LEARNING THAT MEETS LIFE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF

TEACHING WITH SECULAR SPIRITUAL PEDAGOGY

by

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Date_____ May 22, 2019_____

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in
Teachers College, Columbia University

2019

ABSTRACT

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Renee Lee Owen

Spirituality is an elusive, hard-to-define quality that is impossible to measure. Spirituality is often conflated with religion, even though the two have different definitions and purposes. For these reasons and more, spirituality is regularly an overlooked or taboo topic in K-12 education. Likewise, spiritual pedagogy, which considers spirituality a central aspect of education, is often ignored. Yet empirical research is revealing that humans, at our core, are spiritual beings. Studies indicate that when education affirms the animating life force of humans and focuses on the development of people's inner lives, humans thrive. Thus, the phenomenon of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy is well worth investigating. First, however, the phenomenon needs to be understood. Therefore, this study explored the following research question: *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?*

The research employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to illuminate the essence of the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy.

I conducted two in-depth interviews with each of seven K-12 teachers who employ secular spiritual pedagogical practices. Interviews were conducted as open-ended guided conversations, asking teachers to describe what spirituality looks and feels like in their classrooms and to reflect on how they make meaning of their experience. In addition, four of the teachers participated in a focus group to reflect on the early findings.

The findings indicated that teaching with spiritual pedagogy is an extra-ordinary spiritual learning opportunity that some teachers consider to be a spiritual path. Findings are organized into The Path of Spiritual Learning, a conceptual map with six essential themes. The Path is framed by the theme of Meaning and Purpose, has Connection as a foundation, and moves toward Authenticity. The themes on The Path are synthesized with transformative learning theory, Heron's theory of personhood, whole person learning, and the developing theoretical understanding of authenticity within the field of adult learning. Recommendations for K-12 and adult education are to evolve toward a participatory, or relational, epistemology, where the interconnectedness of life is the guiding ontological framework – one that values the flourishing of all human life as the central goal of education.

DEDICATION

To unconditional love.

To my husband.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is an often-overlooked aspect of education in the United States. In many circles, spirituality is a taboo topic, but especially in education. One reason for this is the conflation between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is often thought to be synonymous with religion, and due to the strict separation of church and state in the United States, spirituality in the classroom is often considered off-limits (Watson, De Souza, & Trousdale, 2014). Despite this obstacle, in the last 15 years, the importance of spirituality has gained more attention and some acceptance in education (Lippman & Keith, 2008). The explosion of the mindfulness movement has certainly brought attention to the benefits of secular spiritual practices in the classroom and given it legitimacy, partly due to the large number of scientific studies showing evidence of its wide-ranging benefits, including academic benefits (Flaxman & Flook, n.d.; Lantieri & Goleman, 2008; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Reber, 2014). The popularity of mindfulness, which is typically portrayed as non-religious or secular, seems to be at least partially responsible for a new acceptance and new epistemological understanding of spirituality as different than religion by scholars (Benson, 1997; Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Scales, 2003; Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, & Dowling, 2008). More teachers are beginning to embrace secular spiritual pedagogy, and there is an increased use of spiritual practices in the classroom

(Johnson & Neagley, 2011; Watson et al., 2014). Fostering spirituality is gradually being considered an educational goal. However, spirituality is an elusive concept that, by its very nature, is somewhat indescribable.

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The Phenomenon – Its Context, Aspects, and
Importance as a Research Problem

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There is no one agreed-upon definition of spirituality. With little consensus about what spirituality is, the concept of infusing spirituality into pedagogy is an ambiguous one. Having concrete examples of how teacher-practitioners who are experienced with spiritual pedagogy infuse spirituality into their classrooms would be useful for expanding the practice of spiritual pedagogy, designing teacher training programs, and developing teacher-support systems. This study aimed to use phenomenological research methods to investigate and better understand the experience of teaching with secular spirituality.

The Jewish God indicated that His name was too sacred to even be said aloud. Metaphorically, this speaks to the nature of spirituality, which is impossible to articulate or define fully. The dictionary definition of spirit is "an animating or vital principle held to give life…" (Rayburn, 2012, p. 188). The Latin root is the same as breath or wind. Indeed, to define spirituality is like capturing the wind.

Perhaps the most accurate definition would be "that which is completely non-material, and therefore indefinable and un-nameable." Considering current research that reveals spirituality to be integral to being human, the best all-inclusive definition of spirituality I could venture is: "Relating to the nonmaterial aspect of the human life-force," and I would leave it at that. Anything else that gets tacked on, in my opinion, is reductionist in that it limits the possibilities of what is spiritual.

Not surprisingly, measuring spirituality is as elusive as defining it. Despite the obstacles to measuring and studying spirituality, several researchers have tenaciously worked to open the field in order to study the benefits of spirituality and spiritual development in practically all aspects of life. There are over 100 surveys and tools to measure religiosity, spiritual transcendency, spiritual service, or other psychological human qualities that relate to spirituality, such as happiness (Friedman, Krippner, Riebel, & Johnson, 2012). Of course, these researchers have had to provide definitions of spirituality in their papers. Currently, one of the accepted definitions comes from Lisa Miller (2015), who defined spirituality as "an inner sense of living relationship to a higher power (God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator, or whatever your word is for the ultimate loving, guiding life-force)" (pp. 6-7).

This study is specifically about secular spirituality embedded into pedagogy. Secular spiritual pedagogy is a teaching practice where spirituality is a central aspect of the teacher's epistemological stance and teaching practice, in a manner that is not religious. Secular spiritual pedagogy infuses a consideration and even reverence for the spiritual aspects of people and of the lifeworld as a central component. This study used several terms, such as *contemplative education*, *spiritually responsive pedagogy*, *holistic education*, and *spiritual pedagogy* interchangeably with *secular spiritual pedagogy*.

Some schools that infuse secular spirituality into their practices consider themselves to be "holistic." The particular holistic school the researcher works at is Rainbow Community School (RCS). RCS has a 40-year history of including spirituality as a central theme in its pedagogical model, which is called *The Seven Domains*: spiritual, mental, social, emotional, creative, natural, and physical (Pilla, Willmore, & Owen,

2017). Holistic education maintains that these domains cannot be compartmentalized but are inherently interconnected at all times. It also maintains that without the spiritual domain, the other pieces of holistic education do not hold together (Gellel, 2014). Miller and Nozawa (2005) believed *"the defining aspect of holistic education is the spiritual"* (p. 2).

The Gap in Phenomenological Research on Secular Spiritual Pedagogy

Chapter II highlights aspects of spiritual pedagogy and talks about its validity as a study topic. The literature review includes a summary of the beneficial results of including spiritual pedagogy into the K-12 classroom. However, there are no known studies specifically on the phenomenological description and meaning of secular spiritual pedagogy, as this study set out to investigate.

The research evidence on the importance and benefits of spirituality has increased dramatically in the last two decades. As mentioned, studies specifically on mindfulness have exploded. (In Columbia University's library database, 3,847 scholarly articles on mindfulness were published in 2016, compared to only 351 in 2000.) Most of the research on the broader aspects of spirituality is psychologically based – showing, for instance, that spirituality is a core aspect of being human. The summarized literature in Chapter II provides strong evidence that individuals with healthy spirituality benefit physically, mentally, and intellectually. Additionally, scientists and philosophers alike find that society benefits from a spiritual population, as spirituality tends to correlate with positive ethical development and overall thriving.

In the educational domain, there has been an increase in studies on spirituality, and, again, particularly on the aspect of mindfulness. However, scholarly studies on spirituality in education (a broader concept than mindfulness) are still somewhat rare. In 2016, 124 scholarly articles on the subject of "spirituality" AND "teach*" were found, and 166 in Proquest with "Education" as the subject and "spiritual*" in the title, but the vast majority of these studies did not involve spiritual pedagogical practices, and most were actually about religious education rather than secular spiritual practices.

Of the relevant scholarly studies, most have been about the outcomes and benefits of spiritual pedagogy rather than the experience. This study used phenomenological inquiry to uncover the experience of teaching with secular spiritual practices, so that we can first understand the lived experience of these teachers – the phenomenon – before conducting further research on its benefits. After conducting multiple searches in Proquest and in four education databases, I found only three phenomenological studies on the topic. They were each about teachers who learned to practice mindfulness or other spiritual techniques for their own benefit (rather than teaching the practices to their students), and the effect the practices had on their well-being or their teaching practice.

This study built upon some of these previous studies, using phenomenology to better understand the lived experiences of teachers who infuse spirituality into their pedagogy. Multiple searches using various combinations of a variety of terms, such as "lived experience," "phenomenology," "holistic," "mindfulness," "spirit*," "teach*," "contemplative," and so on, did not turn up even one phenomenological study on teachers' experience with actually using spiritual pedagogy with children.

The aim of this study was to help readers understand the experience of spiritual pedagogy. I listened to the voices of seven teachers from various schools tell about how such classroom experiences look, sound, and feel; how they prepare themselves as teachers for such teaching, what they learn from the experience, and what meaning they gain from it. Previous studies, which are reviewed in the literature in Chapter II, primarily document the results of new programs where a school or individual teachers were introduced to a mindfulness or other spiritual technique, and the resulting changes in attitudes or behaviors were documented. In contrast, this study was conducted with a sample of teachers who are veteran practitioners of spiritual pedagogy. They have been immersed in schools that have used secular spiritual pedagogy for years. This study is meant to peel away the layers of the experience of these teachers and unveil the mystery of what they do.

To summarize, this study is unique in that:

- it is phenomenological, so it captures the lived experiences of teachers (rather than the empirical results of spiritual pedagogy);

- the sample is composed of teachers who are veterans in spiritual pedagogy (rather than newly learning it);

- it is about the teachers' experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy (rather than about the teachers' own spiritual practice).

