ also grew up with severe experiences of child abuse. Left as an orphan after her mother committed suicide when she was an infant, PJ initially grew up in foster care. Once her father returned from fighting in World War II when she was five years old, he began sexually abusing her until he died when she was 16. PJ also suffered mistreatment from her step-mother. Her father's pressure and domination carried over into other areas of her life as well. Referring to her work as a nurse in critical care, she explained

> I thought that's what I wanted to be doing but it really wasn't. You know the whole nursing thing…was not my idea. It was my father's idea that I be a nurse. It was his idea and he pushed me in that direction. And I never said no, I don't want to do this. I said, oh okay, I'll do that. And he started on me quite young. He started on me probably preteen. *You're gonna be a nurse*.

Those early tragedies and ongoing sexual abuse thwarted PJ's ability to identify her own wishes and say no to the pressure of others, shaping her career path as well as future relationships. She described her relationship experiences with men later in life:

> I just got so easily talked into bed with them. It's like, *I don't want to do this* [whispers]. This is not what I want…But you know with men, that's… their focus is…the ones that I've dated has been, *oh honey, you're just so wonderful, look how beautiful you are, now let's go into bed*. It's like that fast. And I think part of my responsibility was not being able…not *feeling* I could say no to them, because I couldn't say no to my father. He wouldn't take no for an answer.

The early abuse PJ suffered from her father created an ongoing dynamic of not being about to create boundaries and protect herself from exploitation in relationships with men. However, the abusive dynamic extended beyond gender, such that PJ described that "the worst relationship of my life" was with a woman who "just about destroyed me" because of the mental torture she suffered. Such abusive experiences created enduring patterns that influenced the meaning and journey of fulfillment.

The internalization of oppression. As illustrated throughout the interviews, forces of oppression arose through many sources – the media, cultural and religious beliefs and attitudes, as well as family messages, expectations and behaviors. The participants' experiences, however, showed that the destructive power of oppression can be turned inward as well. Internalized oppression occurs when an oppressed person or group takes on the beliefs and practices of the oppressor and uses them against themselves (hooks, 1984). Again and again, all of the women discussed the destructive ways in which external norms were adopted as their own. Outer perceptions infiltrated their inner landscapes and steered their life paths. Like the air they breathed, standards of beauty, religious views, and role expectations were ingested as reality; sexist, homophobic, racist, and abusive attitudes and behaviors made them question and diminish their own value, thoughts and reactions.

The participants recognized the propensity to internalize outer messages and expectations, and brought awareness to the ways in which they oppressed themselves. Anna realized she had been putting her life on hold, "waiting for a man" to go forward with the things she wanted to do in many areas of her life, because she had taken on the belief that women need a man/boyfriend/husband in order to "do life." Lou recognized that "myths about aging" are "self-limiting messages than can also come from the inside out as well as the outside in." Kara discussed her own realizations about oppression and the tendency for women to minimize themselves:

> Women are oppressed. They just plain are. I mean that dawned on me as clear as…and it's continuing to unfold! Oh my God! Oppression's a great word for it! And I'm not saying it was done *to* me and us. We did it to ourselves really…We are oppressing ourselves every day by what we buy into, what we stay in as cultural norm, societal norm. Minimizing ourselves to fit in, to be with this guy, to do that…I think it's a woman

> thing, minimizing. If women had any idea of what they could really be… oh my God…But most women don't get it. They're still hiding, hiding themselves away.

Similarly, PJ talked about the ways in which women diminish themselves:

> I think women diminish themselves and for reasons that are clear. We are diminished, worldwide for sure, and the American culture is getting somewhat better but it's not where it needs to be…[Ideally] we would *hold* our value, instead of allowing it to be diminished…It's Eleanor Roosevelt that said…I'm not sure I'm gonna get her words quite right…but it has to do with not allowing yourself the power that you deserve and that you give your power away. That *you* do it.[12]

PJ and the other women's experiences highlighted the importance of recognizing, questioning and challenging these views instead of perpetuating their oppressive force by turning them against oneself. In this spirit, Gemma spoke eloquently about the power of questioning beliefs:

> The only way that I can feel is by understanding how it's contributed to my belief systems…How do I see myself? Or is it more about how do other people see me? Am I worried about that? Why am I worried about that?...So those things, those are the things I've come to understand. That *what I believe* is really where it's at.

Whether about body image and its strong impact on how women feel about themselves, or the many other ways in which power is abused, the participants showed how identifying and addressing internalized oppression interrupted the cycle of oppressive forces and provided a gateway to more fulfilling life paths.

Crisis, Confrontation and Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis refers to the profound change that occurs when an organism transforms from one phase of life to another. From a biological perspective, metamorphosis takes place after birth or hatching, signified by a change in physical

[12] This passage refers to Eleanor Roosevelt's quote: "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

structure due to growth and differentiation, and followed by a change in behavior or habitat (Royston, 2009). The psychological parallels of biological metamorphosis to significant developmental transitions in the participants are striking.

All of the participants described similar experiences of transformation that stimulated meaningful growth, differentiation from family or cultural protocol, and changes in attitude and actions that fostered fulfilling life paths. For the women in this study, metamorphosis came about not necessarily once, but several times throughout their lives. Yet unlike the seemingly effortless and beautiful metamorphosis process of a butterfly, participants described how significant change was catalyzed by health and relationship crisis and facilitated by confronting the inner demons and outer realities shaping their experiences of fulfillment and life paths.

Crisis as catalyst. All of the participants discussed how crisis propelled them into often devastating, yet ultimately liberating, experiences of transformation that fueled their journeys of fulfillment. Particularly surfacing in the realm of health or relationships, these crises were spurred by life-threatening accidents and illness, death of loved ones, divorce and break-ups, as well as other relationship problems. In this sense, many of the women emphasized that their paths were unintentional, in that they did not necessarily want or choose such experiences, yet these crises steered their lives and development in meaningful directions.

All of the women, at some point or another, discussed how crisis within relationship informed their life paths and understandings of fulfillment. Lou spoke of the desperation she faced after getting divorced and having two children to support. The practical necessities of this crisis drove her to seek out work that evolved into a core

avenue of her fulfillment. PJ divorced her husband after realizing "there was nothing really there" between the two of them. PJ realized she had really married his family, not him, because they gave her kindness and support she never received from her own experience growing up within an abusive family. With care and feedback from peer counseling, she discovered that her husband "had no respect for me at all, but I never even saw it."

Anna also described an experience of not seeing the reality of her relationship. She faced a "devastating break-up" that left her in a "deep dark well." Anna explained,

> [I was] completely blindsided and *seriously* shaken by it…I did not necessarily want to feel better…It was all dark, it was all bad…I realized, oh my idea of who this person was was something I had in my head. It wasn't really based on who he was or reality. It was more my fantasy of who he was. And that, I think, was the thing that was so devastating to me, was that I had really fooled myself and been determined to do so in the face of all sorts of things in retrospect that I could see where he was not who I had…just wasn't the person I thought he was.*

Susana discussed a kind of self-deception within her relationship crisis as well. She described herself in a "comfort zone," blind to her own lack of fulfillment. During her first marriage (to a man), she fell in love with a woman and began having an affair. Susana's relationship crisis actually made her physically sick:

> Intellectually I thought I was in that existential piece where you have multiple layers, and you are not black or white. And I really thought that I could carry [it all]…I thought it was all these different layers and levels of experiences in life. Little did I know that life doesn't work that way. So it became, in my mind, it's okay, so I have this type of relationship with my husband, I have this type of relationship here, we can all cross spaces and share what we share. I got so sick…and ended up in the hospital, technically with food poisoning. We know that it was just emotional. Anyway, so I came out of that hospitalization with the clear consciousness that theoretically and philosophically it's very nice to think that life is just experiences and layers and energies, but there are some norms and rules and you cannot take it.

For Susana, her body expressed the internal conflict she actually felt about her relationship crisis, and in that way forced her to face and reconcile her situation by divorcing her husband, coming out as a lesbian, and marrying her new lover.

Other participants also described the ways in which their bodies initiated internal and external changes through various types of health crises that ultimately contributed to their experiences of fulfillment. Gemma broke her ankle and developed a serious chronic infection, making her face her own vulnerability, resistance to asking for help, and struggles caring for and standing up for her own needs. Lizzie brought attention to the significant life stories of the body, which are often disregarded. She described the major loss she felt when she had uterine cancer:

> I used to love to go to the public swimming pool because in the locker room you could see women's stories on their bodies. People who had C-sections, people who had had their breasts removed, people who had scars…I was younger back then, but there were more older women. I do think that we carry our stories in our bodies…And I remember realizing I was gonna have a complete hysterectomy, and I remember saying to the oncologist, oh this is hard. This is the first home my children ever had. And she said, *oh I never thought of it that way*. And I went [slaps hand on thigh], *how could you?! How could you be dealing with women's wombs day after day after day and never think of that?!* I did not say [that]. I just politely, I mean my life was in her hands, so to speak…That was a huge loss for me to lose that part of my body…These were organs that have a significant story attached to them in terms of where I carried my children, the fact that I actually could create a life, all of that was…my history was in those organs. It's like having something cut out, it's like amnesia of the body or something. Something cut out that carries a story.

For Lizzie, the health crisis of losing this source of home and creative power took her on a healing journey that brought her all the closer to the essence of her experience of fulfillment.

Kara's life was forever changed by a life-threatening skiing accident that had severe health consequences and turned into a chronic debilitating condition, as well as a

crisis in relationship. Yet Kara describes that pivotal accident as the "path starter," as if something reached out and grabbed her, pointing her in the direction of fulfillment. She explained,

> It was *the thing*. And I didn't know that back then, that it was *the thing*, that it would turn into what it did. I had no idea. I was just strictly trying to survive. I was just following my symptoms. I was just trying to heal myself and every day…I had no choice but to find a way to stay alive, because I really was dying, very slowly, nutritionally, and my system shutting down…Well, once I decided [to commit to this new path], then I had to work through the life that I was surrounded by, and that all started to change. So when I committed to this alternative path, then my husband and I started to fall apart as a marriage and we ended up ending it after 15 years…But the core reason was because I just wanted to live! [laughter] You know, it really was that basic...I just want to live. I had grown through all this inner work that I didn't even realize I was doing…And I had changed…I was on a path way over here and he was way over here, and we had to separate. I didn't feel like I had a choice.

Kara felt as if she had "no choice" but to follow an alternative path of healing for the sake of her survival, yet she described how, at some point, she made a decision to commit to this new inner path and "follow it with intent." Her health crisis turned into a journey of self-exploration, which eventually led to the end of her marriage because of the significant growth she experienced.

Confrontation – inside and out. Participants discussed not only the influence of crisis on their understandings of fulfillment and life paths, but also expressed the importance of confronting internal suffering and external conflicts. Internal suffering took many forms, yet often manifested as depression. Participants discussed how crisis took them into deep and devastating places within themselves, often triggering old wounds from early childhood experiences. Many of the women described how facing this suffering helped them in their healing process. Another key element of confrontation, often entangled with or in direct response to internal suffering, had to do with addressing

conflict in some external way. Again and again, participants talked about finally "saying no" to internalized beliefs and standing up for themselves in relationships with others.

Returning to Lizzie's story, confronting internal suffering by "meeting my demons" was indelibly linked with her experience living a fulfilling life:

> I would say in many ways, I think [fulfillment] comes from my failures. It's like I had to have experiences of not being the person I wanted to be, I think. And that's where the vessel comes in [referring to her drawing]. The whole notion of, that out of the mud grows the Lotus. This sludge, this dark stuff at the bottom of the vessel, the gold is hiding in there and you cannot, *I* cannot find it without going through the muck and uncovering… my own dark history with my family, but also places I didn't like myself very much. I think that that is, if I were to say anything about what I think has led to my sense of purpose and satisfaction and fulfillment, it would have something to do with meeting my demons…really meeting my demons.*

As Lizzie illustrated, participants' experiences of fulfillment – their understanding of what fulfillment means to them and their paths to experiencing a fulfilling life – were paradoxically intertwined with confronting the most difficult places in themselves and their lives.

Similarly, PJ talked about the importance of facing the pain of her childhood. She referred to a period in her life after her divorce when she really started to "wake up" and listen to her body and her feelings:

> I started to learn about getting in touch with my feelings, that my feelings were valid. And I was also learning how to release some of the old hurt feelings of my childhood. I had some really bad childhood experiences. So it was a twofold thing, getting rid of some of the old horrible anger, deep anger feelings I had. Because when you can get rid of the deep anger feelings, you can start being more real, but if you're carrying around anger …because I was sexually abused by my father and my mother committed suicide when I was a baby. So I had those two major life events, and my father then died when I was 16, which was a blessing because the abuse stopped, but left me then basically an orphan at that point. So in my 30s, I started to do this work, this counseling work, to start to release. And I recovered, started recovering myself and getting myself back.

PJ's experience of fulfillment in many ways depended on acknowledging the anger and pain she felt as a result of the tragedies of her childhood. Expressing those feelings enabled her to begin to "release and recover" herself, as well as her ability to experience fulfillment.