Purpose of the Study and the Approach

The purpose of this study was to research the lived experience of teachers who infuse spirituality into their teaching. A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was

used to interview seven teachers – all who teach within the kindergarten through 12th grade context. The teachers interviewed were asked to describe their experience of teaching with secular spirituality. Eidetic themes were developed that capture the lived experience of each of the participants, while highlighting any compelling divergences from the common themes. The researcher carefully analyzed and interpreted the teachers' remarks with the intent of using inductive reasoning to find correspondence with adult learning literature. The research study addressed the question: *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?*

Hermeneutical Phenomenological Research Method

Since the purpose of the study was to examine and understand the lived experiences of teachers using spiritual pedagogy, a qualitative research method was required (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that seeks a deep understanding of what a particular lived experience is like. Edward Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was based on the philosophical underpinnings of Descartes and other philosophers who sought to understand how knowledge comes into being. Since Husserl's work, phenomenology has been taken up by researchers seeking to understand human life and delving into the meaning of the human experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology – the strand used in this research – goes beyond describing a particular experience to also interpreting the meaning behind an experience. In this case, the hermeneutic phenomenological method is used to understand the experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy. It provides phenomenological description of that experience and interprets the meaning behind that experience for the teachers.

The Rationale and Significance of the Study

Spirituality is largely misunderstood and avoided in American schools. Despite building evidence of the benefits of secular spiritual pedagogy, most K-12 school teachers do not include spiritual pedagogy in their classrooms, depriving children of the opportunity to develop their spirituality, and depriving society of the opportunity to benefit from a spiritually developed populace.

While studies demonstrating the results and benefits of spiritual pedagogy are critically important, we must first understand what the experience of the phenomenon of teaching with spirituality is in order to practice it, support it, and create effective policy around it. Thus, this study was conducted using phenomenological inquiry, a research method that captures lived experiences. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as "pre-empirical, pre-experimental, and pre-statistical; it is experiential and qualitative. It sets the stage for more accurate empirical investigations by lessening the risk of a premature selection of methods and categories" (p. 12). He went on to call it the "'science of science' since it alone investigates that which all other sciences simply take for granted (or ignore), the very essence of their own objects" (p. 46).

Since secular spirituality is so seldom used in American education, teachers, leaders, and policymakers may not understand what it is, or they might have assumptions about spiritual pedagogy that are inaccurate. Furthermore, they may have tacit assumptions about how education is, or should be, conducted that may be unchecked. This study gives the reader the opportunity to view education through the lived experiences of teachers who infuse their daily pedagogy with secular spirituality. This may, or may not, be a completely new lens through which to view education for the

reader. If it is new, I ask the reader to try on the lenses – or perspective – of spirituality while reading this study and re-envision what education might be if spirituality were a core aspect of the K-12 educational experience.

It is my hope that this study might serve as a foundation for further research on spiritual pedagogy and could lead to more teachers using the practice by providing an understanding of the phenomenon and the meaning behind it. Ultimately, a phenomenological study such as this could provide "action sensitive knowledge" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 21) to help inform the institution of education on how to take action to be a more human and, therefore, a more humane institution.

The Researcher

> When I was an undergraduate psychology major, I was fascinated by the relationship between the researcher and the research. Why did people choose to study the topics they did? By the time I got to grad school, I thought I had it all figured out. People generally studied what they were lacking or deficient in….
>
> Nowaways, I prefer to think of this 'deprivation theory' more as a 'concordant self-perfection' model. We yearn to become more of what we already are. We are works in progress.
> ~Robert Emmons (2007, p. 209)

It probably comes across clearly to the reader that the researcher is passionate about spiritual pedagogy. This dissertation was not conducted in the unimpassioned, sterile voice of the post-positivistic researcher, but rather the subjective and intra-subjective voice of a human, within the evolving participatory inquiry paradigm (Heron & Reason, 1997). To this effect, I chose to use first person language.

Yes, I am both passionate about and fascinated with the topic of spirituality, but not only for my own ever-needed growth, as the quote by Emmons implies (although I

find the study of spirituality greatly rewarding). I am passionate about spiritual education as a lifelong activist and a critical theorist. As a systems-thinker who is actively searching for justice in the world, I believe that education, when performed with heart, has the power to change just about everything for the better.

Currently, I am a doctoral candidate at Columbia University, Teachers College in the AEGIS program – an adult learning and leadership program. I am studying how adults learn and develop.

I began my educational career as the founder of a small, rural charter school in a uranium-mining town on the Colorado/Utah border called Paradox Valley School (PVS), where I was executive director for 8 years. As a public school, we did not use the term *spiritual pedagogy* for our work, but at PVS I witnessed how an education full of authenticity and heart has the potential to uplift a legacy of deep poverty.

Since 2007, I have been the executive director of Rainbow Community School (RCS), a preschool through 8th grade (P-8) private school in Asheville, North Carolina, founded in 1977 by leaders in the Sufi movement with spiritual pedagogy at its core. I entered Rainbow long after it had gained a reputation for being a leader in the contemplative educational movement. Recently, RCS opened Rainbow Institute, dedicated to doing research in secular spiritual pedagogy, training teachers, and making holistic education a national movement.

When I first took the executive director position at RCS, I immersed myself in training to understand spiritual learning and how to embed it in education. I attended the ChildSpirit conference in 2007. At this intimate conference I was inspired by Joseph Chilton Pearce (*Magical Child*) and Jean Houston (*The Possible Human*). I had dinner

with Rachel Kessler (*The Soul of Education*) and Aostre Johnson, the first executive director at Rainbow. Aostre is now an internationally renowned researcher and professor in heart-based education – author of *Educating From the Heart*. I took a 2-year course called "The Inner Life of the Child" at Timberlake farm outside of Greensboro, North Carolina, which was co-founded by Thomas Berry, where I learned about eco-spirituality. There I got to know Tobin Hart, author of *The Secret Spiritual Life of Children.* Another founder of Rainbow and previous head of the Healing Order of the Sufis, John Johnson, turned me on to reading Ken Wilber and *Integral Life Practice.* Soon after, I stumbled upon the work of Rudolf Steiner and received a 2-year Waldorf Foundations certificate.

Years later, I think it is safe to say – after directing one of the nation's premier contemplative schools for 10 years, publishing a little essay-journal called *Heart of the Matter*, and founding an institute for researching and training teachers in holistic education – that I am somewhat of an expert on spirituality in education. Therefore, I was astounded when one of my Ed.D. cohort members at Teachers College asked me, "What is spirituality?"…and I realized I could not explain it. I realized that my work in spiritual pedagogy had become so second-nature to me that I did not really know how to articulate my tacit knowledge. Thus, this research challenged me to bracket out my own assumptions and understanding as much as possible, in order to unveil the experience of others. *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?*

Hermeneutic phenomenological research asks the researcher to perform a paradoxical act – while being passionate about one's topic of research, at the same time the researcher attempts to "bracket" her own assumptions and expectations about the topic in order to discover the features and meaning of the experience in its most raw and

unadulterated form. Therefore, I sought to view the experience of spiritual pedagogy like a child seeing this phenomenon for the first time. After first collecting the raw data regarding the experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy, only at the end of the process did I seek to analyze and interpret those meanings and their associations with adult learning theory through a wholly inductive process, or "reductive" process. The end result, I awaited to discover. Thank you, dear reader, for embarking upon this journey with me.

Assumptions

First, I assume, as Lisa Miller (2012) put it, that "spirituality is understood as ontologically real" (p. 1). In fact, not only is it real, but spirituality is a core aspect of human development, and possibility the very thing that makes us human. I assume that spirituality is ever-present, even though it may not be recognized, or it may be underdeveloped. I assume that spirit is life itself – the life force that quietly operates inside and outside and around our daily existence. Spirituality, for me, is an awareness of that life force, an honoring or reverence for it, or an intentional enhancement of it.

I assume the purpose of K-12 education is to help each child thrive (Benson et al., 2012; Lerner et al., 2008), thereby naturally creating a flourishing society. For some, this may seem like an obvious assumption, but the mission of the U.S. Department of Education is essentially about preparing students for the global marketplace or, in other words, preparing them for work in the material world. This mission is not synonymous with individual thriving, nor does it say that education's purpose is to better society as a whole. The concept of thriving is much wider than being able to hold down a job.

Thriving is a holistic concept that implies the ability of an individual to attain self-actualization, referring to a concept popularized by Maslow (1994). People who are thriving have found meaning in their lives and live out that meaning. As for society as a whole, a flourishing society as a target for education sets a high bar. Each reader may picture something quite different when they envision a flourishing society, but the point is not about the exact outcome, so much as the perspective that education is not about merely individuals competing for what they need, but individuals learning and working together in community.

I assume that spiritual pedagogy is a practice that is highly beneficial to enhancing education and beneficial in creating an educational system that would help each child thrive. This study is not about empirically proving the benefits of infusing spirituality into the curriculum. Indeed, literature on those benefits are already available, as I summarize in the next chapter. This study is about understanding the experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy.

As a student of adult education, I assume that teachers of secular spiritual pedagogy are learning. There are different ways and qualities of learning, but I assume that due to the reflective nature of spiritual pedagogical practices, the teachers in this study are not only learning but are conscious of their learning. This study aimed to uncover more about what that experience is like.

Finally, I assume that religion and spirituality are two different concepts. They do sometimes appear together. Religion, for example, can be useful for creating discipline and fellowship around spirituality. Likewise, spirituality can breathe life and authenticity into religion. Therefore, it is important to clarify that while I view them as separate

concepts, they do often coincide. This study, however, is about spiritual practices that are secular, or without religion.

Conclusion

It requires courage to conduct scholarly research within the spiritual realm. Spirituality and science are often considered mutually exclusive concepts, and "spiritual science" an oxymoron. Many, if not most, educators either do not associate spirituality as being an aspect of the K-12 classroom, or they keep their own spirituality privately tucked away. Through this dissertation, I aimed to build credibility for spirituality as an educational issue. I aimed to use hermeneutic phenomenology to uncover the mystery of spiritual pedagogy. I ask the reader to examine, hopefully with any prior assumptions or biases put aside, the lived experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy. This is also an opportunity for educators who long to "come out" about their own inner lives to examine the spiritual lives of the teachers of spiritual pedagogy in this study and to see if they recognize some of their own humanity.

Just as phenomenology humanizes, rather than objectifies, the phenomenon and the participants being studied, it also humanizes the researcher. Therefore, this dissertation is composed in first person voice.

In reading the researcher's background and assumptions, it is important to remember that although the phenomenon being studied is around teaching children, the study is about the lived experience of the *teachers*. What are the teachers in this study learning? What are they feeling? What is important to them? In the findings, the researcher aims to bring the reader into the hearts and minds of the teachers in this study

and to live vicariously, within these pages, the life of these teachers who practice spiritual pedagogy.

Definitions

Spirit: An animating or vital principle held to give life (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spirit).

Spirituality (researcher's personal definition): An awareness and sense of connection to spirit (or life force), an honoring or reverence for spirit, or an intentional enhancement of it.

Spirituality (formal definition): "An inner sense of living relationship to a higher power (God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator, or whatever your word is for the ultimate loving, guiding life-force)" (Miller, 2015, pp. 6-7).

Pedagogy (formal definition): "The art, science, or profession of teaching." (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pedagogy).

Pedagogy (as defined by hermeneutical researcher, Max Van Manen): "Pedagogy is the activity of teaching, parenting, educating, or generally living with children, that requires constant practical acting in concrete situations and relations" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 2).

Spiritual Pedagogy: Putting the term *spirituality* together with *pedagogy* means teaching in a manner where spirituality is "centered" rather than marginalized – where the sacred is held as a core aspect of each child's inner life, the teacher, and the classroom community. A teaching practice whereby honoring the spiritual aspects of

people and of the lifeworld is a central consideration. Synonyms: contemplative education, holistic education, spiritually responsive pedagogy.

Secular: Without reference or deference or devotion to a particular religion; non-sectarian.

Mindfulness: One aspect of spirituality. Specifically, "the awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 4).

Transcendence: "To feel transcendent is to know ourselves beyond the limits of the physical or ordinary self, as part of the greater universe" (Miller, 2015, p. 53.)

Essence: "A linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 39).

Hermeneutics: "The theory and practice of interpretation" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 179).

Lifeworld: "The world of lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 182).

Lived Experience: "The way that a person experiences and understands his or her world as real and meaningful. Lived meanings describe those aspects of a situation as experienced by the person in it" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 183).

Phenomenon: "The central concept being examined by the phenomenologist. It is the concept being experienced by subjects in a study, which may include psychological concepts such as grief, anger, or love" (Creswell, 2007, p. 236).

Phenomenology: "The study of lived experiences. Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to

transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 9, 36).

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In a phenomenological study, the reader must first have a picture of what the phenomenon is that is being studied in order to provide enough context to understand the lived experiences that are reported in the data. Therefore, the first part of this chapter is a short literature review describing the phenomenon of spiritual pedagogy as the researcher understood it at the onset of this study and its relevance in the field of education. The second part of this chapter explains hermeneutic phenomenology, its aspects, its history, and the rationale for using it for this study of the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy.

Aspects of Secular Spiritual Pedagogy

Secular spiritual pedagogy may include a wide range of practices. Below are several characteristics of secular spiritual pedagogy that may be included in a classroom where spirituality is a core aspect of education.

Connection

Secular spirituality commonly points to "connection" as a definition of spirituality. Hay and Nye (2006) defined spirituality as relational consciousness. Rainbow Community School (RCS), a leader in the field, defines connection in four areas:

Connection to Self: We grow through inner discovery.
Connection to Community: We learn through relationships.
Connection to the Natural World: We serve through stewardship.
Connection to the Spiritual: We honor all that is sacred.
(www.Rainbowcommunityschool.org)

Educators who value connection to self plan activities that allow children to consider their inner lives.

Teachers who particularly value connectedness with others develop an open and loving "holding environment" (Drago-Severson, 2004) and psychological safety (Edmondson, 2006) in their classroom. They recognize that learning occurs best when students can safely be vulnerable with one another and therefore try to develop deep personal connections.

Teachers who value connection to the natural world picture all of life as interconnected, and they help their students experience that connection in various arenas, including nature (Johnson & Neaegley, 2011, p. 9). They may take their students into nature as much as possible, and they may give students solo time in nature so children can develop a personal relationship and sense of oneness with the natural world.

Connection to the spiritual is all-encompassing. Teachers who value a sense of the sacred value a sense of reverence in their classroom. They may do this through secular ritual or simply through an attitude of respect for life, love, and spirituality.

Ethics and Service

Educators who have a particularly ethical and moral definition of spirituality often focus on educating for social change (Johnson & Neagley, 2011). They see individual spirituality as being a force that can bring a higher collective consciousness.

In Elizabeth Tisdell's (2003) study of 31 educators who felt that spirituality was influential in their philosophy and approach to education, participants spoke passionately about the importance of their spiritual development in having compassion for others. "Emancipatory spirituality" could be described as empathy in action (Tisdell, 2003). Indeed, spirituality can bring a strong sense of liberation, both individually and when applied socially. Teachers with this spiritual emphasis may see teaching as a sacred calling and are likely to include service and social action into their curricular activities.

Social Emotional Learning and the Quest for Wholeness

Holistic education values social and emotional learning (SEL). Teachers in schools that do not openly embrace spiritual pedagogy but that emphasize the importance of social emotional learning, might sense that SEL touches the human spirit. Spiritual development is sometimes described as a search for wholeness (Tisdell, 2003), meaning moving the self toward greater and greater authenticity. The question has been asked if spiritual development is simply moving toward psychological well-being (Koenig, 2008). Teachers who value social emotional spirituality will provide opportunities for students to reflect on their thoughts and behaviors.

Meaning Making, or Existential Practice

Teachers who recognize the need for students to search for the deeper meanings in life might base their curriculum around existential questions. These teachers might encourage their students to hold paradox or question whether there is absolute truth. Palmer (1998/2007) wrote that only highly developed people are capable of "both/and" thinking. Systems thinkers advocate for the need for both/and thinking in order to solve

the world's most pressing problems. At younger ages, simply providing children with the opportunity to embrace awe and wonder is an existential pedagogical practice.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is sometimes described as contemplation – the ability to watch one's self through one's higher self. It might also be simply remaining silent to allow "what is" to be and to explore one's inner realm. Parker Palmer, a foremost writer on spirituality in education, advised, "Don't speak unless you can improve upon the silence" (as quoted in Kaufman, 2011, p. 85).

Based on MRI studies of people who are in a meditative state, activity in the middle prefrontal cortex area of the brain increases with meditation, bringing self-control and a sense of peace. Stress and biological craving decrease (Miller, 2015, p. 78). The positive results of mindfulness practices on teachers and students are well documented (Flaxman & Flook, n.d.; Lantieri & Goleman, 2008; Meiklejohn, 2012; Reber, 2014).

Non-Rational Ways of Knowing

Non-linguistic ways of knowing manifest from presentational experiences in which people use creative expression to access knowing and inspiration (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Often after taking a pause from the pressure to produce constantly, patients in one particular clinical study reported that they could get a "fresh view on reality from the view of their higher self" (Miller, 2015, p. 75). Insight and sudden inspiration can spring forth when the spiritual self can be accessed. Teachers who encourage this type of spiritual development take time for play and creative experiences (Johnson & Neagley, 2011).

Mystical Ways of Knowing

While this may be outside the comfort zone of most adults, children who have

not been socialized to consider mysticism as dubious easily access "special knowing"

(p. 201), as Miller (2015) described it. A child might happily tell a parent that she "talked

to grandma" who is deceased, for example. Teachers who embrace the mystical will view

their students not just as pupils, but as souls.

Clarity About Secularity

Tisdell (2008) briefly defined religion as being about "an organized community of

faith, with an official creed, and codes of regulatory behavior" (p. x), in comparison with

spirituality, which is more about an individual personal experience or connection with the

sacred. According to Tisdell, "everyone has spirituality (including agnostics and atheists),

but not everyone has a religion" (p. x).

Kendler, Gardner, and Prescott (1997) found that while humans are innately

spiritual, religion has no inheritable traits at all, but is entirely a result of environment. In

other words, out of humans' natural need for spiritual devotion we become religious, not

the other way around.

Religion and spirituality are two distinct concepts that can be completely separate

or overlapping, as seen in Figure 1. Religion is not necessary to have spirituality, but it

can be a helpful framework for some people. Paul Houston (2011) likened religions to

tubes through which spirituality may (or may not) flow. They are containers. Likewise,

spirituality can exist without religion.

Figure 1. Spirituality and religion as two different concepts that can overlap

Most confusion around the concepts of spirituality and religion seems to be a result of assuming that the two always come together. When referring to spirituality, many people are naturally, even unconsciously, making a mental association with the religion with which they are most familiar, because the two have become inextricably associated together in their psyche. As Tisdell (2003) pointed out, "human beings construct knowledge and meaning in powerful and often unconscious ways through image, symbol, and ritual" (p. 55). Religion imposes powerful archetypes on the human psyche. Many religions give people, especially young people, the impression that spirit can only be accessed through religion.

But more and more, especially as membership in religious organizations is declining (Turnbull, 2002), people are finding spirituality through means other than religion. In European countries, such as England and Sweden, as few as 10% of the population now considers themselves to be religiously affiliated, but this decline in religious membership has coincided with an increase in people affirming spirituality (Mahoney & Krumrei, 2012; Watson et al., 2014).

The context of this study was conceptualized as schools that consider themselves to be secular, but spiritual. These schools are not parochial or affiliated with any religion. Teachers in these schools may from time to time refer to particular religions for several possible reasons. One might be to honor the ethical and religious backgrounds of students. Students are typically allowed to talk about their family religions in these schools. Another is to discuss historical, social, or cultural aspects and appreciation around religions (but these schools are careful to touch on a wide variety of religions, rather than focus on one strand of religion). Teachers in these schools may also explain where the influences for spiritual practices that have been appropriated in a secular manner come from. Thus, while they may express appreciation for various religions in a cultural sense from time to time, they never "teach" a doctrine, particular religious beliefs, or particular religious practices.

Clarity About the Relationship Between Spiritual Pedagogy and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is currently a popular aspect of spirituality that centers on practices such as meditation to focus the brain and to somatically entrain the body. Perhaps one reason mindfulness has become so popular is because of the successful secularization of mindfulness, which makes it more palatable than aspects of spirituality that may ring of religion. It is easier to call something "mindful" than "spiritual" in sensitive circles. Another possible reason for the mindfulness trend is its easy colonization by the "achievement culture," as it has been possible to use post-positivistic science to prove the concrete value of mindfulness practices in increasing student achievement (Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, Houlihan, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2016), improved student behavior (Flook,

Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2015), reducing stress (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), and creating a more productive work force in the corporate world (Byrd, 2016).