Like Lizzie and PJ, Anna also expressed a significant period of suffering in her life that ended up being pivotal to her sense of living a fulfilling life; in her case, the sudden ending of an intimate relationship. Yet, at the time, she emphasized how important it was to have someone to be "raw and real" with, rather than attributing anything good to such a devastating break-up. She explained,

> I also was just really resistant to the fact of people saying to me, you know, *oh look what you've been able to do because of what you've learned from that situation.* And I'd be like, NO! I didn't learn anything *dammit*, that was horrible and evil and bad. Let's leave it at that. I don't want to make it good and beautiful. I just want it to be how it was…I remember I had a really good friend who, he discovered his wife having an affair at almost exactly the same time, we were on the same trajectory. And people would say, *oh you'll get over it. They were right for you guys. You'll come to see and it'll get better.* And it was so refreshing for the two of us to be together and say, *I'm not gonna get over it and I hate him and I want to kill them and this is how I think I'm going to do it*...Just someone to be angry and mad and hurt and to share the darkness with and not have to get over it or make the best of it or take the high road or be understanding or … just to be in the trailer court of pain…It was really satisfying. It really helped…Maybe being so disillusioned with myself was ultimately beneficial, but I don't know, I don't want…well I don't care that much anymore, but I kind of could see this guy thinking, *well because of me, see what I did.**

For Anna, facing her suffering was essential, yet "tying a bow" around the experience and abdicating credit for her accomplishments to her ex-partner would not have fostered pride in her own ability to create a fulfilling life.

In addition to facing internal suffering, the participants also discussed another key aspect of confrontation: saying no to oppressive beliefs and people, and standing up for themselves in relationships or the world in general. Continuing on with Anna's experience, part of her journey out of suffering was confronting internalized sexism; the subtle yet potent beliefs that a woman needs a man in order to feel fulfilled and do "big things" with one's life. Anna explained that she got to a point where she thought,

> I'm not going to wait around. I'm just going to do it myself. But truly I don't know what the 'it' was, but it was kind of like whatever *it* is, I'm just going to go do it! And I think before, I had always had the conscious or unconscious assumption that there needed to be…you know, *my husband* or *my boyfriend* involved for me to get a house, have a child, do something scary like start my own business.*

Once she realized and rejected this internalized belief, she began to forge a fulfilling life for herself – by starting her own business, buying a home and creating her garden, getting her special dog companion, and adopting her daughter.

Gemma also discussed a crucial time of confrontation that emerged out of depression. Although Gemma had developed the strength and courage early on in life to stand up to her father's abuse, she expressed that she did not know how to care for or stand up for herself. She explained that she broke her ankle as an adult, which developed into an open wound and subsequently a serious chronic infection that was disregarded by the medical system. Simultaneously, she was in a relationship with someone who perpetually lied and took advantage of her financial generosity and other care-giving tendencies. Gemma described her process of "saying no" and standing up for herself:

> It's just all these lessons of, you know I was really good about standing up for other people…but it was hard for me to really say what about me, or how to take care of me. I wasn't familiar with how to do that. I was really good at taking care of people but not taking care of myself.

For Gemma, saying no to forms of abuse and standing up for herself became a crucial gateway towards her own sense of fulfillment.

Such radical acts of saying no to internalized beliefs and standing up for oneself in the face of external barriers did not come easy to the participants. Kara discussed the risk, courage, and self-esteem it takes to stand up for her worth in the job market and negotiate equitable pay. Lou expressed the importance of saying no to external pressures by highlighting the significant impact of *not* being able to stand up for herself at various points throughout her life. Learning from the regret of giving up on herself and her dreams, Lou discovered that standing up for herself is essential for a fulfilling life path.

PJ also described the tenacity it took for her to stand up for herself and end an abusive relationship with a woman later in her life. Even with her severe history of childhood abuse, she expressed how she had "never been so mistreated by someone, emotionally…the mental torture can be almost worse than the physical…I lost myself completely and she just about destroyed me." The abusive treatment became so extreme that PJ got legal support and barred all communication with her lover. She explained, "I really closed the door and sealed it, *sealed it*, that I would never go near her again." The radical act of saying no to this abusive relationship was critical, yet re-triggered her history of abuse and became an opportunity to revisit and tend to that suffering:

> So that's that whole piece about my heart being open…I feel like even as a little girl, your heart is just open, you're a little girl, you're just [hands open at chest] in the world. And my father took advantage of that and moved in and just took advantage of me. So this relationship developed out of that vulnerable place again. I didn't realize it, but that's really what happened. I just got swept away with it…Once I got [the abusive relationship] out of my life, I was able to recuperate that fortitude again… [Counseling] helped me release the feelings, the horrible feelings, because it would bring up feelings of unworthiness. That whole thing was what it did, the sexual abuse, so that's what…it brought it back up to the surface.

> The badness that I felt about it, about it happening, my letting it happen and all that stuff. It was just another opportunity to heal it, but I wish I could've healed it a better way [laughter]. But it did, it did help me.

PJ illustrated the interconnection between internal and external confrontation – that saying no and standing up for oneself can also unveil roots of suffering, just as facing demons can lead to important action in relationship and the world. Yet both hold keys to the journey of fulfillment.

Metamorphosis – awakenings and new stories. As implied in the notion of metamorphosis, these experiences of crisis in health and relationships, as well as internal and external confrontations, brought the participants from one phase of life or identity into another – changing belief systems, self-concepts and inter-personal patterns. These transformative encounters with themselves and others elicited awakenings and new stories. For example, by confronting her suffering, PJ woke up to the unconscious drives behind her career in critical care nursing:

> The piece I got about my mother is that I can't save her. I could not save her when I was baby [when she committed suicide] and I cannot save her now. And with that realization came the opening of, I don't need to do critical care nursing anymore! Because what I feel I was doing was continually trying to save her…I was driving me. *It* was driving me. It was the best day of my life. That was one of the best days of my life.*

PJ described entering into a "new story" about herself and life in general, helping her change her beliefs and develop a trust that she will be taken care of:

> In my life, that was a tragedy that happened. When my mother died, I was five months old. And then my father wasn't there, he was in Europe. It was during World War II, so he wasn't there, and people didn't know what to do with me…So the whole thing of *there's no one there for me*, that was very real in my life at that point in time. So there's some of that I've carried, probably I've carried forward, a belief that I can't trust and I'm not gonna be taking care of. So all this work, or this processing, has helped me to see that that's not true anymore. That happened then and this is now, and I am safe and cared for and I have a wonderful life, which I have

> created. So I see that and now I know that. And it's good to not only see it, but really know it on some deeper level. So you have to continually remind yourself that *this is the truth now. It wasn't true then, but this is now and it is true now.**

For PJ, these awakenings liberated her from unconscious drives and debilitating beliefs that directed her life and diminished her sense of fulfillment. With continual reinforcement, these liberating experiences and her new story about herself enabled her to create a fulfilling life.

Lizzie also discussed a powerful metamorphosis that shifted her identity from "doing life solo" to feeling supported by others and life in general. She described a pivotal confrontational experience where colleagues stepped in to support her:

> I've done my life solo….And I tell you that [supportive work experience] changed something in me so big, because really I have had to do so much alone… That was one of those, what do you call it? It actually alters your story…it changes your mythology. It was a corrective moment. It corrected something that had been off all my whole life, that I had to do everything alone…It's like, it's not true. It's just my story…My way of looking at my own story…it's like I don't have to tell myself that story anymore. It's an antiquated story. It doesn't work. It's not true. I mean, we could go on about what's true and what's not. It's all myth anyway. Any way I could tell that story would be a myth, and I get to choose which myth I want to tell. And now, because I have a deepened experience of what it is to not be left alone doing things that feel like they're too big for me to do alone, I am in a different story…[One that now says] that I have so much at my back, so many people at my back, so much divine presence at my back…just my home is at my back. Everything conspires to support me.*

Building upon her ability to face the suffering related to her family history, Lizzie was able to enter into a new experience of herself, perceive and open up to the support and care from others throughout her life.

Susana had taken big stands throughout her life to confront the expectations of others and forge a path of her own. However, she discovered that those radical acts had built in her a strength that eventually changed a life-long pattern of "leaving and losing." Susana was able to enter into a different story; one that allowed her to stay rather than leave, build an enduring sense of home within herself, her relationships and community, and express herself and her power in new and fulfilling ways.

True to Self

Throughout the interviews, all of the participants discussed the importance of being true to themselves in their processes of finding and navigating fulfilling life paths. For these women, being true to themselves involved many ways of listening to themselves and encompassed multiple aspects of who they consider themselves to be. Being true to themselves necessitated facing the disapproval of others, and also both stemmed from and cultivated a feeling of self-love and acceptance that grew over time. Discovering the meaning and means to live true to oneself seemed to arise out of connections with something bigger, the transformative experiences of crisis, and confronting internal suffering as well as external forces of oppression, such that all these themes worked together to facilitate participants' experiences of fulfillment.

This theme stood out in an especially strong way because not only did the women's life experiences illustrate the significance of being true to themselves, but they spoke directly and explicitly about its importance in living a fulfilling life. Referring to her drawing, Susana described fulfillment as expressing her true colors:

> You have this interior light, you have your divine essence somewhere, like in a shell…So you have a shell and [your divine essence is] covered, and you go on and on, and it's like you are all inside and then finally you find a way out where you can show your true colors [laughter]. And that light

> follows your true colors…I see the fulfillment inside being, being truthful to that light, at the same time that you are without, and letting that come from the in to the out in a truthful way…It comes in many ways and forms, the partnerships that you form, the work that you do, the way that you work. Truthful to yourself. That's fulfillment for me.*

For Susana, being true to herself means being real, respecting what she really feels, and doing what she wants, rather than following the expectations of others.

Likewise, many participants emphasized the importance of "doing what I want." PJ talked about feeling like she is at the peak of her life because she is finally creating a life that is totally hers, rather than being directed by others. Having faced internalized beliefs resulting from childhood abuse, as well as cultural prescriptions and attitudes toward women, she now feels liberated from many previous unconscious drives. Although, like many of the participants, PJ stresses the importance of daily practice in cultivating awareness and self-affirming beliefs, she now feels free and strong in her ability to create a life that reflects her true desires.

Gemma expressed appreciation for the gifts that arose even out of the hardship of her childhood, yet also emphasized that she now has the freedom to shape her own life by following what's true for her:

> To be true to yourself, to be true to what feels right for you. Just because someone else is doing that, doesn't mean that you have to do it too. What might be right for someone else, doesn't mean it's necessarily right for you…It's a lot and much more enjoyable to make your own path, figuring out your own way, and not doing what somebody else told you or what others are telling you, this is what you need to do to live an enjoyable life. No, to make life, to make *your own path*, whatever that might be. If you want to try this out, go try it. If that's not working out for you, that's okay, it's not a bad thing. You still learn something from it. And then it takes you to the next part. I don't regret any of my life. I don't. It really contributed to who I am. My childhood contributed to the gifts that I have. Those gifts, because of my childhood, made them that much stronger. But there's also the fact that now I can do whatever I want to do, *whatever I want to do.* Whatever experience I want to have, I can do it. And what are

> we here for? Seriously. Why not, why not just try things, if you want to do it, just do it…And I'm not saying it's all easy, but sometimes it's just simple…Our ideas between what's bad and good, are not, are just so out of touch. Askew. So I guess what I could say is, don't buy into the beliefs, look into the beliefs and see if they're really true. Are they true for you?

Like most of the participants, Gemma illustrated how being true to oneself requires acknowledging and questioning the belief systems of others, in order to discover one's personal truths.

Listening to self. The participants discussed how being true to self stems from listening to oneself. This experience of paying attention to oneself was described in many ways, including listening to feelings, the body, intuition, and callings. Both Susana and Gemma discussed pivotal life experiences in which they listened to themselves by following "callings" that compelled them to move to new locations and radically change their lives. These experiences of feeling called toward a particular place guided their sense of direction in their lives, and also made them feel connected to something bigger than themselves (note *Connection with Something Bigger*).

PJ said that listening to herself has been a gradual process that came over time, through "waking up" and getting in touch with her feelings and receiving encouragement that her feelings were valid. She explained, "It was a matter of learning it from others saying *it's okay to listen to your intuition, to listen to your heart, what your heart's speaking*." For PJ, listening to herself combined emotional and body awareness. Because she tended to drive herself throughout her life and career, overriding her emotions and body experiences, PJ emphasized that she now stops when something doesn't feel well, slows down, and pays attention to what her body is trying to tell her. She referred to this inner listening as "intuitive knowingness:"

> Trusting what you really know, as a woman, instead of looking out there in the culture for the answer. I wished I had trusted myself and my knowingness more. And to see that so much out there is smoke and mirrors and it's created by a very male patriarchal culture, still women's influence is not there. And so we look to it as if that's the gold standard. But what we know intuitively with our feminine side, our femininity, is really what's true. That's what I wish I had known. I know I would've made some very different decisions about a lot of different things. And spirit plays a piece of that too, but it's really a woman's own intuitive knowingness…If we had allowed, if *I* had allowed myself to sit quietly for moments in my day to ask what's the right thing here, what's the best thing here, for me and for my family, and been able to not let that influence me, because…that smoke and mirror thing, is such a strong influence. If I could somehow have blocked that out, put the curtain down on that, and just tap into that knowingness. I think that knowingness and that tapping into oneself really comes from getting in touch with our spiritual side, our spiritual connection, the mother earth connection.

For PJ, her sense of intuitive knowingness is connected to being a woman, blocking out cultural messages, tapping into her spiritual connection, and listening within.

Kara also linked listening to herself with intuition and a sense of knowing, which she experiences directly through her body. She described how her experience of intuition has changed over time:

> When I was younger, it was a gut feeling…I would feel it right here [solar plexus], a knowing. It would actually start out as a physical feeling, a certainty here, warmth, comfortable, and I also have this sense of solid like a rock, like *this is real*…It's like this where my brain is, that's how I think of it. This is where is my brain is, but it's more than a brain…it's a combination of the best of me. This is like my heart brain…it's not completely rational. It's combinations of my ethical feelings, my morals, all my sense of right. And that's not from the standpoint of philosophy, but just, is it safe?! It's my safety valve, my safety place…But since then, that's evolved into more of this kind of that feeling [pointing to picture] where I feel the ecstatic feeling. It's like I'm being nurtured or something …it's a feeling of ecstasy. Not only am I safe, but it's good for you…it feels good.