It is important that mindfulness is not assumed to be synonymous with spirituality. This study is about *more* than mindfulness: It is about spirituality, which is an *umbrella* term under which mindfulness is one aspect. Note that in the list of aspects and practices that are included with spiritual pedagogy, mindfulness is merely one of the aspects.

The Importance of Spirituality in K-12 Education

In North America, some of the literature on spirituality in education refers to Palmer's (1998/2007) classic *The Courage to Teach* as a book that broke the silence on the importance of spirituality in education. Early in his book, Palmer talked about the "sociological imagination," a term from C. Wright Mills, that simply means that to really understand what is happening in a culture, one cannot just look around with everyday lenses. "By putting on new lenses, we can see things that would otherwise remain invisible" (Palmer, 1998/2007, p. 27). Viewing spirituality as an inherent part of education may require seeing something that might have been previously invisible to some readers.

A Crisis of Materiality in K-12 Education

Buckminster Fuller observed, "99% of who you are is invisible and untouchable" (https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/r_buckminster_fuller_165610), yet in education we seem to be putting far more emphasis on the observable, which may be the smallest part of who we are. The post-positivist policy approach to public education, where only

quantifiable measurable outcomes are tracked or funded, has reduced the meaning of education to instrumental learning, and marginalized the value of relationships and other "invisible" concepts, especially spirituality (Baez & Boyles, 2009). Of course, it is virtually impossible to measure spiritual development, which is probably one reason it has been passed over in dominant educational philosophy. As the popular quote goes, "Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted" (http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/05/26/everything-counts-einstein/).

Rudolf Steiner in 1906 stated:

If you know only the laws of ordinary life, then you know only a small part of life. The major portion lies in those things hidden in life – that is, hidden from ordinary senses. People will soon recognize that to live better they must study the hidden worlds, since the materialistic approach leads to a crisis in nearly every area, but primarily in health care and education. (Steiner, 1996, p. 41)

Indeed, over 100 years later we seem to be in the middle of a crisis in American education. *The Huffington Post*, for example, has a whole page dedicated to articles on the "Educational Crisis," with articles ranging from the massive dropout rate, to the racial achievement gap, to parents protesting testing policies (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ news/education-crisis/).

Redefining Education as a Soulful Endeavor

Spiritual educators maintain that we have to redefine the purpose of education by embracing its original meaning of "edu-care," meaning to "draw out" (Bass & Good, 2004), which is more akin to finding one's true self. Bleyl and Boverie (2004) described their study of 20 "wise" people who were chosen for their sample based on their reputations as wise in their communities. Their study revealed wholeness, including an integration and connection with all of humanity and nature, as a theme among these

highly developed wise individuals. This study indicates that if wisdom, in addition to mere knowledge, were the goal of education, we would see different – more soulful – results. "Faith not knowledge will be the source of renewing energy [in education]" (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004, p. 12).

An education that puts developing the whole person on a path toward wisdom as its goal would have spirituality at its heart. Gregory Cajete (2004), a Pueblo educator, described the indigenous, integrated purpose of education as being a pathway:

> If one really thinks about what is entailed in the Western concept of education and then tries to describe it in native language, you would be hard-pressed to find anything that would be equivalent to what we would define as education today. Generally, what you would find in native languages would be words for moving along a pathway or a description of the concept of pathway or road. You would find words that would be connected with 'remembering to remember' something that is important to you. You would encounter words that would describe the process of knowing or coming to know, which includes in the Tewa language, 'hah-oh' or 'to breathe in.' (p. 107)

In the Tewa language, the process of gaining an education is almost synonymous with the words that mean "breathing in life" (p. 103). A renewal path for education as an institution could be going back to the source of wisdom – remembering the soul of education – breathing life into it.

To be clear, the intent of re-establishing spirituality in education is not that it *feels good*, or other "fluffy" (Johnson & Neagly, 2011) assumptions that may be made, but by recognizing spirituality as the core of being human and therefore the core of education, we can overcome the educational crisis by breathing life back into the classroom.

Studies Find Spirituality to Be Inherent in Humanity

Multiple research teams have identified some of the chemical, genetic, and structural features in the brain (primarily in the occipital and parietal lobes) that carry spirituality, or "transcendency" (Miller, 2015).

Zohar and Marshall (2000), upon examining the electronic circuitry in the brain, found that our spiritual intelligence seems to be located throughout the brain as a unifying feature. In a genetic study (Hamer, 2004), the "god gene" was discovered, and several neurologists have located the "god-spot" in the temporal lobes (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Several other studies have determined spirituality to be an inheritable trait, including several twin studies featuring thousands of twins. In one particular study of 1,902 female twins, Kendler et al. (1997) found that transcendence is its own unique inborn personality trait, creating an evolutionary drive for personal devotion, which is 29% inheritable. Psychologist Piedmont (2012), through the use of the ASPIRES survey tool, found spirituality to be as statistically inheritable as any of the big five personality traits of conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism.

These studies emphasizes that at our core, humans are spiritual beings. As Miller (2015) declared, "It is our birthright!" (personal lecture). This further explains why spirituality is so hard to define – it is such an inherent aspect of who we are that is it like the air we breathe. It is all around us and inside of us, and therefore impossible to see objectively.

As a Core Human Trait, Spirituality Is at the
Core of Healthy Human Development

Many important studies have found that children who develop broader spirituality live happier, more secure, and more productive lives. Some of the most dramatic evidence has emerged from the lab of Lisa Miller (2015), head of clinical psychology at Columbia University, Teachers College and recently named among the 10 Leading Women in Science & Technology by Hearst Publications. Through her own research and the meta-analysis of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies involving thousands of children, adolescents, and adults, Miller has determined that spirituality is at the very core of being human. As Miller (2015) put it, "Biologically, we are hardwired for a spiritual connection" (p. 29), and therefore, spirituality should be at the core of our learning and development.

From the very beginning of life, we see that a baby actively seeks out a transcendent relationship by bonding with the parent. As the child grows, if her spirituality is nurtured and shared with a parent or other caring adult, the child learns from the adult how to access her transcendent relationship independently, protecting her through adulthood. The "joint effect of spirituality and parenting" was revealed in a study of 60 mothers who were genetically prone to depression and their 151 offspring. Miller's studies showed this "shared spirituality is between three to seven times more protective than *any* other sources of resilience against depression known to the medical or social sciences" (p. 87).

"Connectedness" and spirituality seem to create a virtuous circle – the more spirituality one experiences, the more connectedness one feels, and vice versa. After reviewing the results of their grounded theory inquiry of 38 children, Hay and Nye

(2006), in their landmark 1998 study on children's spirituality, renamed spirituality "relational consciousness" because the theme of relationships, or connection, was overwhelmingly synonymous with spirituality in their findings.

Miller pointed to the extensive studies that scientists such as Larry Dossey (Schwartz & Dossey, 2012) have conducted on the *sympathetic harmonic resonance* of humans, showing innate connectedness. Miller recalled one such study by Achterberg and colleagues in Hawaii, where researchers

> ran fMRI on traditional healers at work simultaneously on a patient located in a different room. As the healer started to work, a distinct pattern emerged in the fMRI that moments later appeared identical in the fMRI of the patient down the hall. (p. 122)

Achterberg's demonstration of sympathetic harmonic resonance provides physical, empirical evidence of the spiritual relational consciousness of humans. This and other studies summarized here indicated that a recognition of our natural soulful connection is a basic human need, without which human development would be incomplete.

When Spirituality Is Denied in Education…

While the natural connectedness and spirituality of humans are inherited, it can sometimes seem like our current educational system dampens or even reverses the natural benefits that come with our native spirituality. A culture of competitiveness, rather than connectedness in schools, can train children to turn their backs on their spirituality. Even worse – with children spending more waking time in school than anywhere else, and most schools not even addressing spirituality, much less nurturing it – children lose this most crucial developmental window. Logically, just like any human trait, spirituality needs to be strengthened, or the brain prunes it.

> Due to socialization in our current society, heart knowing is often blocked, denied, or disintegrated. This leads to enormous suffering, as we can become cut off from other people, our higher selves, and even our transcendent relationship. (Miller, 2015, p. 78)

In demonstration of this, Miller's book, *The Spiritual Child,* tells about a study with 252 teens in junior high and high school from a wealthy suburb of New York City. According to psychologist Suniya Luthar, who led the study, this was a fairly homogeneous group of youth who appeared to "have it all," and she followed them longitudinally into adulthood. Miller described the typical families in the study:

> …fathers were largely absent. Mothers…were found to be perfectionistic…and anxious to meet the mark of outward success. Luther noted very little concern with goodness or morality in family goals and time together. (p. 224)

Miller cited this study to capture "The effect of being parented without feeling unconditional love and spiritual direction," and instead "striving for outward success to please parents...enormous resources are put into performance goals. The net effect is neglect for spiritual development in children and teens" (p. 224).

Luthar's (Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman, 2013) study of these teens demonstrated superficial and even negative features as being the top traits that most predicted popularity in school: for girls, physical appearance, particularly thinness, was the top factor; and hostile girls, or "mean girls" was the second greatest predictor. For boys, substance abuse was first and an "exploitive attitude toward women" was the second predictor (Miller, 2015).

For this group of teens, rates of substance abuse were greater than that of teens in the inner city, as were their rates of depression. These same teens, when followed longitudinally into their adult years, displayed *eight times the national rate of sociopathy,*

which Miller defined as "exploitive and manipulative behavior to a clinical degree" (p. 226) as well as exceedingly high rates of prescription drug use.

Just as the adolescent's brain and body is surging, so is her spirituality. Teenagers need their spirituality to be nurtured, or the results are disastrous, as indicated in Luthar's study above. Thrill-seeking is natural during this age, and if that thrill-seeking is without a spiritual rudder, it goes awry. Rachel Kessler (2011) spent years developing the PassageWorks program to provide non-religious spiritual rites of passage rituals for youth, because without meaningful spirituality to guide youth through transitions, youth find their own rites of passage: the first time drunk, first sexual conquest, even first murder (Sanders, 1994). Our teenage suicide rate is arguably a direct reflection of the emptiness of life experienced by teens who lack spiritual guidance.