Kara's sense of intuition has evolved from a detector of safety to include an additional feeling of nurturing guidance and bliss.

Lou also described how listening to herself has changed over time. At 71 years old, Lou emphasized that age has created more discernment, guiding her to more consciously choose how she wants to spend her time. Referring to a new workshop she created, she explains:

> We're at that time of saying, do we want to grow it, do we want to have it stay small, and what are we getting from it? Those are really interesting to be able to do now and have the time to test it. I was gonna say *toy* with it, but really to *test* it and see, is this something that's worthwhile? Is it time well spent?...To find out if it is true or it was just a fantasy that once you get into it, you go I don't really like this or I don't want to do this or I don't want to put my time into it. Because time is certainly more measured at this state of life, because it isn't endless anymore. Whereas, when I was in my 30s…you know time just seemed forever. And now at this stage, it isn't forever and it's very real that it's not gonna be forever. So your choices are probably more conscious of how you're spending your time.*

For Lou, aging and the reality of death became a kind of ally for living a fulfilling life by pressing her to listen to herself with all the more awareness.

Multiple aspects. The women's interviews also illustrated that being true to oneself includes identifying, differentiating, weeding out, as well as honoring various aspects of who they consider themselves to be. As discussed throughout the theme of *Oppressive Forces*, the participants illustrated the oppressive power of belief systems and the tendency to internalize family and cultural beliefs. The theme of *Crisis, Confrontation and Metamorphosis* showed the importance of identifying those beliefs, their origins, and saying no to oppressive beliefs, people and systems. Together, these themes contributed to the women's ability to recognize multiple aspects of themselves, differentiate between others' beliefs, expectations, values and judgments and what was true for them; something that evolves, crystallizes, and can also change over time.

In addition, participants expressed how they have different parts of themselves that need attention in order for them to feel whole. For example, Lou described how most of her sense of fulfillment comes from outward engagement, such as working with groups, traveling, and being stimulated by new experiences. Yet Lou also discussed how, especially as she has gotten older, she values a "healthy balance" of sitting and reflecting, taking time to go inward and digest what she has learned, as well as staying connected with her "root system" of friends. As captured in her drawing (Illustration 2), Lou's experience of fulfillment comes from honoring "*individual* pursuits of curiosity" (meaning her own curiosities, as opposed to others' and obligations) and "*multiple* arms of interest" (reflecting many aspects of herself, not just one).

Similarly, Anna expressed how her sense of fulfillment stems from being true to both her domestic and wild sides. She described these contrasting aspects of herself in astrological terms:

> I feel as a woman that I'm very Taurean, in that I'm very domestic and I take a lot of pride and pleasure in where I live and my family and my daughter and dinner parties and beautiful things and things in the right places. That gives me enormous pleasure. But at the same time, I really enjoy being seen as this great sexy dancer and that if I go to parties, everybody knows I'm gonna be really fun cause they never really know what I'm gonna do. Well, that's not very Taurean at all, but it is still very Scorpio-Leo…and I see all of that as very much part of my feminine persona.

As illustrated in Anna's interview sketch, her ordinary identity tends to be speedy, caffeinated, moving a lot, drawn to entertainment and high energy. Yet the essence of her experience of fulfillment was expressed through the calmness, placidity, pleasant exhaustion, and reassurance she receives from the garden. Going even further, for Anna the garden represents "seasonal wisdom" – that every season, every phase of life, in

nature and in herself, is perfect. Other participants also described different and often contrasting qualities that reflected the wholeness of their identities and sense of fulfillment. Being true to themselves meant also being true to that multiplicity.

Facing disapproval. All of the participants' experiences of being true to themselves were underscored by the risk of disapproval, somehow going against the status quo of family and culture, or letting go of the need to please others. As if arriving at a fork in the road or edge of a cliff, the women described leaving the security of familiar outer sources of approval and forging into the territory of following their inner authority. Susana aptly captured the disapproval often embedded in being true to oneself:

> If knew that the world wouldn't come to an end if I show my true colors, I would have done it earlier. And when I say the world coming to an end, it's all the fears about my mother not loving me, the society not accepting me, the academia not taking me in because I'm not mainstream, the professional body [not] embracing me because I'm always kind of a marginal person. So if I had known earlier that that didn't have that much importance, it would have been great. Because anyway, it's damned if you do, damned if you don't. If you are not true to yourself and trying to please others…because by pleasing others, you are pleased. But by pleasing others, then you are not yourself and you suffer. So it's a paradox…you get trapped…There is always somebody who doesn't like me, no matter what. So why bother?! [laughter] Why bother trying to please anybody because what I feel is this self-esteem and women being truthful and finding themselves and their identities, we are so much playing a role that the patriarchal culture designed for us, that we think if we ever break away from that, we will never be accepted, tolerated, loved, supported, liked… and that's true! But the other way is true as well. Even if you conform to the role, there is always somebody that doesn't like you or you're not doing it good enough, so why not put all the energy into it and do what you want?! And forget the rest…It's possible. You can do it and survive and feel fulfilled. And you will find that there is always someone who will support you, admire you and love you, but you will not find those until you find yourself. It's not that easy. You pay a price. But it's a meager price compared to feeling all that power and all that energy and all those great things.*

Susana pointed out the sober reality that being true to oneself does not necessarily mean that others will like or support those choices, yet she stressed that risking disapproval is an essential step in discovering oneself and creating a fulfilling life.

When Gemma followed the call to move to a new city, start fresh and go back to school, she left behind the security of a home and good paying job. Doing so, she let go of the approval she received from maintaining the values of her family and culture. Yet by facing this disapproval and being true to herself, Gemma gained a greater sense of fulfillment and received unexpected validation from new teachers who recognized and supported the unique gifts that had been unseen or diminished throughout her life.

Similarly, when Kara's health crisis demanded that she pursue an alternative path of healing, her husband thought she was crazy. In this sense, being true to herself led to the end of her marriage, yet also inspired the beginning of a spiritual journey that has helped her discover and craft a truly fulfilling life path. Kara described how feeling outside of the status quo has paradoxically been a source of inspiration to bridge disparate perspectives. Being true to herself in the face of cultural disapproval has not only resulted in physical well-being, but has helped Kara to "maximize" herself, giving her a sense of purpose and professional direction.

Lizzie discussed how being true to oneself also involves facing and addressing the hardship that inevitability arises as a result:

> There's nothing more important than just being who I am. There's no reason not to be who I am. And if I do something that hurts somebody or that's unkind or even dangerous, it's my work to face that and to be with that, but to know that that will happen. That *will* happen. I will hurt someone. And then I will need to face that. But that is part of life.

In this way, Lizzie illustrated that being true to oneself is not necessarily a "happily ever after" path, yet embraces conflict and self-reckoning as a natural part of the process.

Self-love and acceptance. All of the women described periods in their life of self-judgment, self-doubt, and dislike of themselves. Sometimes this undermining feeling was expressed in relation to looks and weight, sometimes fears about others' criticism, and other times a more global sense of insecurity that permeated their identity and relationship with others. Yet participants' experiences of being true to themselves were facilitated by a growing love and acceptance of themselves. This enhanced sense of appreciating and accepting themselves came about through therapy, as well as receiving love and acceptance in other close relationships. Some of the women described coming to accept their bodies in particular, rather than trying to change themselves. And many of the women attributed this changing relationship with themselves to the process of aging itself.

Lizzie spoke of the profound impact therapy had in helping her to not only love and accept herself, but also extend that non-judgmental attitude and appreciation to others in her role as therapist, as well as her community in general. Referring to her therapist,

> [He] so deeply loved me in the process of analysis, in the power of the transference, that he held me in my darkest moments and loved me through it, which is what I think our work is as therapists. And I think I have, probably as a result of that work, created a life for myself where mostly the people in my life, we do that for each other. We sit with each other's demons…without judgment. But I think for me that's been a process of maturation. It's been a process of just really loving and accepting myself for who I am. And then that makes it possible for me to do that for others. And I think the people who I have in my life now, as opposed to when I was younger, are people who have been through that process themselves.

By learning to love and accept herself, Lizzie has fostered loving and accepting relationships throughout her life. She has risked "being herself" in her professional and personal relationships, and feels appreciated and encouraged for her confrontational style.

Lou and Anna also described an enhanced experience of self-love and acceptance that came with age. In contrast to previous years of excessive preparation stemming from a feeling of pressure to be extremely put-together (including her physical appearance, as well as professional presentations), Lou has experienced a trust in herself and the process of group interactions that has grown as she has gotten older. Along with this trust, Lou described a relaxation and letting go throughout her body that she attributes to decreased self-judgment. Similarly for Anna, although she says she still has moments of suffering from self-doubt, being older has given her a sense of security and self-acceptance. In her words, "It's kind of like, oh well, this is who I am at this point, and yeah it's pretty good!"

After a life-time of chronic diets and "trying everything" to lose weight, Susana experienced a profound shift in her ability to be true to herself when she "took ownership" of her body and accepted herself as she is. While she described always having a lot of stamina, it was not until she "came to terms" with her body and stopped the extreme discipline and regimens that she actually felt the energy in her body as her own:

> I always had the energy. I always was able to do many things, but I never felt it through my body…When I let go of having the body that was *not* mine, I was able to feel what I *did* have. There was this endless source of energy…That energy in *my* body. It's not only the cosmic energy or the divine energy. It's like my body is a resource. It says GO!...If you talk technically, you will say I'm connected to my chi [laughter]. Like Berkson, the existential used to call it the élan vital, in French that source

> of energy.[13] For the Chinese, it's chi.[14] I feel a connection with that. I *feel* it. It's not intellectual…I feel it as vibration, as energy, as power. It's muscular power, I can walk the extra mile, I can hold you, I can be strong. And I do feel it through my body…[Fulfillment] makes us know the divine, but it's also body energy…Once that I take ownership, that's *my* energy, *my* center, *my* well, like the well that I can pull…that makes me feel, okay this is it. *I have it*. If you say, what is what you have? I don't know. *I have it*. I have what it takes to be me, to be fulfilled, to get it all.

For Susana, her self-love and acceptance was liberated through the process of owning her body. Unleashing a source of power, energy and identity, Susana became all the more connected to who she is, her ability to be true to herself and feel fulfilled in her life.

Bestowing Life Learnings

One of the most striking patterns that shined through the interviews was a theme which seemed to emerge as a direct result of the first four themes: that participants experienced fulfillment through sharing their significant life learnings with others. As if bestowing a gift born out of the core elements of their own personal journeys, central aspects of the women's unique paths became a kind of mission or source of purpose directing their lives. Although not necessarily always overtly expressed, the women's stories indicated that the struggles, insights, and transformations they experienced in their own journeys inspired the very stuff they were drawn to offer others. In this way, the women's experiences of fulfillment are imbued with the Greek myth of Chiron, the journey of the wounded healer: that the greatest pain and burdens of life become a source of wisdom and healing power for others (Dunne, 2000; Groesbeck, 1975).

[13] *Élan vital*, a term coined by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1907), refers to the vital impetus or vital force thought to explain the evolution and development of organisms (Bergson, trans. 1998).
[14] *Chi* (literally translated as breath, air, or gas) is a Chinese term used to describe life force. It is considered the active essence of any living thing, and is the underlying principle of traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts (Kaptchuk, 1983).

After facing a life-threatening accident and subsequent health crisis that turned her life upside-down, Kara felt her worlds were split in two: husband/science/rational/ allopathic healthcare on one side and herself/experience/intuition/alternative healthcare on the other. Feeling she had "no choice" but to follow the path that would help her survive, Kara decided to pursue an alternative path of healing; one that led not only to the end of her marriage but to the beginning of a spiritual journey that has restored her health, cultivated her gifts and identity, and nurtured a deep sense of fulfillment. In turn, this split inspired her to pursue an academic and professional path that "bridges worlds and dissolves barriers," through her work as a conflict mediator as well as her own radio show that broadcasts interviews with key experts on culturally significant topics, such as science and spirituality. In addition, having struggled with a sense of boundary-less-ness throughout her life and viewing boundaries as a problematic issue particularly for women, Kara explained:

> I'm really trying to model [boundaries] and know what that feels like, so I can be a model for other women. And by studying myself as I'm doing that, because I came from the other experience so extremely so, I can teach it. I can bridge from one place to another. It's really important for me to be a bridge and bring some other people along.

Many of the other women expressed a similar passion for addressing the very issues they have struggled with or are continuing to learn about, and in some way facilitating kindred learning opportunities for others. Currently in her own process of "soul searching about aging," Lou now leads workshops

> helping women process what they might have left behind, or process what they've forgotten was something they wanted to live or finish or start… Not just repeating the same pattern that you've done throughout your life until there isn't any more life, but maybe again doing more individual pursuit of curiosity, as much as your life allows you to.

Lou has created a space for others to explore the very issues she has found to be important in her own life.

For PJ, having felt diminished throughout her life she now wants to bring a message to women that they have value. Describing the book she is currently writing about women, health, and the medical system, PJ explained:

> I am really wanting to elevate women and have them see how wonderful we are…that we have made such marvelous contributions to humankind to promote ongoing life, because we give life, but also because we care about life.

Like PJ, Lizzie also expressed a desire to help women see their value, specifically so they can use their power for the benefit of others. She explained,

> I want to be a part of supporting girls, *our* girls, to be able to step into their own power. And I want to, that's one of my hopes for my work, is that we will be sending women out, we'll be sending people out to support people all over the world.