The Positive Impact of Spiritually Supportive Educational Environments

In contrast to the devastating effects of spiritual denial, according to Miller's extensive research, teens who have the benefit of "a personal sense of spirituality are 80 percent less likely to suffer from ongoing and recurrent depressions and 60 percent less likely to become heavy substance users or abusers" (p. 209). She added:

> Girls with a sense of personal spirituality are 70 percent less likely to have unprotected sex. In the entire realm of human experience, there is no single factor that will protect your adolescent like a personal sense of spirituality. (p. 209)

These are astounding figures!

Yet, how many teachers are trained to help students develop their personal sense of spirituality? Psychologically speaking, the most important job of the teenager is individuation. Miller talks about the intense need for spiritual individuation in the teen,

which is partly done through having open conversations about life's big questions (Miller, 2015). *Who am I? Why am I alive? What happens when we die?* Schools are the most important place for individuation, and students desperately need schools to be safe, open places to have these conversations (Johnson & Neagley, 2011). Out of a youth's successful spiritual individuation comes spiritual agency, the ability to be in touch with one's higher self and to act on and speak out for that sense of rightness (Miller, 2015). No amount of formalized character education in schools can make up for a lack of spirituality.

When the child reaches adolescence and their peers and social settings become more influential in sociological development, the "general ecology" of the school is the most important factor in the "successful spiritual individuation in adolescents" (Miller, 2015, p. 251), according to a study of thousands of teenagers out of the University of North Carolina.

The Effect of Spiritual Pedagogy on Teacher Well-Being

In addition to the documented benefits of spirituality for students, several studies have demonstrated that teachers also benefit from spirituality. One of these studies (Frias, 2015) documented the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, and pointed out that teaching has become such a high-stress job that mindfulness could be a critical tool in helping teachers to not only cope, but to thrive in a stressful environment (Frank et al., 2013; Jennings, 2011; Lantieri et al., 2011; McCloskey, 2015).

In multiple studies using qualitative methods, researchers have indicated that when teachers have the opportunity to practice mindfulness, or to develop their whole selves or their inner lives, they are more present for teaching (Lantieri, 2001). In one

particular study with nine teachers who went through Parker Palmer's Inner Life of the Teacher program, teachers reported that they could secure more authentic relationships with students and better reach them (Hofman, 2012; Palmer, Jackson, Jackson, & Sluyter, 2001). After participating in mindfulness-based programs, teachers in many studies reported a greater awareness of emotional reactivity and the ability to self-regulate when stressful events arose in the classroom (Flook et al., 2013; Frank et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2011; Lantieri et al., 2011; Napoli, 2004; Singh et al., 2013). Of course, when teachers are happy and focused, they can better serve their students, meaning teacher benefits are generally transmitted to the children.

The Potential Impact of Spiritual Pedagogy for Society

Even more important than the individual benefits, children who develop their spirituality also develop positive character traits that contribute to a flourishing society. The most thorough research in this area is from the Search Institute (Benson et al., 2012), having worked with a sample of over 7,000 youth, ages 12-25, from around the world and from every major religion. Healthy spiritual development – defined by the Search Institute as "affirming the importance of a sacred or transcendent force and the role of their spirituality or faith in shaping everyday thoughts and actions" (p. 473) – is attributable to concern for others, including a propensity to perform service for others.

Unfortunately, spiritual development is so lacking in the majority of our schools that most adults have not had the opportunity to individuate spiritually and do not have a strong sense of their spiritual life. As referenced above, when we do not nourish our brains' natural spiritual intelligence, our capacity to develop spiritual traits at important developmental windows, such as the spiritual capacities that desperately need to be

developed during adolescence, is greatly diminished, leading to a society full of adults

with potentially stunted spiritual development.

In *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999), His Holiness the Dalai Lama

characterized the misery in the world as falling into two main categories: those of natural

causes and those of human origin.

> Wars, crime, violence of every sort, corruption, poverty, deception,
> fraud, and social, political, and economic injustice are each the consequence
> of negative human behavior. And who is responsible for such behavior?
> We are. (p. 25)

He called for a "spiritual revolution" in order that humans may work toward solving these

problems that essentially stem from ethical degradation. He was also careful to point out

that he was not expecting religion to solve these problems: "religious belief is not a

guarantee of moral integrity" (p. 27). "This is why I sometimes say that religion is

something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are these basic

spiritual qualities" (p. 22). He explained:

> Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit –
> such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a
> sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which bring happiness to both self
> and others. (p. 22)

He clarified that a spiritual revolution is not a call for "a life that is somehow

otherworldly." Rather, "it is a call for a radical reorientation away from our habitual

preoccupation with the self" (p. 23).

One of the women in Tisdell's (2003) study of 31 higher education teachers who

use spirituality in their teaching said that her spirituality, her activism, and her approach

to education were based in her belief "that the purpose of education is the improvement

of the human condition through both individual and social change" (p. 6). According to

the Dalai Lama (1999), spirituality needs to be at the center of that change.

What sort of world do we wish to live in? If we desire a world where humans take

care of the planet and take care of one another with justice, a world where humans can

access insight and inspiration to solve problems, a world that is meaningful and fulfilling,

then it would make sense that we train our teachers to develop these spiritual qualities so

they may convey them to our children. As teacher Zoe Weil claimed in her Ted Talk,

"The world becomes what you teach" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5HEV

96dIuY).

Understanding Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The second part of this literature review covers phenomenology, beginning with

an introduction to phenomenology, then provides a short history of phenomenology, and

finally discusses specifically the type of phenomenology used in this study – hermeneutic

phenomenology.

Introduction to Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena. The etymology of the term means to

appear, or to shine light on (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Phenomenology is a

human science approach to studying the essence(s) of a human experience. It seeks to

reveal the nature or meaning of a lived experience (Van Manen, 1990).

The basic concept of phenomenology appears deceitfully simple because

phenomenology generally seeks to peel back the layers of experiences that are so human

that they may even seem mundane. Studies on topics such as loneliness and parenting are

prime examples of phenomenology's utility in understanding experiences and knowledge that most of us tacitly take for granted. Spirituality is commonly taken for granted because it is such an intrinsic part of our everyday experience. Furthermore, spirituality is so difficult to define that phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for studying a spiritual experience because it does not seek to *define* the experience, but to *describe* it.

Phenomenology aims to examine objects and events as they are in their purest "pre-reflected upon" form, or noema (Moustakas, 1994). It attempts to capture an experience before the limitations of language have adulterated it. The noeme has to be described in words, of course, but only after the phenomenological research has taken a deep dive into examining its essence, should description of the noeme be executed.

Whatever the topic of a phenomenological study, it always asks the question, "What is it like to be human?" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5). According to Van Manen's phenomenological perspective, "A human being is not just something you automatically *are*, it is also something you must try to *be"* (p. 5). Phenomenological research seeks to understand what the nature of "being human" is so we can be *more* human and, thereby, more humane. Van Manen framed phenomenological research as an act of questioning (like any research), but as an intentional act of becoming more a part of the world, rather than setting the researcher objectively apart from the world. "Then research is a caring act…and if our love is strong enough, we not only will learn much about life, we also will come face to face with its mystery." When we love someone or something, we want to understand it; we want to help it and to preserve it; we want to do it good. This is why the phenomenological researcher should be passionate about her phenomenon of study.

Phenomenology is always rooted in the lifeworld (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher seeks experiences from life, not abstract ideas, opinions, or concepts. It drills into events that may seem like the smallest, most inconsequential occurrences – the tiniest parts of life, and through these *parts* it searches for an understanding of the *whole*. In that, it seeks to make us more thoughtful, more aware, more awake. By examining the specifics of another's experience, we see themes that are "shared and communal" (Smith et al., 2013). We come to learn more about ourselves and all of humanity. As Schleiermacher (1998) put it, "Everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themself" (pp. 92-93).

Core Features, Techniques, and Processes of Phenomenology

To understand phenomenology, one must become acquainted with its core features: epoche, bracketing, reduction, and eidetic themes.

Epoché. Epoché originates from the Greek language, meaning to abstain (Moustakas, 1994). The epoché is a process of examining the researcher's assumptions, biases, and taken-for-granted tacit knowledge. While epoché is impossible to accomplish in total purity, it encourages an attitude of bracketing in which one looks upon a phenomenon with as fresh a stance as possible in order to practice reduction. Moustakas (1994) called the epoché an approach of having an "open ego" (p. 41).

Bracketing. The epoché is accompanied by bracketing. Think of bracketing as a mathematical procedure, where the operation inside the bracket is attended to first. In phenomenological research, the object, or phenomenon, is bracketed and attended to (with epoché), while attention to perceptions, opinions, and concepts outside the brackets is suspended (Moustakas, 1994).

Reduction. Reduction is the "practice" at the core of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Reduction, as opposed to deduction or induction, is a form of "reasoning" that uses insight to arrive at understanding the essence of a phenomenon. It requires an attitude of awe and wonderment with the world, accompanied by a stripping away of one's preconceived notions, biases, and expectations, and also setting aside any theories or prior learned conceptions, so that one can see the phenomena in a "non-abstracting" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 185) manner. The goal of reduction is to see the essence, or *eidos,* of an experience, often called the experience in its "pre-reflective" state. Reduction brings to consciousness the themes, or essential structure and meaning, of an experience. It is somewhat akin to bringing the subconscious to the conscious.

Eidetic themes. Eidetic comes from the Greek word *eidos* and means essential. In the case of phenomenological study, eidetic refers to essential themes. Phenomenology strives to identify what is universal in a human experience – or what is commonly *human* – and to describe that in eidetic themes, thereby identifying the structure of a phenomenon. This distinguishes phenomenology from other human sciences, such as ethnography, which looks for appearance rather than essence (Van Manen,1990).

What Is Hermeneutic Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is the description of a lived experience and hermeneutics is the interpretation of a text (in this case, the text of what teachers express and the written text of the researcher). Hermeneutic phenomenology puts the two together.