Just as Lizzie has spent a lifetime learning how to face her own demons, she now helps others to get to know themselves and develop their abilities in order to be able to serve others and promote change:

> I can only give them what I have and I trust that they will transform that into whatever their fire is. But it's the consciousness of, that the work that we do individually on our own psyches is also work for the world and that what we do matters. And teaching students really the technology of whatever it is…conflict, membership, leadership, multiculturalism…that there are ways of holding those realities and moving them forward in a world that doesn't really want us to do that, or doesn't know how to do that.

For Lizzie, her own ongoing path of self-discovery fuels her work with others as a psychologist and teacher.

Finally, participants not only bestowed their personal learnings in overt public or professional ways. The women's stories also elucidated the intimate nature of their

journeys and gifts – how personal realizations and decisions can invoke profound meaning that impacts others in sometimes less obvious or unacknowledged ways. When Gemma took a stand against her father's abuse as a child, then later as an adult began to dive into learning more about herself and her family dynamics, she gradually realized that she was "saying no" on an even bigger scale:

> I realized I was not gonna let it go on anymore. I wasn't gonna let the dysfunction continue [hand comes down like a barricade]…Uh uh. Stopping it. No more. Can't do this anymore…And I realized that my path was, one of my paths was healing…The healing that I was doing for myself was healing not just me, but my family, my ancestors, my father. That I was actually healing generations.

As Gemma and other participants embraced the power of their own journeys, they realized their personal transformations and learnings had a much wider sphere of influence. Bestowing those significant life learnings fostered their experiences of fulfillment and fulfilling life paths.

Ongoing Journey: To Be or Not to Be (Fulfilled)…That is *Not* the Question

As illustrated throughout the themes, participants' experiences revealed that fulfillment is an ongoing journey. Rather than someday arriving at a clear point in time at which they felt fulfilled and/or no longer felt unfulfilled, the women described fulfillment as a path involving ongoing learning, changes and growth, and experiences of extending that learning to others. As previously addressed in the theme of metamorphosis, the catalyst of crisis shaped participants' journeys and inspired profound transformations. These journeys were also impacted in various ways by the process of aging, yet left many of the women feeling as if they are just at the beginning of experiencing new levels of fulfillment in themselves and their lives. In closing, I want to highlight the topics of relationships, aging, and learning as related to the participants' experiences of fulfillment.

Interestingly, although clearly woven throughout the participants' stories, the women did not emphasize relationships as the source of their experiences of fulfillment or equate fulfillment with relationships. Instead, relationships seemed to be a steady yet understated ingredient – like just the right amount of salt that makes a dish taste so good, yet is barely noticed. Taking many forms, the women spoke of relationships as a vehicle or facilitator of fulfillment through friendships, family, children and grandchildren, partners, colleagues and students, healers and health practitioners, mentors, teachers and gurus, animals, and even the enduring presence of loved ones who have died. In this sense, while the oppressive nature of relationships has been discussed in previous themes, the supportive presence of relationships was also embedded in the participants' experiences of fulfillment. Such support facilitated the women's ability to face their internal suffering, helped to bring awareness to internalized beliefs, and also empowered them to say no and stand up for themselves with others and within the world at large.

Surprisingly, only one woman directly talked about the importance of having a supportive partner/spouse as part a fulfilling life path (PJ). This unique viewpoint might reflect the demographics of the sample (i.e., four out of the seven participants were single), yet the lack of emphasis on intimate relationships may also point to the changing nature of women's identity, as well as how fulfillment is conceptualized in general. It seems the women of this study did not tie fulfillment to marriage and/or partnership, but rather to their own self-expression, regardless of relationship status and linked with many forms of relationship. Lizzie captured this sentiment well when she expressed the importance of "people to love and be loved by…I would not feel as fulfilled as I do without those people in my life."

The topic of aging and its impact on the ongoing journey of fulfillment also arose throughout the participants' interviews. Carrying an amorphous quality, discussion about getting older ranged from developmental markers to physical limitations brought about by age to efforts to sustain health; from changes in family roles and relationships with partners, children and grandchildren to the inevitability of death. As if reflecting the many realities of growing older, each participant voiced important aspects of the impact of aging, its challenges and contributions to women's experiences of fulfillment. The participants' discussion of fulfillment as related to aging yet again reveals the diversity and complexity of experiences. Aging can enhance the experience of fulfillment, especially by reducing self-doubt and self-judgment, instead helping women to grow in ease, freedom, self-love and acceptance. Yet aging can also bring challenges and hardships, such as physical limitations, changing roles, and the inevitability of death. With the prescience of death came discernment in choices and a heightened sense of the impermanence and value of life.

Finally, many of the women emphasized that fulfillment is intertwined with learning: the actual experiences of gaining information/knowledge/skills; learning about themselves psychologically, spiritually, and interpersonally; as well as an overall attitude toward life in general. This attitude that life is about learning diminished self-judgment and contributed to participants' self-acceptance, supporting them to risk and be true to themselves. Staying close to the spirit of learning helped participants feel that fulfillment is an ongoing and evolving journey.

In the chapter that follows, the results of this study are discussed in light of the original research questions: How do women experience fulfillment? And what role, if

any, does the body play in helping women find and navigate fulfilling life paths? Particular attention will be placed on the significance of the body with regard to women's experiences of fulfillment, as well as the relationship between this study's findings and relevant issues within the literature. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed, as well as the study's limitations and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The purpose of this research has been to explore how women experience fulfillment, the meanings and means to a fulfilling life path, including its facilitators and barriers. Embedded throughout this inquiry, particular attention has been given to the body: women's experiences of their bodies, the body's presence and significance, in relation to fulfillment. In other words, what are women's experiences of fulfillment, and what role, if any, does the body play in helping women find and navigate fulfilling life paths? Another emphasis of this study has been an interest in the overlaps and diversity amongst women, recognizing that gender is one of many sociocultural factors influencing one's identity, everyday reality, and worldview. In that vein, this research has been approached through case studies and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), informed by intersectionality and somatic awareness methods, in order to gain an in-depth qualitative understanding of a small sample of women's experiences of fulfillment and the body (Anderson, 2002 & 2003; Brooks, 2010; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994; Patton, 2001; Willig, 2001).

What follows includes a brief summary of the results of this study, placing the findings within a sociohistorical context and highlighting the role of the body in women's experiences of fulfillment. The theoretical implications of the findings are discussed in relation to the larger field of psychology, feminist and diversity studies, as well as somatic psychology. Practical implications are also considered, including how the findings may inform clinical practice in various fields. The study is then evaluated in order to address its rigor within the qualitative tradition, strengths and limitations. Finally, suggestions for further research are presented and discussed.

Overview of Results

Using the analysis methods of Embodied Transcription and IPA, informed by intersectionality and embodied writing, the following five themes emerged from the participants' experiences of fulfillment: Connection with Something Bigger; Oppressive Forces; Crisis, Confrontation, and Metamorphosis; True to Self; and Bestowing Life Learnings. These themes present broad areas that contribute to and shape women's experiences of fulfillment, yet also allow space for the particularity and diversity that exists among women.

The results indicate that women's overall experience of living a fulfilling life is a gradual and ongoing process, one that evolves over time, and often manifests as a feeling of being connected with something larger than oneself. Based on the participants' accounts, fulfillment is indelibly linked with being true to oneself, an experience that grows out of hardship and adversity. In particular, the oppressive forces of family, religion, and culture create a foundation of messages, expectations, attitudes and behaviors that shapes women's identities, self-concepts, relationships with their bodies, life choices, opportunities, and interpersonal and systemic experiences. Often catalyzed by health and relationship crisis, the ongoing process of waking up to these forces and their impact is a crucial part of finding and navigating fulfilling life paths for the women in this study. By "facing one's demons" and addressing internal suffering, as well as confronting external conflict by saying no to oppressive forces and standing up for oneself, the women experienced a kind of metamorphosis that helped them recognize unconscious drives and step into new stories about themselves. This recurring process created a spiral of growth and development resulting in a deepening ability to live true to

oneself by listening to feelings and body experiences, discerning and honoring multiple aspects of self, risking and facing disapproval, as well as experiencing enhanced self-love and acceptance. The very elements that filled these women's journeys with challenge and suffering evolved into core understandings about themselves and life in general: life learnings that in turn fueled their sense of direction and what they have to offer the world.

Women and fulfillment through the lens of history. The participants in this study were born into (and on the bookends of) the "baby boomer" generation (1946-1964), so the results of this research reflect the cultural issues of this period of dramatic social change. The oldest participants (Lou, PJ and Lizzie; born 1940-1946) grew up during a time of strong traditional values: white middle- and upper-class women were expected to marry, have babies, and stay at home with their children (Carr, 2004; Goodheart, 2006; Gore, 2010). For the most part, if women achieved an education beyond high school, it was often thought of as a "back-up" option, in case for some reason they had to go to work. The cultural norm of the 1950s enforced family over career as the main priority for women, generally defining a successful woman as equivalent to wife and mother. However, it is important to point out that for women of color and lower socio-economic classes, work alongside motherhood has long been the norm (Davis, 1983).

Lou, PJ and Lizzie all came of age just as the movement of the 1960s got underway. In contrast to the conservative values of the 1950s, the 1960s brought a zeitgeist of experimentation, individualism, freedom and social activism – and with it, the women's and civil rights movements (Gillon, 2004; Schuman & Scott, 1989). This time of major social change was the period in which Susana, Kara, Anna, and Gemma (born

1954-1965) grew up. As evident throughout the findings, many of the tensions of this significant time in history are illustrated throughout the participants' experiences of fulfillment: they speak of being pressured by family and culture or passively "swept" into roles as wife and mother; career paths spurred by necessity, such as family hardship and divorce, and carved by the limits of culturally accepted sexism (i.e., women should be nurses and secretaries, rather than doctors and business executives); and having to fight for the freedom to love outside of heterosexist norms.

Carr's (2004) research into the psychological consequences of women's intergenerational social comparisons elucidates many of these sociocultural tendencies. She found that mothers who came of age in the 1950s emphasized a lack of personal control in charting their own life paths; they had few independent ideas for how their lives would unfold, instead complying with others' expectations. In contrast, their daughters (who grew up in the 1970s) benefitted from enhanced educational and occupational opportunities, developed a sense of personal agency, and made choices based on what they actually wanted. Interestingly, the results of the current study echo these historical signposts, illustrating journeys of fulfillment up against the back-drop of this significant period of change in social norms and values, and highlighting the importance of confronting outer and internalized sources of oppression as a means of discovering and *making it possible* to follow one's personal truths. In this vein, we might say that younger generations of women are riding the waves of change ushered in by the efforts of our "baby boomer" foremothers and the many grandmothers behind them.

Fulfillment and the body. As a way of discussing the significance of the thematic findings in regard to literature on fulfillment, women, and somatic psychology, I

want to highlight the presence of the body throughout the participants' experiences of fulfillment. Just as fulfillment does not hold universal meaning, but rather is imbued with meaning based on personal history, sociocultural influences and subjective lived experience, so the body emerged as a presence with many facets. Based on the findings, the body can be conceptualized as manifesting on three levels of experience: physical, sociocultural, and internal. Although differentiated as three distinct realms, these levels of experience also overlap and at times are blurred, as illustrated by the findings and discussion below.

On the **physical** level, women experienced the body in terms of ability and limitations: health, illness, accidents, changes related to aging, as well as a physical means to fulfillment. The physical level of the body appeared most vividly within the themes of *Crisis, Confrontation and Metamorphosis,* in which health issues emerged as a catalyst for transformation, and general comments about growing older, in which the physical limitations of aging were discussed. Much of the literature on fulfillment discusses the body from a physical perspective, in terms of physiological needs (Maslow, 1943, 1970 & 1999), bodily pleasures (Seligman, 2002), and physical skills, activities, and senses (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Some recognize that health issues and accidents, for example, also point toward meaningful sources of information and guidance about one's sense of fulfillment, purpose, and life callings (Beck, 2001; Hillman, 1996; Jung, 1989; Levoy, 1997; Mindell, 2002, 2004).

The body also emerged as a **sociocultural** experience, encompassing family, religion, media and other interpersonal influences as shown throughout the themes of

Oppressive Forces and *Crisis, Confrontation and Metamorphosis*.[15] These findings are in line with feminist and diversity studies, which have helped to elucidate the body from a sociocultural perspective by addressing the social construction of gender, gender norms, and intersectional identity, as related to the equation of women with the body (Butler, 1993; Eisler, 1995 & 1995; Price & Shildrick, 1999), body image and the objectification of women (Carr, Friedman & Jaffe, 2007; Carr, Jaffe & Friedman, 2008; McKinley, 1995 & 2011; Smolak, 2006; Wolf, 1992), violence against women and trauma (Price & Shildrick, 1999; Worell & Goodheart, 2006), and women's psychological and physical health (Chesler, 2005; Ehrenreich & English, 2005; Jack, 1991; Lee, 1998; Worell & Goodheart, 2006).