The earliest forays into phenomenological research sought pure description. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as a later evolution of phenomenology, also interprets and analyzes descriptions to find meaning. Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that

"human beings are sense-making creatures" (Smith et al., 2013), and therefore pure phenomenology without hermeneutic interpretation is practically impossible.

Historical background of phenomenology. Phenomenology was originally a philosophical pursuit. Philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is generally credited as the pioneer who developed phenomenology as a science (Moustakas, 1994), which he called "transcendental phenomenology" (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2013). Heavily influenced by philosophers such as Descartes, Husserl founded phenomenological science on the principle of going "back to the things themselves" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 1). He noted that humans too naturally categorize and fit things into pre-existing concepts, while taking for granted the *lifeworld* – a term with which Husserl is credited (Moustakas, 1994). When Husserl coined transcendental phenomenology as a "method," he also coined or appropriated much of the phenomenological terminology, such as bracketing and eidetic reduction. Husserl's work is highly cognitive in nature, and ultimately about understanding how knowledge comes into being (Butler-Kisber, 2010). An existential philosopher, Martin Buber, took a warmer approach to human understanding, emphasizing openness, empathy, and love (Butler-Kisber, 2010). The works of Husserl and Buber were accompanied and followed by a number of philosophers and human scientists who had varying approaches to phenomenology, but all stayed true to four principles:

1. An emphasis on wisdom, or philosophy, rather than science.

2. The concept of epoché, or setting aside preconceived judgments about reality.

3. The raising of consciousness through intentionality – that is, intensive focus on an experience.

4. Using a parts/whole approach, where meaning is found within eidetic themes (wholes) derived from individual experiences (parts). (Creswell, 2007)

Today, the two primary strands of phenomenological study are the transcendental strand and the existential strand (Treadwell, n.d.). The studies of Clark Moustakas, a researcher who has been a leader in the transcendental strand, are primarily descriptive, with an epistemological goal of constructing knowledge about experience. The existential strand is ontological, meaning the primary goal is to understand "being." The writings of existential philosopher, Heidegger, underpin this strand, which rejects the notion that the inquiry can be completely free from suppositions, and also find that human language is naturally embedded with meaning. Therefore, existential phenomenology took a hermeneutic turn, where interpretation of the lived experience is embedded in the method. Van Manen (1990) defined and enlivened the hermeneutic phenomenological method with his book, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. This study was based on Van Manen's hermeneutical approach.

Van Manen's strand of hermeneutic phenomenology. Since this phenomenological study follows in the tradition of Van Manen, and he is such a skilled phenomenological writer, this section uses direct quotes of his, taken from *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Van Manen, 1990).

1. "Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience" (p. 9)

Phenomenology asks, 'What is this or that kind of experience like?' It is different from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it. So phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world. (p. 9)

2. "Phenomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness" (p. 9).

Consciousness is the only access human beings have to the world. (p. 9)

Whatever falls outside of consciousness…falls outside the bounds of our possible lived experience. (p. 9)

A person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience. For example, if one tries to reflect on one's anger while being angry, one finds that the anger has already changed or dissipated. Thus, phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective. (p. 10)

3. "Phenomenological research is the study of essences."

Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes some-"thing" what it *is*. (p. 10)

Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structure, of lived experience. A universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience. (p. 10)

4. "Phenomenological research is the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them" (p. 11).

Phenomenological human science is the study of lived or existential meanings; it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness. (p. 11)

5. "Phenomenological research is the human scientific study of phenomena" (p. 11).

The term 'science' derives from *scientia* which means to know. Phenomenology claims to be scientific in a broad sense, since it is a systematic, explicit, self-critical, and intersubjective study of its subject matter, our lived experience. (p. 11)

6. "Phenomenological research is the attentive practice of thoughtfulness" (p. 12).

Thoughtfulness is described as a minding, a heeding, a caring attunement. (p. 12).

As educators we must act responsibly and responsively in all our relations with children, with youth, or with those to whom we stand in a pedagogical relationship. (p. 12)

7. "Phenomenological research is a search for what it means to be human."

We come to a fuller grasp of what it means to be in the world as a man, a woman, a child, taking into account the sociocultural and the historical traditions that have given meaning to our ways of being in the world. (p. 12)

8. "Phenomenological research is a poetizing activity" (p. 13).

When you listen to a presentation of a phenomenological nature, you will listen in vain for the punch-line, the latest information, or the big news. As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study. To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result.… So phenomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetizing project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world. (p. 13)

Clarity around what hermeneutic phenomenology is not. While it is important to understand what hermeneutic phenomenology is, it is just as important to understand what it is not:

- Hermeneutic phenomenological research is not empirical.

- It does not seek to solve problems. It searches for meaning.

- It is not ethnographical, meaning that it does not try to describe the structure or themes of a particular place or people, but rather a phenomenon.

- It does not search for generalizations. Eidetic themes are not generalities, but universal human experiences described through specific particularities. (Van Manen, 2016)

Summary and Conclusion

Spirituality, according the literature reviewed in this chapter, is essential to human learning, development, and well-being – both at the individual level and for societal and ecological flourishing. An education that nourishes spiritual development, often called contemplative education or holistic education, is multifaceted with many aspects. Mindfulness, social emotional learning, and service learning are three examples of the many potential aspects of spiritual pedagogy. No matter what activities or emphasis the teacher of spiritual pedagogy employs, the research indicates that an *attitude* of relational consciousness (Hay & Nye, 2006) is central to the pedagogical practice. "Relational" is a theme throughout this study.

The second half of Chapter II was a literature review about phenomenology, which is the study of the lifeworld. Hermeneutic phenomenology, the strand of phenomenology used in this study, aims to better understand the essence of being human. It aims to raise the consciousness of humanity through an intensive focus on human experience in regard to a particular phenomenon – in this case, the lived experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy.

The researcher (and the reader) of hermeneutic phenomenology are asked to bracket prior assumptions with epoché and allow the essential themes of the study to be revealed through the reductive process. Later in this dissertation, the findings in Chapters V through VIII use a phenomenological parts/whole reductive approach – meaning both the details and nuances of the noeme (the parts) and the wide view of the big picture (the whole) of the phenomenon – to capture the phenomenon in the form of eidetic themes. The idea is to portray the "essence" of the experience. In this study, as in all hermeneutic

phenomenology, the research aims to raise human consciousness by bringing to the

conscious level insight into the meaning of life.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

This study is a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry in which seven teachers who infuse secular spiritual pedagogy into their classrooms were interviewed twice, using a semi-structured scheme. Interviews were transcribed, and transcriptions were the primary text which was analyzed using a hermeneutic approach. Eidetic themes were developed, accompanied by quotes from participants in the presentation of findings in Chapters V through VIII. The research addressed the question: *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?*

Chapter III provides an explanation for how hermeneutical phenomenology was employed in this study of the phenomenon of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy. The chapter provides an overview of the study design, the participant sample, data collection procedures, the process for analyzing and reporting results, validity considerations, and limitations of the study.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a Research Methodology

This inquiry used a qualitative approach, meaning "an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their

natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

A research paradigm is a collection of the intentions, values, and perceptions that underlay a research attitude and methodology. It is important to know the paradigm a researcher is operating with, because it helps to define the assumptions that guide one's research. These assumptions can range from the purpose behind collecting the data, to how participants are treated, to the perspective a researcher uses to analyze the data and assemble conclusions. Essentially, the research paradigm is the lens with which the researcher is seeing. I could, for example, ask the same question in an interview to the same interviewee, but have completely different intentions and rationale for asking that question, and also interpret the response wildly differently depending on the research paradigm from which I am operating. This particular research employed a hermeneutic phenomenological method within a participatory perspective, so it is important to examine what that means and how it affected this study.

The Participatory Paradigm

As a qualitative inquiry method, phenomenology is unique. As a "methodless method" (see below), it can be exercised in such a number of ways that its paradigmatic underpinnings vary, depending on the intentions, perceptions, and approach of the researcher. The early transcendental phenomenological approach of Husserl, while being concerned about the construction of knowledge, has a bit of a post-positivistic taint to it, as he was trying to find objective reality, albeit through the subjective experiences of people. Heidegger, in contrast, is considered a constructivist. Since Heidegger is the

philosopher upon which much of contemporary phenomenological inquiry is based, phenomenology often works within the constructivist paradigm. What does this mean?

First, when examining a research paradigm, one has to be clear about what one is searching for – or what type of reality the researcher expects to find. This assumption about reality defines the ontology of the researcher and explains the assumptions of the researcher regarding what "truth" she hopes to discover. In the case of the constructivist research paradigm, the researcher is not looking for a single truth or reality. Instead, the researcher understands reality as a phenomenon that is constructed differently by different people from differing perspectives. Reality is relative, or local, meaning "it depends" on who you are and how you see the world. Second, we want to know how the researcher perceives the quest for knowledge, or how knowledge comes to be known. In the constructivist paradigm, knowledge is subjective – again, "it depends" on who is constructing it; but in any case, it is constructed, and reconstructed, by human individuals in relation to one another and their situation. Third, we must consider the assumptions the researcher makes about methodology – or how she thinks about the strategy and steps to constructing knowledge in her study. Constructivism uses a dialectical approach, where the research is constantly in conversation with the researcher and with the research participants, whose voices are just as valid as the researcher's. New (sometimes opposing) thoughts build upon one another in a hermeneutic effort to construct understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The epistemology of hermeneutic phenomenological studies is subjective. Hermeneutic phenomenology generally has a relativistic ontology, where knowledge and truth are considered relative. As Smith et al. (2013) conveyed: "Interviews are not held to

be 'the truth' – but they are seen to be 'meaning-ful'" (p. 66). The subjectivity of constructivist phenomenology is also demonstrated in the epoché – a state of being in which the researcher is allowed to have subjective feelings but makes a focused effort to recognize those feelings in order to put them aside during the inquiry. Additionally, interviewees are active participants (Smith et al., 2013) in constructing the knowledge. Moustakas (1994) referred to his subjects as "co-researchers." In fact, in following with this tradition, my follow-up email to participants was influenced by a template from Moustakas' book in which the researcher thanked the co-researchers for "their contribution to the knowledge of the nature, quality, meaning, and essence of the experience being studied" (p. 109). (I did not use the term *co-researcher* because I feel it is not authentic to call the participants literal co-researchers, as I think the term implies they would then have a more active role in analysis and other segments of the research process. The point here is in the sentiment.)