Finally, the body also emerged as an **internal** (or experiential) phenomenon, meaning a subjective experience of the body based on feelings/emotions/associations stemming from proprioception, or vague body sensation. This level is akin to Gendlin's "felt sense" (1981), an experience arising from that body that is inherently phenomenological, thus mainly non-verbal, although out of which words can emerge. Validating Johnson's (2009) research on the embodiment of oppression, the participants discussed the somatic implications of *Oppressive Forces*, as well as the internalization of sociocultural messages and the importance of liberating themselves from these oppressive forces by questioning and challenging them. Such findings extend theories of differentiation and individuation (Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005; Jack, 1991; Jung, 1962 & 1989; Maslow, 1970; Miller, 1986), as well as feminist psychology, critical psychology

[15] The sociocultural realm of the body could arguably be separated into two or more different areas of focus (i.e., family, inter-personal, and societal). However, because the results of this study regularly demonstrated the intertwined nature of family, interpersonal, and societal dynamics and influences, these areas are merged as one over-arching level for the purposes of this discussion.

and liberation theory (Ballou, Matsumoto & Wagner, 2002), to show how they also interface with the body. The body as an internal experience was also illustrated through the themes of *Connection with Something Bigger* and *True to Self*, as well as being apparent in each woman's ability to access and describe the somatic experience associated with her sense of fulfillment. Finally, the results indicate that the fulfillment that comes through *Bestowing Life Learnings* is also linked with an internal experience of the body, in that the participants described living/expressing/offering what they know (and are continuing to learn) from lived experience, also referred to as embodied awareness. The field of somatic psychology supports the findings that the body is an experiential source of information and guidance, as well as a gateway to emotional healing and empowerment (Aposhyan, 1999; Caldwell, 1997; Damasio, 1996; Gendlin, 1981; Lehrer, 2009; Mindell, 2004 & 2007).

This tri-level understanding of the body – the body as physical, sociocultural, and internal – illustrates the strong ties between psychological, physical, interpersonal and sociocultural experiences, and points toward the need for reconceptualizing fulfillment as a bio-psycho-social phenomenon grounded in subjective experience (Ballou, Matsumoto & Wagner, 2002; Lee, 1998; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006; Mindell, 1996; Mindell, 1993, 1995, 2002, 2004 & 2007; Ryff, 1995; Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2003; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study contributes to the theory and practice of somatic psychology by providing in-depth explorations of the meaning of fulfillment in women's lives: how they identify it, how they create it, what they face in the process, and specifically, how the

body relates to this journey. These illustrations enhance theoretical understanding by linking conceptualizations of fulfillment to the complexities of sociocultural context. Through the additional lens of somatic psychology, the study furthers awareness of the role the body plays in women's experiences of fulfilling life paths. Likewise, the research contributes to the field of somatic psychology by broadening the understanding of how sociocultural realities are embodied and influence these journeys. Practical contributions for clinicians of various fields are also explored, in order to provide insight into key elements, challenges and resources that could further women's experiences of fulfilling life paths.

Psychological theory on fulfillment. In general, psychological theories of fulfillment are based on cultivating the unique potentials within each person and using those potentials in service of a larger purpose, such as Maslow's self-actualization (1943, 1970 & 1999), Jung's individuation (1962 & 1989), Hillman's acorn theory (1996), and positive psychology's focus on signature strengths and flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The current study's findings echo this perspective in that being *True to Self* and *Bestowing Life Learnings* were found to be core aspects of fulfilling life paths. Indeed, the theme of *Crisis, Conflict and Metamorphosis* speaks directly to the aforementioned theories of individuation and differentiation from others' beliefs and expectations. And the theme of *Bestowing Life Learnings* strongly reflects Seligman's (2002) emphasis on meaning and purpose, as well as Erikson's (1950/1993) psychosocial stage of generativity, which is marked by the developmental task of contributing to society and helping to guide future generations. However, the findings also illustrated

that those potentials are shaped by oppressive forces, unique to women and their intersecting identities, which require both inner and outer reconciling. For the participants in this study, discovering the meaning and means of fulfillment involved a circuitous and at times arduous journey, entangled with the diverse sociocultural experiences of women, as well as their relationships with their bodies.

Some of the findings of this study may benefit theorists of fulfillment, especially when delving into women's experiences of fulfilling life paths. For example, in contrast to the pathological orientation of many approaches to mental health, the new movement of positive psychology instead advocates for a reorientation toward what makes life worth living and increasing happiness by "not just fixing what is broken…[but] nurturing what is best" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 3). Positive psychology stresses the importance of positive emotions, strengths and virtues, as well as meaning and purpose for achieving "authentic happiness" (Seligman, 2002). Lyubomirsky's (2008) happiness strategies promote optimism and forgiveness, even warning against the dangers of self-reflection and social comparison.

However, as seen in *Crisis, Conflict, and Metamorphosis*, the findings of this study indicate that such positive spins might obfuscate the importance and value of tending to internal suffering and confronting relationship conflict, for example. Indeed, for the women who participated in this research, emotional transformations, the discovery of gifts and strengths, as well as a sense of direction, emerged *through* "facing one's demons" and "going through the dungeon," not simple attitudinal changes or focusing only on the positive aspects of their lives. The concept of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) lends weight to this finding, in that positive psychological change can

occur “as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances,” manifesting as a more robust sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and an enhanced existential and spiritual life, as well as an increased appreciation for life in general and more meaningful interpersonal relationships (p. 1). The early works of Maslow (1968) and Jung (1989) also affirm the finding that growth and self-awareness arise through hardship and adversity.

Indeed, for the women in this study – and the marginal aspects of their identities which often go against status quo norms – self-exploration and saying no to sources of oppression were essential aspects of discovering and being able to live true to themselves. Considering the pressures of socialization and psychological tendencies of women to acquiesce and accommodate to social norms, it may be all the more important to integrate an awareness, questioning, and confronting of oppressive forces into theories of women and fulfillment, as well as the potential disapproval that comes in the process (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996; Miller, 1986; Worell & Goodheart, 2006). Ryff’s eudaimonic approach identifies six core dimensions of psychological well-being that illustrate strong parallels to the current study’s findings: growth (note *Crisis, Confrontation and Metamorphosis*); self-acceptance and autonomy (*True to Self*); positive relationships; and purpose and environmental mastery (*Bestowing Life Learnings*) (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Ryff’s approach also stands out for its recognition of the negative consequences of socioeconomic inequality and discrimination on experiences of fulfillment, substantiating the necessity for attention to women’s unique paths and issues of marginalization (Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2003). Perhaps the findings

contribute more specificity and nuance to help fill out how Ryff's eudaimonic approach applies particularly to women.

Another important facet that helps to fill a gap in the literature on fulfillment is the role of the body in women's journeys. For the most part, theories of fulfillment only address the body on the physical level, as a means to fulfillment through pleasure, exercise, and other enjoyable activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2002). Yet for the women in this study, the body (as described above) surfaced on multiple levels and became a key presence throughout their journeys. Physical experiences that are seeming deterrents to fulfillment, like illness and accidents, served as catalysts for transformation and growth. Beyond the physical level, the findings illustrate that the body is also experienced as a sociocultural reality that has particular significance for women in relation to beauty and body image, religion, roles and boundaries, sexism in the workplace, homophobia, racism, and abuse. In addition, as an internal (or experiential) reality, the body assists women in living true to themselves and connecting with something bigger, potentially enhancing the various theoretical understandings of fulfillment as related to spirituality, one's essential nature, and the path by which one discovers meaning and purpose in life (Campbell, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hillman, 1996; Jung, 1989; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Maslow, 1999; Seligman, 2002). Mindell's (2010) concept of "processmind" lends support to this understanding of the internal body. He describes a method for connecting with a larger source of guidance by attuning to the deepest part of oneself, as experienced through the body and linked with nature, thereby accessing a source of wisdom that not only assists in navigating inner and outer conflict, but also inform one's sense of purpose and life direction.

Ryff's research into eudaimonic well-being also offers a unique recognition of the multi-dimensional and inter-related aspects of the body by examining the socioeconomic and biological correlates of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1995; Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2003; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Her team's preliminary findings suggest that eudaimonic well-being results in cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune health benefits, yet also illuminates that the opportunities for eudaimonic well-being are not equally distributed due to socioeconomic inequities and the consequences of perceived discrimination. Together with the current study's findings that demonstrate the strong presence of oppressive forces and possible routes toward women's experiences of fulfillment, these results point toward implications for healthcare, education and social policy, as well as clinical practice.

Psychotherapists and counselors working with women on issues of fulfillment may also benefit from the findings discussed above. If clinicians were to use these findings to inform their practice, they might be more attentive to the ways in which various forms of oppression affect women's identities, self-esteem, and ability to discern and act upon what they truly feel and think. At times this may mean engaging in a psycho-educational role with clients, helping women gain awareness of the oppressive forces in their lives, where those beliefs and messages come from (familial, interpersonal, cultural, systemic), uncovering their feelings and reactions to those forces, as well as how those expectations and attitudes have been internalized. Yet it would also be important for counselors not to generalize about women, but rather explore and gain an understanding of each client's subjective experience based on her intersecting identities (race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, physical abilities, etc.). Feminist therapy

theorists also emphasize the important of placing clients' concerns within a larger sociocultural context (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002; Gilbert & Kearney, 2006).

Going further, it could be valuable for clinicians to support women to question and challenge those oppressive forces, confronting them in real life interactions when indicated, such as family and intimate relationships, as well as professional and social contexts. The findings indicate that doing so potentially has a liberating effect that enables women to step into a more authentic understanding of themselves, enhancing their ability to identify their needs and dreams, patterns, limitations and strengths. However, since growth and self-development challenges both the inner and outer status quo, doing so also involves the risk of facing disapproval, the consequences of which could be buffered by an anticipation of this response from others, as well as increased sources of support. Gradually this process may strengthen women's sense of identity, enhancing their relationship with their bodies, and ability to experience fulfilling life paths. The research also points toward the interconnection between life stories and fulfillment, in that self-development through personal hardship instills learnings and inspiration that creates a sense of direction, meaning and purpose in life. Helping women explore this link could assist them in bringing their lives into more congruent alignment with their beliefs, self-expression, and ability to cultivate fulfilling life paths.

Finally, incorporating a tri-level understanding of the body (as physical, sociocultural, and internal) not only helps to fill a gap in the literature, but could also be helpful for counselors who work with women and issues of fulfillment. For example, counselors might frame how the sociocultural body is intertwined with oppressive forces (cultural standards of beauty, the family, media), exploring the related impact on

women's feelings about themselves, body weight, and their relationship with their bodies in general. In addition, the findings show how the internal body offers a way for women to connect with something bigger, as well as live true to themselves. Women's sense of fulfillment and ability to listen to themselves could be enriched by bringing awareness to their internal body experiences.

Psychology of women. Literature on the psychology of women excels at reconstructing notions of fulfillment by deconstructing gender norms. In particular, feminist and diversity studies address oppression and its impact on the psychology of women, both historically and in ongoing forms, as well as how oppressive forces shape women's conflictual relationship with their bodies (Butler, 1993; Chesler, 2005; Ehrenreich & English, 2005; Eisler, 1995 & 1995; McKinley, 1995 & 2011; Price & Shildrick, 1999; Smolak, 2006; Wolf, 1992; Worell & Goodheart, 2006). U.S. culture is indebted to feminist theory – and its sisters, the feminist and civil rights movements – for challenging unquestioned norms and raising awareness about gender roles, equal rights, violence against women, and the infiltration of the media into women's psyches, especially with regard to standards of beauty and body image. The past 50 years have seen significant expansion of ideas about what it means to be a woman, bringing more freedom and choice about when and if to marry, sexual orientation, whether or not to have children, educational and career opportunities. Early feminism helped to equalize women with men, later years celebrated women's differences as unique and valuable, and most recent evolutions emphasize the social construction of gender, intersubjectivity, and the necessity of recognizing the diversity of social identities amongst women (Bohan, 2002; Crenshaw, 1994; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996).

Feminist and diversity studies thus lend significant theoretical support to the findings of this study. For example, as seen in the themes of *Oppressive Forces, Crisis, Conflict and Metamorphosis*, and *True to Self*, the feminist ecological model also emphasizes the psychological distress women experience due to the oppressive use of power in interpersonal relationships and larger systems, as well as the intersectional and multi-level influences contributing to women's identities and life experiences (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002). Likewise, Peck (1986) discusses the importance of women disentangling themselves from internalized messages and constrictive relationship structures in order to develop self-definition. And others describe how social constructions of gender and authority affect women's sense of self, voice, and mind (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986/1997). From a developmental perspective, women's growth post-midlife tends to shift their efforts away from others and towards themselves, in that "many women attempt to affirm their own being, independent from family, through graduate education, beginning a career, or switching careers" (Etaugh & Bridges, 2006, p. 361). Accentuated by the participants' ages and related sociocultural changes (addressed above), these issues speak to the strong emphasis in the findings linking fulfillment to being *True to Self*.

Although relationships were not excessively emphasized in this study, the findings could also be interpreted as validating theories about a "self-in-relation" rather than individualized notions of self-actualization, in that much of the illustrations of the themes occurred within a relational context – oppression in many forms, saying no, standing up for oneself, listening within and acting upon what is heard, facing disapproval, and bestowing life lessons to others (Jordan, Hartling, & Walker, 2004;

Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1993). However, the women in this study definitely emphasized the importance of accessing and expressing a personal sense of self as central to fulfillment, both within and outside of relationship with others (note *Connection with Something Bigger*, *True to Self*, and *Bestowing Life Learnings*). Based on the findings, I would lean toward more of a post-modern feminist perspective, which views the self as a fluid construct that exists and is given meaning according to socialization and interpersonal dynamics (Bohan, 2002). Yet at the same time, unlike social constructivism, the findings seem to indicate that women experience both an essential sense of self (an underlying unique nature that seeks expression) and a sense of self that is shaped by context (familial, interpersonal, and cultural). Perhaps, from a theoretical perspective, such results help to bridge a constructive tension between traditional understandings of fulfillment and the challenges made by feminist orientations.

While feminist and diversity theory substantiate the idea of a sociocultural body, there is less attention given to the internal body – how one experiences the body as an in-the-moment access point for thoughts, feelings, and impulses. Both from a theoretical and practical perspective, this could be an area where this research offers a unique contribution. For example, feminist therapists working with women could not only talk *about* the significance of the body, but also invite their clients to *experience* their bodies in the moment by bringing awareness to the sensations, movements, images, sounds, thoughts and feelings that arise in the body as they discuss issues related to fulfillment. The findings show that women experience their bodies as a source of information that provides guidance, emotional shifts, and greater understanding about the barriers and facilitators of fulfilling life paths. By helping women to access their actual somatic

experience as they explore the contours of fulfillment, further interventions may arise organically, informed by clients' internal body awareness. Therapists may also find that their clients are able to discover and feel all the more anchored to their "true colors," a core element of fulfilling life paths.

Somatic psychology theory. The field of somatic psychology brings the body to the foreground, recognizing its significance in reflecting human experience and giving the body a voice to inform the process of healing and development. In this sense, somatic psychology gives precedence to the internal (or experiential) body with the aim of fostering embodiment, "the moment to moment process by which human beings allow awareness to enhance the flow of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and energies through our bodily selves" (Aposhyan, 2004, p. 52). From a somatic psychology perspective, fulfillment stems from an embodied sense of self and responsiveness to the impulses that arise from such awareness.

Such a body-based orientation lends much support to the findings of this research. All of the participants were able to access and express their internal body experience of fulfillment in ways that enhanced and gave meaning to their overall experiences of fulfillment, particularly as illustrated through the themes *Connection with Something Bigger*, *True to Self,* and *Bestowing Life Learnings*. These results echo the research of Damasio (1996) and Lehrer (2009), which demonstrates the importance of emotional awareness – as revealed through *body* awareness – in successful decision making processes. In other words, a fulfilling life stems from decisions based not merely on what one thinks, but also informed by what one feels; discovering what feels true and living true to self is enhanced through somatic awareness.

Yet, in order to foster embodiment as a facilitator of fulfillment, somatic psychology also addresses the barriers to embodiment: What impedes somatic awareness? From a somatic psychology perspective, much attention is given to the formative relationship between child and primary caregiver as the source of attachment and conditioning, and thus the foundational building block and/or deterrent to living "true to self" (Johnson, 1994; Schore, 2001). Likewise, theories such as interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 2001) recognize that people experience themselves through relationship, a locus for both reliving and potentially transforming early psychological patterns. Thus, somatic psychology focuses on the body as a present-moment access point for bringing awareness to and individuating from these early internalized patterns.

Indeed, the findings show how early family experiences were often a source of trauma and oppressive messages that were internalized and created patterns which impeded participants' ability to experience fulfillment. However, as discussed in detail in the previous sections, the findings also highlight the significance of wider sociocultural forces in women's psyches and bodies – specifically religion, sexism, homophobia, and racism – the implications of which are under-explored within the field of somatic psychology. Outstanding exceptions include dissertations on women, embodiment, and leadership (Anstiss, 2004; Macelveen-Ryan, 1997), Johnson's research on the intersections of trauma, oppression, and embodied experience (2009), and both Arnold and Amy Mindell's research into health issues, social conflicts, and environmental problems (Mindell, 1996; Mindell, 1993, 1995, 2004, 2007 & 2010). Participants' experiences illustrate how closely entangled the messages of the family are with larger cultural norms and values, such that we might even say the family often represents a

microcosm of society at large or an embodiment (albeit without much awareness) of past generations and the evolution of culture itself. Yet by steering the focus to family, the field individualizes problems and misses the opportunity to address the *problems-behind-the-problems* and create a bridge for social change. As Aposhyan notes, "By recognizing the deeper cultural roots of an individual problem, we might discover more fundamental ways to rectify it" (2004, p. 53). Given this wider emphasis in the findings, the theory and practice of somatic psychology could be enhanced by devoting more focus to the sociocultural body as related to fulfillment and these cultural issues of oppression.

Linking the findings to potential contributions for clinical practice, somatic psychology practitioners might integrate this tri-level understanding of the body into their work with women addressing issues of fulfillment. Doing so brings together somatic experience and neuroscience, as well as sociocultural awareness. Therapists would recognize accidents and illness not only as physical health crises meant to be healed, but also as potential catalysts for fulfillment that stimulate transformation by inviting women to confront suffering and external sources of conflict. If somatic psychotherapists brought these findings into their practices, they would explore early messages from family, as well as wider cultural sources, about being a woman and the meaning of fulfillment. Therapists would also be alert to the many manifestations of sexism, racism, homophobia and other issues of marginalization in their clients' lives, explore the somatic experience of these oppressive forces, how these issues impact women's relationship with their bodies, as well as inform expectations, life dreams, and barriers to fulfillment. By supporting women to confront both the internalization and external manifestations of

oppression within their lives, therapists may find that women are all the more able to "own" their bodies and access their embodied experiences of fulfillment.

Evaluation of Study

For the purposes of evaluating this study, I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for rigor and their strategies for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. This model is based on four areas: (1) credibility, which involves establishing the authority of the researcher and that the results are believable from the perspective of the participants; (2) transferability, which is judged by those seeking to generalize the results to other contexts, yet can be enhanced by a thorough description of the research sample; (3) dependability, which requires a dense description of methods; and (4) confirmability, which corroborates the role of the researcher and her perspective on the results.

In terms of credibility, my education and professional background as a somatic therapist, as well as years studying and working in holistic health, help to establish my authority in the field. I came to this research with an interdisciplinary undergraduate degree combining psychology, sociology, political science, and women's studies; as well as a Master's in Counseling and Diploma in Process-Oriented Psychology. These various forms of specialized training and professional practice made me adept in the role of researcher/interviewer and enhanced the interview techniques through my abilities to establish rapport, track both verbal and non-verbal information, and elicit in-depth reflections from the participants. In addition, I maintained a journal and integrated self-reflexivity throughout the research process (Appendix A). Although I included an experiential exercise in the interview process, triangulation was weak, in that I did not

formally incorporate the drawings into the analysis process. The study could have been enhanced by using additional data sources, such as participant journals or focus groups, as well as peer examination. However, I conducted a member check, resulting in verification of the individual interview sketches by all participants. Also, the structural coherence of the results is sound, in that the themes that were generated were clear and concise and followed the Embodied Transcription (Brooks, 2010) and IPA methods (Patton, 2002). Finally, I have thoroughly noted references throughout the research.

The sample was small and purposively chosen to fulfill the participant criteria, so the transferability of the results is weak. Due to the criteria for the sample, all of the participants expressed an explicit interest in exploring the topic, potentially excluding a range women with different perspectives on fulfillment; such as those who do not identify with being fulfilled, experience depression, or do not have an explicit interest in the topic due to more pressing concerns (such as financial, health, or abuse). The participants also represented women with the ability to self-reflect and express themselves clearly, perhaps indicating a high degree of emotional awareness and interpersonal facility. In order to be able to conduct the interviews in person, the participants all lived in major metropolitan areas of California, Oregon and Washington, which also limits transferability due to the lack of geographic diversity and unique sub-cultures those areas represent (i.e., liberal politics, progressive ideology, self-actualization movements, and non-religious affiliation). In addition, the sample is skewed and does not reflect the larger population, in that it is possible that this sample was disproportionately single, none of the participants were affiliated with the most common religions in the U.S. (such as Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Muslim traditions), all of the

participants have at least a high school education (indicating a higher socio-economic status than national averages), and all of the women have some level of exposure to body-based learning experiences (indicating potentially greater somatic awareness that most women). A significant number of the participants also reported some degree of physical health issues, which may also influence their experience of their bodies in relation to fulfillment.

However, the study is strengthened by the diverse demographics of the sample in the areas of race, sexual orientation, and income; especially given its small size. Participant demographics are thoroughly addressed in Table 1 and Appendix F, including dense descriptions of the participants' social identities (race, socio-economics, sexual orientation, physical ability) and current circumstances (employment, relationship status, children), with special attention to intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994). The results should not be viewed as generalizable to all women, but rather as reflecting the lived experiences of this unique sample. At the same time, the findings raise interesting questions that could be further investigated with a broader and more representative sample in order to determine if and how these themes apply to women in general (as suggested below). Readers will need to use their own judgment in evaluating whether or not, and to what extent, the findings glean insight into women's experiences of fulfillment more broadly.

To address the issues of dependability and confirmability, I wrote thick descriptions of data collection and analysis methods, as well as both individual sketches and composite themes illustrating the participants' experiences. The methods have not, however, been independently audited nor reviewed by peers, so the consistency of the

findings is yet to be determined. With regard to researcher bias, I practiced self-reflexivity throughout the study (Appendix A). In addition, I sought ongoing consultation from my committee chairperson in order to receive additional perspectives on my interpretations and create a feedback loop to keep my biases in check.

Although my personal and professional life experience adds to the credibility of this study, in that I am an informed researcher on the topic, it is also possible that those lenses shaped how I heard and analyzed the data. Some of the initial hunches I had about women's experiences of fulfillment were indeed confirmed by the participants – such as the role of oppression and its internalization, that women's identities are diverse, and that fulfillment is a journey rather than an end point. However, the ideas I was loosely holding before the study have been illuminated by learning about the participants' actual lived experiences, such that I have a much better understanding of the process of fulfillment as a whole, as well as the presence of the body in that journey. For example, I did not anticipate that confronting inner suffering and outer oppression would surface as such an integral aspect of fulfilling life paths, nor that health and relationship crises would serve as global catalysts for transformation. I was also surprised that women's connections with something bigger became such a central theme, as well as bestowing life learnings. All of these findings somehow make sense in retrospect, yet I believe the confirmability of the study is strengthened through the transparency of my reflections.

Future Research

As I bring this study to a close and consider future possibilities for research, I am filled with enthusiasm for the insight into women's experiences of fulfillment and the body, as well as spurred by new curiosities and areas yet unexplored. One of the benefits

of this research stemmed from its qualitative focus on individual women's unique experiences, giving time and attention for each woman to explore her own understanding and path of fulfillment. However, because the research questions also reflect larger social issues with many different perspectives, I realize there may be considerable value in approaching the research itself from a more "social" perspective. For example, creating workshops or focus groups that not only invite women to share their individual experiences but also provide a context where they can hear from others (especially from different ages and backgrounds), discuss the issues that arise, learn together and broaden their understandings to view fulfillment not only as a personal journey but a wider sociocultural phenomenon. Such an approach allows for more collaboration, potentially lessens researcher bias, and also serves as a kind of "action research" that values the educational exchange between participants (Patton, 2002). I believe there is much to be gained across generations from women sharing their stories and experiences of fulfilling life paths.

Going further with this cross-generational direction, the sample was limited to "mature" women (45 years or older), such that all of the participants were born between 1940 and 1965. With a larger sample that includes a wider range of ages, cross-generational comparisons could be evaluated from an historical perspective in order to glean further insight into the sociocultural influences on women's experiences of fulfillment and determine if the findings discovered here reflect patterns salient to women of different generational cohorts. Broadening the sample criteria further to include younger women as well, or even girls, would lend greater awareness to developmental issues related to women and fulfilling life paths.

In addition, there is much to learn about women's experiences of fulfillment in relation to race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and other areas of marginalization. The current study indicates that forces of oppression – relational, systemic, and internalized – play a significant role in shaping women's understanding of and means to fulfilling life paths. However, the findings that emerged from this study only begin to touch upon the rich and important territory of culture and context in relation to women's experiences of fulfillment. Research exploring these areas in greater depth and specificity would enhance theoretical and clinical understanding of diverse experiences of fulfillment, its expression and barriers, as well as implications for social policy and education.

Initially, I had intended to focus the sample on women who identify as living a fulfilling life. However, as my research and personal reflections evolved, I realized that the question of fulfillment and its inherent subjectivity is far too complex for a simple categorization of "fulfilled" and "not fulfilled" (see Appendix A: Researcher Self-Reflexivity). Therefore, I decided to broaden the sample to allow for this tension within the research questions themselves, as well as the ambiguity and mixed feelings that arose throughout the interviewees' stories and explorations. In retrospect, it could be a valuable addition to include a quantitative and/or qualitative survey that asks participants about the degree to which they feel fulfilled, in what areas, and what they attribute as barriers and facilitators of fulfillment. This would generate more structured responses to supplement the semi-structured interview format. In addition, future studies could build and expand upon the findings presented here, operationalizing the concept of fulfillment, creating quantitative measures to investigate its various dimensions and possible correlates, for

example, to personality characteristics, life circumstances, geographics, and socioeconomic differences.

Given the (still) strong social pressures that tie womanhood and fulfillment to intimate relationship and motherhood (and vicariously sexuality), it is interesting to note the lack of emphasis on these areas in the findings. Perhaps this is an effect of the unique demographics (age, sexual orientation, relationship status) and philosophical/political orientations of the participants that debunk such pressures, or maybe this truly does indicate an evolution in cultural expectations that grants women more freedom and choice to experience fulfillment beyond these traditional notions? The absence leaves me curious, especially in light of my experience in clinical practice where many women express a lack of fulfillment when faced without intimate relationships, wrestle with the decision of whether or not to have children, or struggle with changes in their sense of fulfillment based on intimate relationships, sexuality, and motherhood, for example. Further research into women's experiences of fulfillment that emphasizes intimate relationships (Brabeck & Brabeck, 2006; Hendrick, 2006) and motherhood, childlessness, and choice (Brooks, 2007; Rice & Else-Quest, 2006), as well as sexuality and sexual expression (O'Sullivan, McCrudden & Tolman, 2006), would shed light on these important tensions within women's identity and the undercurrents of fulfilling life paths.