The research approach for this study is conceptualized using the values of the participatory paradigm, which builds upon elements of constructivism. I studied how individuals engage in meaning making. However, this study transcends constructivist notions in that it is situated within the phenomenological concept of inter-subjectivity, in which humans are viewed as having a "shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 17). Van Manen (1990) referred to the "situated person" (p. 19), a term he used to indicate a person is situated in her own circumstances and local reality, yet with shared, *universal felt experiences* (Heron, 1992, 1998b).

Going one step further, the spiritual nature of this study implies that the research and participants are not only learning and acting together, but they are learning and acting in conjunction with a transcendent force. Because of the spiritual nature of this study, there is an underlying epistemological belief that as the individual constructs knowledge, she is acting on the cosmos and, concurrently, the cosmos is acting on her (Heron, 1998b), making knowledge co-constructed between the individual and the divine – a concept that is aligned with the more cosmic notions of the participatory paradigm.

This notion of co-constructing knowledge with the cosmos also implies that the ontological underpinning of this study – or the understanding of the nature of truth and being – is that truth is continually co-created between human consciousness and the divine. Heron (1998b) used the term *entelechy* (p. 53) to describe the spiritual concept of becoming. Borrowing from the language of Jean Houston (1987), Heron described entelechy as the code for all that was and all that will ever be. For an individual, entelechy is essentially what is possible for that person's life. One may develop into anyone and accomplish anything (and probably much more than ever imagined). Yet, at the same time, all that is possible was seeded long ago. The phrase "long ago" is only helpful in aiding our limited, linear human sense of temporality in understanding the concept of entelechy, because it is an eternal concept, where long ago is also far ahead. It is timeless.

Thinking about entelechy brings up an ontological question about fate: Is the future destined or designed? The concept of co-creation is that the future is co-created between humans and a divine force. Again, as one acts on the cosmos, the cosmos acts on her, and vice versa.

Research operating with a participatory approach is typically in the form of action research, where all participants are researchers working together to solve, or to act on, a problem or situation they all have in common. This study is an exception in that the participants are not directly working together. Most of them do not even know one another. Instead, it is a cosmic thread that connects us; and it is expected, or at least hoped, that the methodological process of this study will engage participants in co-creating spiritual knowledge.

Finally, what sets a participatory approach apart from a purely constructivist approach to research is the purpose and values, or axiology, behind the study. Participatory research intends not just to learn for the sake of knowledge, or science, but to act on the world in such a way that lives are improved and humans are, ideally, emancipated from the chains of anything that limits their life force, whether that be an individual's or group's psychological health, an institution's bureaucracy, or perhaps a yet undiscovered attitude that pervades or clouds society's potential. This study sought to co-create an inter-subjective reality with participants for the purpose of recognizing the lifeworld and assisting in human flourishing, which aligns its values, or axiology, with the participatory paradigm (Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As described in the researcher assumptions, I view secular spiritual pedagogy as a beneficial practice that breathes life into education, and ultimately contributes to a flourishing society.

Van Manen, the hermeneutic phenomenologist who has most influenced my inquiry approach, did not use the term *participatory* when discussing the paradigmatic underpinnings of his strand of phenomenology. However, in *Researching Lived*

Experience, Van Manen (1990) provided an eloquent argument that consisted of three reasons for why he viewed hermeneutic phenomenology as "critically oriented action research" (p. 154). First, he asserted its critical orientation by arguing that all original thinking is ultimately revolutionary in that its awareness to human life is, at heart, emancipatory. Second, it is a "philosophy of action" (p. 154), especially when researching in the pedagogical realm, as its goal is to improve thoughtful pedagogic knowing and acting – thereby, aligning with the practical component of participatory research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Third, when conducting a phenomenological study around pedagogy, Van Manen claimed the purpose is for "personal engagement" (p. 154) and "thoughtful learning" (p. 155) that betters the lives of children. It is "done *by* rather than *for* the people" (p. 156), "in practical service to people's lives" (Heron & Reason, 1997). Additionally, the goal of hermeneutical phenomenology is never to generalize. Instead, it is a "theory of the unique" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 155), recognizing that every child, every teacher, every situation is unique, while at the same time intimately human.

The words of Peter Reason (1994), pioneer of participatory action research, best capture why a study involving spirituality is particularly well suited to the participatory paradigm:

> One characteristic of the participatory worldview is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the wider natural world. To make whole also means to make holy: another characteristic of a participatory world view is that meaning and mystery are restored to human experience, so that the world is once again experienced as a sacred place. (p. 10)

The participatory research paradigm is so well suited for this study that I see the conceptual model for this study as being a marriage between the study of spirituality (in

this case, secular spiritual pedagogy), hermeneutic phenomenology, and participatory

research (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The conceptual model intersecting hermeneutic phenomenology, participatory research, spirituality

A Methodless Method

Phenomenology has been called a methodless method. Researchers new to

phenomenological inquiry are advised to be "wary of 'methodologism' (Salmon, 2002) or

'methodolatry' (Chamberlain, 2000)" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 40). In some ways, it appears

to be as much of an art as a science. Phenomenological theorists say the underlying

philosophy of phenomenology, or an "attitude" of phenomenology, is more important

than method (Smith et al., 2013). Indeed, there is no method, in a technical sense, and

every researcher is encouraged to be creative (Smith et al., 2013). However, hermeneutic

phenomenology does have a systematic series of activities that the researcher conducts along her way. In fact, the activities themselves can help create the proper attitude. It is important to understand that the activities are not prescriptive, and would typically be conducted in an iterative fashion rather than in a linear fashion.

1. "Turning to the nature of lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31)

Van Manen compared the phenomenological research study to a quest. Like many tasks in life, it requires a certain mindset, in this case, one of thoughtfulness, passion for the topic, and openness to discovery (rather than preconception). We must become wholly attentive to our topic. We develop a research question and truly "mind" it.

2. "Investigating experience as we live it, rather than as we conceptualize it" (p. 30).

This is sometimes called "turning to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1991/80, p. 166, as cited in Van Manen, 1990, p. 31). In whatever manner we collect our data and observe the phenomenon, we must set aside all preconceived notions and look at it afresh. Our quest is to re-learn about the noeme. Data may be collected in a wide variety of ways. In the case of this study, teachers were interviewed, and the "texts" those interviews produced were read for interpreted meaning. Anecdotes, in particular, were read closely as each word or sentence may be revealing. A wide variety of data can be considered helpful for phenomenology, including fictional texts and film (Van Manen, 1990, 2015; Smith et al., 2013). To capture the essence of a phenomenon, the researcher is not just gathering texts on factual events, but any possible description that can be recognized as shared human experience.

3. "Reflecting on the essential themes" (VanManen, 1990, p. 32).

The act of reflecting on data to find eidetic themes requires searching into the soul of the phenomenon through reduction. The researcher looks for essences in what may first appear to be very simple or taken-for-granted statements. Van Manen (1990) encouraged researchers to "invent an approach" (p. 173) to discovering essences, as there is no prescribed format or systematic method to finding or writing themes. There are no particular coding system or steps to uncovering the truth. To a large degree, the researcher must depend on creativity and inspiration.

4. "The art of writing and rewriting" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 32).

Writing is not a simple regurgitation of data and organization of it. The act of writing is part of the research. It brings voice (or vocative expression) to the phenomenon. If the researcher is open and inspired, the voice of the phenomenon will speak through the writing, making the writing a part of the experience.

5. "Maintaining a strong and oriented [relationship to the research]" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 33).

Strong phenomenological research remains attuned to the research question, with complete integrity. Without a strong orientation, there will be many

> temptations to get sidetracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculation, to settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations, or to fall back onto taxonomic concepts or abstracting theories. (p. 33)

6. "Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole" (p. 31).

The text should have "revealing power" (p. 33) – the power to reveal to the researcher and reader the "whatness" (p. 33) of the phenomenon. This requires attention to parts – or details of experiences – as well as dialogic conversation with the text to

arrive at interpretations. However, the researcher has to step back and also look at the whole so that the parts are sewn together into a whole picture.

Looking at these six activities, it is clear that the process of phenomenology is full of ambiguities. It is a process that requires the researcher to take latitude as intuition informs direction. It is a technique that requires a particular attitude, as much or more than it requires a particular method – thus, the label "a methodless method."

I hope this does not give the reader the idea that hermeneutic phenomenology is a free-for-all. In fact, it is very demanding. It requires the researcher to maintain absolute integrity in her phenomenological stance, as discussed in the section on research validity.

Rationale for Employing Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Husserl, the father of the phenomenological method, saw phenomenology as a "first order" (Smith et al., 2013) experience that science (a "second order knowledge system" [Smith et al., 2013]) needed to rely upon in order for science to first understand phenomenon. In other words, a phenomenological account of an experience would be a needed precursor to any scientific study of a topic (Smith et al., 2013).

Spirituality and the experience of spirituality, as discussed in Chapter I, are elusive concepts that are difficult to define. Spirituality is such an integral part of our everyday human experience that we ignore it most of the time. We might know when we feel an experience to be spiritual, but we may not be able to articulate what about that experience made it spiritual. Since spiritual experiences are impossible to define fully, they instead need to be *described.* Phenomenology is the perfect method for unveiling the experience of spirituality; as argued in Chapter I, a phenomenological study(s) of

spiritual pedagogy needs to be conducted in order to add a dimension to the discourse that is not provided by other qualitative and quantitative studies of spiritual pedagogy.

The rationale for conducting hermeneutic phenomenology was to uncover the essence of teachers' experience in using spiritual pedagogy. Rather than looking for mere appearances or a list of activities or pedagogical approaches, I sought to understand what the inner experience of the teacher is and what meaning it has for the teacher.

My hope is that once the phenomenon of teaching with secular spirituality is better understood, teachers who wish to use spiritual pedagogy in their classrooms will recognize what the experience is, and those in leadership positions or higher education might be better equipped to help teachers learn to embody it and use it in classrooms, and better understand how to support teachers in their spiritual pedagogical endeavors.