I am particularly interested in further research on the tri-level body and its implications for women's experiences of fulfillment, as well as young girls, our future's women-in-the-making. As highlighted by this study, and supported by Ryff's approach to eudaimonic well-being as well as other researchers that recognize the social determinants of health, questions of fulfillment are indelibly linked with sociocultural factors and

health on many levels (Ryff, 1995; Ryff, Keyes & Hughes, 2003; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006). Thus, future research into the bio-psycho-social correlates of fulfillment, as well as the diverse understandings of the meaning of fulfillment as related to sociocultural diversity and socioeconomic inequities, would be a valuable next step. Such explorations could expand notions of women's identity, what it means to be fulfilled as a woman, and the conditions and processes that support women's experiences of fulfilling life paths.

Finally, my hope is that this research waters a seed of exploration about fulfillment, women and the body that will continue to grow and blossom, creating new seeds and offshoots. I envision future research in the form of a multi-disciplinary symposium, bringing together psychologists from various perspectives – humanistic and positive psychology traditions, feminist and somatic psychologists, and perhaps other branches and fields as well. For example, positive psychologists could help to steer our discussions away from pathology and towards the factors and means that facilitate fulfilling life paths; feminist perspectives might aid us in understanding fulfillment from a sociocultural and historical perspective, as well as the potentially unique issues related to women and their intersecting identities; and somatic psychologists would help to ground the conversation in the body and the contributions of neuroscience, bringing awareness to a powerful and universal vehicle for awareness and transformation. However, I would hope that such a forum not only investigates these ideas as they apply to others, but that it would inspire people in all roles – researchers, therapists, and clients – to reflect on their own experiences of fulfillment, what fulfillment means to them, their journeys and struggles, in order to bring humility and self-awareness to this vital topic.

Together, we can share, discuss, and wrangle with our divergent perspectives on fulfillment as related to women and the body, in order to challenge and enhance our understanding. From both a theoretical and practical perspective, the creative tension of such a fusion would do much to benefit the territory of fulfillment and its implications for the many branches of psychology, as well as education, healthcare, and social policy.

APPENDIX A:
Researcher Self-Reflexivity

Personal Inspirations

The story of how I came to this research captures the essence of the topic itself and the elements that guide this study. My initial dissertation topic focused on women's health issues explored from a holistic perspective. It was a great idea and made sense in many ways, in that I was interested in women's health, it is a significant part of my background in holistic health and midwifery, and I believe in psychotherapeutic approaches to body symptoms and wanted to further such research. Yet the actual experience of writing that initial concept paper was exhausting. I felt impotent: I kept having to pick myself up, work hard to get into it, try to convince myself that I was. I told myself that the struggle was just a normal part of the research process, but I was miserable.

Then, just as I was finishing up that paper, I asked to meet with my research advisor: my "scary strict formal academic" research advisor. I was nervous, unsure I even wanted to have the conversation, nor what I really wanted the conversation to be about. Yet I am grateful that I did because it ended up being profound and pivotal. In a nutshell, she helped me get in touch with the underlying spirit of research…following one's *genuine curiosity*. In doing so, I found myself talking with her about another topic I found utterly compelling. As I talked I experienced myself coming alive. For me, it was physical and emotional, so obvious to us both. A total state change, like everything in me was waking up. I was excited, energized, and also felt like I was getting permission and encouragement – from the seemingly unlikeliest of places – to follow something in myself that I normally do not. *Genuine curiosity. Something that made me come alive. Uncontrived, unforced, and in this way somehow effortless.* It was utterly fulfilling. I

realized this tapped a deep dream for me: something I not only wanted to experience throughout my dissertation research process, but also something that I was wanting to experience in my life as a whole. And thus the exploration of fulfilling life paths.

In fact, I then went to the calendar to mark this special moment – it was the "Day of Epiphany." Unfamiliar with its religious meaning, I found out that it was on this day that the three wise men realized that they had been following the wrong star and changed their course, now guided by the North Star, which ultimately took them to the new baby Jesus. Astonished, I felt that I too had been "following the wrong star," now set on the right course guided by my own North Star of what was fulfilling for me, leading me on the quest of fulfillment itself.

This experience ultimately gave rise to my research topic, its guiding questions, and the design and methods for exploring fulfillment, women and the body.

Preconceptions: What I Bring to this Study

Bringing transparency to the motivations behind this research, the current study has been fueled by my own journey: what I seek to create in my life, my perceptions of what is timely and significant in U.S. culture, and what I hope to contribute to the field. I am a white woman, born during the 1970s amidst the "third wave" of a feminist generation (Tong, 2009). A time when women and American culture were questioning what it means to be a woman, challenging previously unchallenged notions on a grander scale – whether or not to have children, sexual identity, career choice – what to give oneself to and focus on in life. In my world, this was happening in a very personal way. By 8 years old, my Catholic-raised mother had fallen in love with a woman. She was questioning deeply engrained notions about love and life path, facing homophobia,

challenging these internalized beliefs within herself and the world around her, and following herself, her heart, her love in a very new way; one that was painful, exhilarating, and courageous.

Thus, the zeitgeist of my generation and the personal circles of my upbringing, have ushered my own life path to echo that questioning and not simply fall in-line with fundamental notions about women. Many ideological and practical doors have been opened to me about what fulfillment can look like and how to get there. In addition, with a background in dance, healthcare, and holistic psychotherapy, the body has been an integral part of my life path, studies and profession. Still, I have found the journey confusing and arduous. Based on my research and professional experience as a psychotherapist, I am not alone. These opportunities, yearnings and struggles have compelled me to explore other women's experiences of fulfilling life paths – in all their diversity – as a way to honor and learn from their stories and extend that learning. Such personal motivations potentially bias the study, yet also enhance insight into the topic and synergy with participants.

Preparation for Analysis

I want to reflect on my biases and beliefs about this research topic, in order to bring awareness to my orientation before I enter into the analysis process. Checking in with my body as I begin, I notice *nervousness in my belly, tension in the back of my head*, and the *rumblings of excitement* too. Considering the research questions guiding this study, what are the beliefs and ideas I already hold about women's experiences of fulfillment and the body's role in helping women find and navigate fulfilling life paths?

I believe fulfillment is an ongoing journey of getting to know yourself, one that is made of many layers of experience. It seems that the meaning of fulfillment is not static, but rather changes and develops over time. In my experience, one's ideas about fulfillment are also influenced by family, society, and culture. I've reflected (above) on some of the ways in which those influences have shaped my own experiences. I believe that messages about fulfillment are often merged with messages about what it means to be a woman. The values imbedded in those messages may or may not reflect one's own – and this also can change over time, contributing to the process of individuation. I have also experienced for myself and witnessed in others how these messages, beliefs, and values can be internalized – for better or worse. They can serve us, work against us, and also can become petty tyrants or allies; meaning presences in our lives that we would never consciously choose but somehow help us to grow, even through hardship and traumatic consequences. These belief systems reflect cultural values and worldviews that also play a role in women's paths – such as racism, sexism, and many contexts where power plays out. In addition, actual people influence our paths, serving as both supports and barriers, as described above.

I think it is important to recognize that one's identity as a woman is multifaceted. I don't believe there is one common experience or set of qualities defining women. Indeed, I hold strong feelings that such one-dimensional perspectives can be a disservice to women and skew/diminish the reality of diversity among women. Yet because gender is such a potent means of organizing experience – psychological, social, biological – and because of the benefits, privileges, and oppression tied with gender, this is an important

area for investigation. Especially, in my view, through the lens of diversity among women, since there is so much to learn from that perspective and it is not often explored.

Finally, it seems there are many levels and areas related to fulfillment – personal, relationship, social, artistic, spiritual, career, children, etc. And when considering the body's presence in women's experiences of fulfillment, I believe it is important to recognize that the body has many levels – objective, experiential, sociocultural – which again can both serve and hinder one's path. This is the *complexity* I want to explore and glean insight from by learning from women's actual experiences.

Change in Participant Criteria

A conversation with a colleague of mine helped me get in touch with and clarify my topic. Yet I later found out that as a result of that interaction, she was left feeling hurt because I had emphasized the relationship aspect of a "fulfilling life path." In other words, I had associated an important aspect of fulfillment with being in a committed relationship. Though I didn't know it at the time, my colleague later shared that she experiences herself as having a difficult time in relationship – that she herself is unfulfilled in that area of her life and felt judged by me, as if I didn't see her as living a truly fulfilling life because she's "screwed up" in the area of relationship. Far from my own truth, in that I admire and experience her as quite sophisticated and evolved in the way she seems to follow herself around relationship.

Yet as she expressed this to me, it definitely resonated with a feeling I had been having about the criteria I set out for interviewees. I had already taken the emphasis off of relationship in particular, because I recognize and want to give space for women's experiences of fulfillment both in and out of relationship. However, I had still been

planning on interviewing women who specifically identify with living a fulfilling life, as opposed to women who do not experience their lives as fulfilling. This distinction has been an inner conflict for me. Part of me really wanted to focus attention on those who say "yes, indeed my life is fulfilling" and get to the heart of what this is about. Yet another part of me kept feeling that it's simply not that clear cut – the question is complex and multi-faceted, the experience may change from day to day, moment to moment, as the woman herself changes and grows. Or there may be a general sense of fulfillment, yet with subtleties and different aspects of inner and outer life that don't quite match that sense of fulfillment. I realized that these categories of "fulfilled" and "not fulfilled" started to evoke a sense of hurt in me, in that I felt (and imagined other women too feeling) put down in the "not fulfilled" category.

My experience with my colleague – her bringing out the hurt, the sense of being judged as not fulfilled – helped me get in touch with and pay attention to this hurt in myself, which undoubtedly reflects the potential hurt among women in general when we categorize (and vicariously pathologize) our experiences, either internally or externally.

Thus, my criteria have changed!

APPENDIX B:
Participant Screening & Demographic Questionnaire

To be administered by telephone and conducted by the researcher, Katje Wagner

Script: "I am going to ask you a series of questions to help me determine your eligibility for this study and find out about your current life and your background. Please be as specific as possible with you answers. Your answers will remain confidential. I will be the only person to see your specific responses."

"Please tell me your"

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____

Phone number: _____

Email address: _____

Age: _____ *

I am planning to conduct the interview in person and want to make sure all participants are willing to have me come to your home or find a mutually agreeable location.
Does that work for you? Yes No **

How do you describe your race or ethnicity? _____

How do you define your sexual orientation? _____

How do you describe your current relationship status? _____

Are you currently in relationship with a significant other? Yes No

If yes, ask:
How long have you been in this relationship?_____

How do you describe the relationship?_____
(If answer is ambiguous, include additional probes such as "Are you married? Are you cohabitating? Do you consider this relationship to be monogamous?")

Have you ever been in a long-term committed relationship or married? Yes No
(Clarify which)

Do you have children? Yes No
If yes, ask how many? _____
(Clarify if children are biological, adopted, children of partner, etc)

Are you currently employed? Yes No

If yes, ask what is your profession? _____

How long have you worked in that field?

_____

(If less than 10 years or unemployed, ask did you have another career before?)

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

_____

Have you ever studied in body-related fields? Yes No

Please describe _____

(i.e., healthcare, massage, yoga, somatic awareness, sports, dance, other)

Do you have a biological or medical condition that impacts your physical abilities?

Yes No

Please describe _____

From this list, where does your household income fall? Joint or separate? (Clarify which)

_____Less than $10,000
_____$10,000 to $24,999
_____$25,000 to $49,999
_____$50,000 to $74,999
_____$75,000 to $99,999
_____$100,000 to $149,999
_____$150,000 to $199,999
_____$200,000 or more

Script: "Thank you for your time and interest in participating in this research. I am collecting names and putting them into a pool of possible participants. I will contact you within six weeks once the participants have been chosen and schedule the interview at that time."

_____

*If applicant is 45 years of age or older, continue on with additional demographic questions.
**If applicant agrees to meet in person, continue on with additional demographic questions.

If the applicant does not meet above criteria, I will not move on to subsequent questions.

Instead, I will say:
"Thank you for your time today. You currently do not meet the needed criteria to participate in the study. But if you would like a summary report of the findings from this study, I am happy to send them to you at the completion of the research."

Keep this information on file and include those who want the data in the final mailing of summary reports.

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form

Santa Barbara Graduate Institute
Katje Wagner

Title:
Inner Pathways Made Manifest: The Role of the Body in Women's Experiences of Fulfilling Life Paths

Investigator:
Katje Wagner

I am asking you to participate in a research study. Please take your time to read the information below and feel free to ask any questions before signing this document.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to explore how women experience fulfillment and what role the body may play in helping women find and navigate fulfilling life paths. I am conducting this study as part of my doctoral dissertation at Santa Barbara Graduate Institute.

Procedures:
If you are interested in participating, you will complete a telephone interview during which you will be asked questions to determine whether or not you are eligible to participate. If you are eligible to participate, I will contact to you to arrange a time and location to complete a 1-2 hour audio-taped interview. During the interview I will ask you to discuss your experiences of fulfillment. I am interested in learning about what fulfillment means to you, how you experience it in your life, how you have come to this experience, and in particular how your body relates to your ability to find and navigate a fulfilling life path. It may be necessary for me to contact you for a brief follow-up conversation to clarify some of the information from the interview. This conversation would take place over the phone, depending on your availability. After the initial interview, I will send you (via email) a write-up of our time together. You will be invited to email me with your comments, feedback, and clarifications. (If you do not have email access, we can communicate via regular mail.)

Risks to Participation:
Discussing your personal life experience may bring up difficult memories or feelings. If at any time during the interview you have questions or concerns, please let me know. I will make every effort to discuss them with you and inform you of options to resolve these issues.

Benefits to Participants:
You will not directly benefit from this study. However, I hope the information learned from this study may benefit society in our understanding of women's paths of fulfillment and enhance clinical knowledge for assisting women in their journeys towards fulfilling life paths. If you wish to receive a summary of the findings, please provide your mailing address below.

Alternatives to Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from study participation at anytime without any penalty.

Confidentiality:
During this study I will collect your name, telephone number, and email address (or mailing address). However in the written transcriptions of our conversation you will be assigned (or you may choose) a fictitious name. Your name or identity will not be used in my dissertation or in any presentation/publications that result from this study. All interview documents will be kept under my supervision in a locked cabinet and destroyed once the study is complete.

Questions/Concerns:
If you have any questions about this study you can contact me at 503-313-5733 or katjewagner@gmail.com. If you have questions concerning your rights in this research study you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of subjects in research project. You may reach the IRB office Monday-Friday by calling 312.467.2343 or writing: Institutional Review Board, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 325 N. Wells, Chicago, Illinois, 60654.

Consent

Subject
The research project and the procedures have been explained to me. I agree to participate in this study. My participation is voluntary and I do not have to sign this form if I do not want to be part of this research project. I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Subject: _____
Date: _____

If you wish to receive a summary of the findings, please provide your mailing address here:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent:
_____
Date: _____

APPENDIX D:
Experiential Exercise

For each interview, I will bring creative arts materials including colored markers, crayons, pastels, colored pencils, and paper. I will lay out the materials on an open surface (such as a table or desk, depending on our surroundings), such that all of the art supplies are in clear view.

Script:
"Before we begin our interview session, I would like you to take 10 minutes or so to make a picture that captures your experience of fulfillment or a fulfilling life path. This image can be as abstract or as representational as you would like. It is entirely yours to create."

Once the participant is finished with the exercise, I will ask her to share her work with me, including answering the following prompts: "Please tell me about your picture. How does the image you have created speak to your experience of fulfillment or a fulfilling life path?"

From this discussion, I will transition into the semi-structured interview questions described in Appendix E.

APPENDIX E:
Sample Interview Questions

MEANING & EXPERIENCE

Fulfillment…a fulfilling life path…What do these words bring up for you?

> *This question is intended to create a "blank access point" or "free association" for the interviewee, without much influence from the researcher. Such an entry point may give rise to emotions, images, sensations, memories, etc., and serve as a natural segue into a deeper exploration of the topic.*

What does fulfillment mean for you?
What other words would you use to describe the process or experience of fulfillment?
In what ways do you experience that in your life? Or not?
What are the areas of your life that make it fulfilling?

PROCESS

How have you arrived at this experience of fulfillment in your life?
Has this always been present for you? Or was it somehow cultivated, discovered?
Do you experience it as a before/after; ie, a pivotal moment? Or something gradual?

OBSTACLES & FACILITATORS

What barriers/challenges have you faced related to discovering the meaning of fulfillment for you? As well as living a fulfilling life?
What key experiences, people, practices/methods have contributed to you live a fulfilling life?
What key experiences…have prevented you from living a fulfilling life?

BODY

How do you experience fulfillment in your body?

> *Assist participants in identifying somatic, sensory grounded experience of fulfillment – sensations, areas of body, movements, etc.*

How does living a fulfilling life relate to your body?
Have you had body experiences that have influenced your experience of fulfillment and living a fulfilling life?
In other words, do you experience your body as a resource? What kind? Has this changed for you over time? How so?
How has your background, environment, or family of origin influenced your relationship with your body?

IDENTITY

> *Throughout the interview, I will be paying attention to how (and if) the interviewees relate their experiences to their identity; and how they define their identity in relation to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical abilities, age, social and family roles, employment and relationship status, etc. I will ask follow-up questions to deepen their/my understanding of how these aspects of identity influence their experience of fulfillment and living a fulfilling life. However, I do not want to initiate this discussion with a direct question, such as "how does your identity as a woman influence your experience of fulfillment and your path of a fulfilling life?" One's "identity as a woman" itself is complex – it could be another dissertation topic all together. So I would rather let this information emerge organically through the explorations invited above.*

CLOSURE

Is there anything else you would like to add to this exploration of fulfillment and the body?

APPENDIX F:
Participant Demographics

This appendix provides an in-depth description of the participants of this study through the lens of demographic information and intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1994). I first discuss the demographic make-up of the sample of women as a whole, focusing on the following: age, race, religious/spiritual orientation, sexual orientation, relationship status, children, employment status, educational background, physical ability issues, and economic status. This view addresses the diversity of the sample according to each separate demographic category. However, from the perspective of intersectionality, it is also important to acknowledge that each participant is comprised of several co-existing social categories that come together to shape her identity. Therefore, I then present the demographic overview of each participant within the sample, in order to show the many overlapping social identities that co-exist and infuse the results in Chapters Four and Five.

Demographic Information

The recruitment process included seven women from the north-western states of the United States. Because all of the interviews were conducted in person, participation was limited by the researcher's location, financial resources, and ability to travel. Thus, most of the participants lived in Oregon, with one participant in California and another in Washington. One participant was originally from Venezuela and immigrated to the U.S. as an adult; the rest of the participants were born and grew up in various parts of the U.S. Please note: All of the category labels reflect the participants' own language; some of the categories include additional subjective descriptions or other details added by the participants.

Participant ages. In order to gather a sample of women with a significant amount of life experience upon which to draw, participation was limited to "mature" participants, defined as 45 years and older. The sample for this study ranged from 46 to 71 years of age.

Table 2

Age Ranges	***Number of participants***
45-55	2
56-65	3
66-75	2

Racial and ethnic backgrounds. The participants included women of different races. Two of the participants were women of color (Hispanic and African-American); the rest of the sample was white. There were no women of Asian descent or mixed-race. Some of the women also described their ethnic backgrounds, which included the following: "a mix of many combinations;" English and German; Italian, German, and Spanish; and Irish-American.

Table 3

Race	***Number of participants***
African-American	1
Hispanic	1
White	5

Religious and spiritual orientations. None of the participants were affiliated with the most common religions in the US, such as Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Muslim traditions. Instead, all of the participants could be categorized as spiritual or non-religious. However, only two participants specifically used the word "spiritual"; one of whom emphasized "actively spiritual, but not in a group"; the other who added "spiritual, not religious." One participant practices Science of Mind and pagan traditions, explaining that means "we're all one, no dogma." Another participant has studied many spiritual

traditions and now practices Vedanta. The rest of the participants used subjective descriptions to specify their religious/spiritual orientation, including: "unknowing, searching, but not vibrantly;" "all about love;" and "soul-orientation, living soulfully."

Table 4

Religious/Spiritual Orientation[16]	***Number of participants***
Spiritual	2
Science of Mind, pagan	1
Vedanta	1
Other	3

Sexual orientation, relationship status, and children. The sample included women with various sexual orientations, both in and out of committed relationships, and those with and without children. Four of the women identified as heterosexual (one of whom added "as far as I know"), two as lesbian, and one as bisexual (or, in her words, "you love who you love"). Of the heterosexual women, all four had been divorced, one divorced twice, and another currently remarried; three of the heterosexual women were single. All of the heterosexual women had children: three out of the four had biological children from their marriages; one also had children from her husband's first marriage; another also had foster children for a short time; and the fourth had an adopted daughter, originally from another country. Both of the lesbian women had been divorced: one of whom had been divorced twice (first from a man, second from a woman); the other divorced once (from a man). Both of the lesbian women were currently married (to women); although one of those marriages is not considered legal, due to changes in state legislation. One of the lesbian women had biological children from her first marriage. The bisexual woman was single and did not have children; although she had taken care of

[16] Reflects current religious/spiritual orientation. Although participants were not asked about religious/ spiritual upbringing as part of the screening, several discussed its significance during the interviews, which is included in the individual sketches in Chapter Five and the composite themes in Chapter Six.

four children “as her own” from a previous relationship, but was not granted legal guardianship.

Table 5

Sexual Orientation ***Relationship Status*** ***Children***	***Number of participants***
Heterosexual	4
Divorced	4
Married	1
Single	3
Children	4
Lesbian	2
Divorced	2
Married	2
Children	1
Bi-sexual	1
Single	1

Educational backgrounds. The highest level of education of the participants ranged from current college studies to doctoral degrees. One of the participants was currently studying in a bachelor’s degree program, three had attained bachelor’s degrees, and three had doctoral degrees. Of those who attained doctoral levels of education, two had Ph.D. degrees and one had doctoral degree in naturopathic medicine (N.D.). In addition, when asked if they had studied in body-related fields, all of the participants described some form of body-based learning. However, their responses indicated a wide variety of exposure, ranging from formal training to personal learning experiences as a client, patient or group member in somatic-oriented psychology, different types of exercise and meditation, as well as alternative and allopathic approaches to medicine and healing. Responses included the following: nursing, naturopathic medicine, kinesiology, homeopathy, flower medicine, acupuncture, magnetic healing, massage, Feldenkrais, breath work, energy and psychic work; yoga, Pilates, dance, voice, music and drumming;

somatic-oriented psychology, transpersonal psychology, Bio-energetics, trauma work, alcohol and drug detox, and emotional release work; and body image presentations. More in-depth questioning would be needed to track the type, level, and length of body-based educational experiences and to differentiate experiential learning from formal training.

Table 6

Education	***Number of participants***
BA degree (in progress)	1
BA	3
PhD	2
ND	1
Body-based	7

Employment status and occupations. All of the participants were currently employed, most of whom worked in multiple positions. Six out of the seven participants worked for organizations; five of which were also self-employed; one of whom described herself as semi-retired. One woman owned her own business and was entirely self-employed. Occupations included the following: operations and personnel manager; training performance consultant and workshop facilitator; clinical psychologist, faculty member, and president/founder of eldercare company; naturopathic physician and faculty member; event planner; receptionist and spa attendant; and psychotherapist, supervisor, and faculty member.

Table 7

Employment	***Number of participants***
Employed	7
Self-employed	5
Semi-retired	1

Economic status. Participants' annual incomes ranged from $15,000 to $200,000, with most of the women earning between $50,000-$75,000/year. However, it is important to note that some of the women reported individual income, whereas others reported joint

income, as noted. One participant reported earning $15,000/year; one earned $45,000/year; another explained that her income varied between $35,000-$85,000/year (averaging $60,000/year); one reported a joint income of between $50,000-$75,000/year; another earned approximately $70,000/year; one reported between $100,000-$150,000/year; and finally, one reported a joint income of approximately $200,000/year.

Table 8

Income	***Number of participants***
10,000-24,999	1
25,000-49,999	1
50,000-74,999	3
75,000-99,999	0
100,000-149,999	1
150,000-200,000	1

Physical health issues. In order to gain an understanding of the participants' physical health status, all of the women were asked if they had any biological or medical conditions that impacted their physical abilities. Their responses highlight the complexity of the topic and diverse range of subjective understandings of what constitutes a "physical health issue." Thus, this category seems to point toward a topic worthy of further investigation unto itself in future research. Two of the women reported no physical health issues; although one added that she did have environmental and food allergies. Five of the women reported a range of conditions impacting their physical abilities, most of which appeared to be chronic symptoms with varying degrees of debilitation. One woman reported a knee problem, proudly declaring that (at 71 years old) it was her first physical limitation. At 67 years old, another participant described a "nagging little pain" caused by arthritis in her foot, which limited her ability to walk long distances. At 65 years, another participant reported painful arthritis that limited her ability to use her hands, as well as sporadic migraines. At 57 years old, one participant described

an ongoing recovery process after facing a life-threatening accident (in her 30s) that resulted in numerous broken bones and brain injury. And finally, at 46 years old, another participant discussed chronic health issues after having hip surgery (at 11 years old), then breaking her ankle (as a young adult) which resulted in several problematic surgeries. This participant also reported her weight (approximately 400 pounds) as a health condition, as well as emotional issues related to childhood abuse, illustrating the understanding that health reflects an interconnection between body, emotions, and relationships. Based on participants' descriptions, there appeared to be no clear association between age and severity of health conditions; except that arthritis was reported by two of the older women. However, it is important to note that these women, given their background and the fact that they agreed to participate in this study, probably have a much higher than average level of "body awareness" and thus may report symptoms or conditions that others might ignore. It is also worthwhile to consider that this section captures perceptions of health, not objective measurements.

Table 9

Physical Health Issues	***Number of participants***
Yes	5
No	2

Participant Intersectionality

The above sections have focused on the separate demographic categories of the participants, specifically to highlight and address distinct areas of diversity – and lack thereof – within this sample of women. However, women's identities are not defined by individual categories. Identity is shaped by the fusion of many social factors and given meaning by the unique subjective experiences of each person based on that fusion, as well as the social attitudes and practices linked to those categories. Each participant

within this sample of women does not only identify as being a woman; she also identifies as white, African-American, or Hispanic; as heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual; as divorced, married, or single; as a mother or not; and the nuances go on. Indeed, for any one woman, her "woman-ness" (whatever that means for her, because there are diverse understandings, as illustrated in the results to follow) may not be central; instead her race or sexual orientation may be the root of her sense of identity; and this may be fluid, changing depending on context or her own evolving development.

For all these reasons, it is important to attend to the intersectionality of the participants (Cole, 2009). In other words, how have these many different demographic categories come together to create a whole complex person whose identity is influenced by multiple factors? Crenshaw (1994) astutely points out the importance of identifying the ways in which race, sexual orientation, class, or other identities shape the meaning of gender. In this way, the current study has attempted to create a foundation for contextualized and nuanced understandings of women's experiences of fulfillment rather than broad generalizations.

Table 1 in Chapter Three outlines intersecting social categories for each participant. As illustrated in the table, the sample of women in this study comprise many diverse combinations of age, race, sexual orientation, relationship and motherhood, education, employment, economic, and health statuses. The significance of these over-lapping social identities and roles in relation to fulfillment and the body are illustrated throughout the findings discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

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