As an adult educator, I conducted this study with the assumption that teachers *are learning* from the experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy. Therefore, it was only after carefully analyzing and interpreting teacher remarks that I used inductive reasoning to compare the teachers' experience with my knowledge of adult learning theories. The intention was to see if the phenomenon of teaching with spiritual pedagogy has any intriguing relationship with adult learning. I wanted to know if the teachers' remarks would reveal anything about how the experience of spiritual teaching affects teachers' learning. This was a process of open discovery. While holding the integrity of having true epoché, I did not have any particular adult learning theory in mind before beginning the study. The process of referencing the eidetic themes from the study with adult learning theory shed light on *how* the teacher participants are learning and how their inner experience contributes to their learning.

Alignment of Hermeneutic Phenomenology With the Study of Spiritual Pedagogy

I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as the best research method that could adequately capture the final product, or end goal, of this research project – to discover themes present in the experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy and the interpreted meaning of that lived experience. In addition to the reasons already stated for choosing this method, there are also spiritual reasons. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as a process, is in harmony with the topic of spirituality for a number of reasons:

Hermeneutic phenomenology is an empathetic exercise – a spiritual act of being in relationship with another living being. When engaging in phenomenological interviewing, the researcher is expected to reflect on her assumptions about the topic, and as much as possible, to bracket out those assumptions in order to see the experience through fresh eyes with an open ego (Van Manen, 1990). Furthermore, she is to listen with wonder and openness (Van Manen, 1990) to the participating interviewee, in an expression of empathy and connectedness and to truly try to understand the interviewee's inner experience. Moustakas called this empathetic listening "co-presence" (p. 37). Many of these aspects of hermeneutic phenomenology – sustaining an open ego, attentiveness to empathy, and the cosmic concept of co-presence – have the familiarity of an inherently spiritual practice, or a practice of relational consciousness (Hay & Nye, 2006).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is existential in its nature. "Meaning making" is a common definition of spirituality. Thus, the hermeneutic strand of phenomenology, where participants seek meaning and the researcher embarks on a meaning making journey, is a perfect fit for the spiritual seeker.

The spiritual skills of insight and intuition are required by the researcher in order to interpret the texts of people's lived experience and to see into the essence of human experience. The researcher ideally "becomes one with" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 46) the phenomenon in order to identify with it.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a consciousness-raising exercise in that it requires a mindful awareness of the experienced world, and it is in the service of ethical action, with hopes of improving participants' lives.

Wholeness, as another meaning of spirituality, dovetails with hermeneutic phenomenology beautifully. By seeking meaning, we are looking for an understanding of how spiritual pedagogical practices bring wholeness to the classroom teacher and to the teaching experience. The phenomenological notion of parts and whole is spiritually alluring. As Goethe stated, "The particular eternally underlies the general; the general eternally has to comply with the particular" (as cited in Hermans, 1998, p. 785). In holistic education, the whole is equal to more than the sum of the parts. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the parts of people's stories weave together a whole picture that is a quantum leap beyond the parts, creating a communal story (Van Manen, 1990, p. 7). Hermeneutic phenomenology has a holographic quality (Smith et al., 2013), where each part, or holon, is a representation of the whole. Van Manen (1990) argued that we particularly need to pay attention to the whole in education.

Finally, hermeneutic phenomenology aids humans in completing a task that Steiner (2018) defined as the purpose of humankind – to achieve what the pure spiritworld cannot do without the work of human bodies. "Human life needs knowledge, reflection, and thought to make itself knowable to itself, including its complex and

ultimately mysterious nature" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 17). The human intellect, or the conscious reasoning mind, brings with it the ability for humans to ponder its very existence. This is incredibly important, because with human perceptivity enters the ability for the universe to reflect upon itself! With this perspective in mind, the phenomenological study is one of utmost spiritual purpose.

Overview of the Research Design

This hermeneutic phenomenological study examined the lived experience of infusing secular spirituality into teaching. The teachers represented in this study work within kindergarten through high school grades, and they are considered highly experienced practitioners in spiritual pedagogy. The research addressed the question: *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?*

Preparing the researcher with the proper phenomenological attitude is fundamental to conducting phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). Before beginning this study, I read multiple books on phenomenology and several examples of phenomenological studies in order to develop the proper mindset. Additionally, I successfully conducted a phenomenological interview. I also had supervisory support, as my dissertation adviser conducted his own dissertation using phenomenology.

Examining assumptions and, as much as possible, bracketing them out along with researcher bias, is another important first and ongoing step in the phenomenological process. Therefore, I shared my background and acknowledged my assumptions in Chapter I. Additionally, prior to beginning the interview process, I wrote a personal narrative about my experiences as a practitioner of spiritual pedagogy. Before each

interview, I prepared myself with a meditation to help me clear my mind and focus

on the present. I also maintained a reflective journal of "initial impressions, questions,

unresolved issues, and assumptions related to each participant, each interview experience,

and the data analysis phase" (Treadwell, n.d., p. 63). Throughout the research process, I

considered data from my personal narrative and my reflective journal, including the

stages of analysis and synthesis, where several personal reflections from my personal

data were included.

The primary data collection was through face-to-face interviews. I interviewed

seven teachers – all of whom teach within the kindergarten through 12th grade context.

Using an open-ended interviewing protocol, I asked about their experience of teaching

with secular spiritual pedagogy. Based on interview data, I carefully analyzed and

interpreted their remarks. Then, I developed eidetic themes that captured the lived

experience of each of the participants.

Before the study began, I recognized that, like all phenomenological studies,

developing and maintaining epoché could be my biggest challenge in this research

endeavor. Therefore, I was particularly careful to wrap validity measures into several

stages of this research design, which are highlighted in the validity section. The most

valuable of these validity measures was the help of critical peer reviewers. The criteria

for selecting these reviewers were threefold. First, they had to be scholars – Ph.D.s,

Ed.D.s, or doctoral candidates – who were familiar with scholarly research processes and

credible validity measures. Second, I did not want reviewers who were intimately

familiar with the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy so that they

could view the data and analysis without prior perceptions or expectations. Finally, they

needed to care. Specifically, I wanted reviewers who knew me well enough that they cared about my own scholarly endeavors and authentically wanted to help. Two fellow doctoral candidates from my AEGIS cohort at Teachers College volunteered to be peer reviewers.

The Study Sample

I sought a "reasonably homogeneous sample" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 3) for this study by using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) to select seven teachers who embed secular spiritual pedagogy into their teaching practice, and who had done so consistently for at least 3 years. In order to find commonalities among teachers' experiences that transcend the context, culture, and learning practices of their individual schools, I chose teachers from six different schools that are supportive of teachers practicing secular spiritual pedagogy (and no more than two teachers from any one school). I had anticipated all the schools would be private schools, as I did not know of any public schools that have consistently and openly adopted spiritual pedagogical practices beyond mindfulness. However, I found one teacher for the study who teaches in a public high school that is supportive of her practices. My criteria for selecting the veteran spiritual teachers were based on recommendations from leaders and colleagues at their schools who referred them as teachers who are exemplars in the way they infuse their practice with secular spiritual pedagogy, the researcher's personal knowledge of their work, and recommendations from experts in the field. In addition, I referred to each teacher's biography through his or her online bio (if one existed), pre-interview biographical information sharing, and resumes. In the case of referred teachers whom I did not personally know, I conducted a pre-interview by phone (or in person, if possible) to

determine if they met the criteria for the study and were open to the process, namely that they considered spirituality as central to their life and their teaching philosophy and practice.

In phenomenological research, interviewees are respected as active participants (Smith et al., 2013). A revealing phenomenological interview requires the participants to feel a part of the process, comfortable enough to recall stories, and able to share deep, personal insights. I am quite close to a couple of the teachers in the sample. This was an advantage, as I was able to share the purpose of the research easily so they were able to develop an affinity for the study, and because they were already comfortable with me and could safely be open and candid.

Alongside the advantages of personally knowing some of the research participants came disadvantages I had to address. Namely, I remained ever-conscious of my commitment to epoché. With the comfort of familiarity, I did not want to be lured into assuming that I knew what a colleague was saying or that I knew her intended meaning. To address this, I employed several strategies listed above, such as meditating before each interview to clear my mind and writing researcher notes about my assumptions and impressions. When analyzing the transcripts of known participants, I again meditated beforehand to be ever-intentional about reading their comments and stories with fresh eyes and an open ego. Additionally, I relied on critical feedback from scholarly peers – peer reviewers – who were not familiar with these colleagues to read these particular transcripts, my researcher notes, and my analysis to ensure that my own pre-perceptions and biases were not tainting the interview process or the analysis. Overall, I saw

interviewing colleagues as an opportunity to draw a fresh perspective on what we do and who we are on a daily basis – a quintessential phenomenological pursuit.

For the participating teachers with whom I was not close, I endeavored to create a sense of mutual familiarity and comfort by getting to know one another before the interview via a Skype chat and/or sharing tea or a meal together.

Methods for Data Collection

While phenomenological data collection can vary widely and include an assortment of data, this study concentrated on data from interviews with the teachers described in the sample.

I engaged the teachers in two interviews of about 90 minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured, comprised of open-ended phenomenological questions about the experience of spiritual pedagogy, followed by prompts, as needed.

The first interview opened with a short meditative experience, followed by a request to describe how events in the teacher's life led to teaching with spiritual pedagogy. After this biographical storytelling, I led each teacher in a visualization exercise intended to help participants release themselves from linguistic, propositional knowing so that they would be able to immerse themselves in a felt experience (Heron, 1992). The visualization exercise asked teachers to visualize a particular moment with their class that they felt was spiritual in nature. I asked them to describe their visualization with prompts such as what they saw, felt, and thought. The rest of the interview included only three core questions—asking them to describe their personal notion of spirituality, the experience of embedding secular spirituality into their teaching, and the meaning they made from these teaching experiences.

Because meaning making is a natural aspect of spirituality, I expected that participants would provide direct or implied meaning making commentary throughout interviews, and they did. However, as noted, the latter part of the first interview was more hermeneutic, with some prompts about their personal meaning making around spiritual pedagogy.

At least one week before the second interview, I used email to send each participant a transcript from the first interview. In the email, I suggested that participants read the transcript without judgment about their responses, language, or phrasing, but simply to get a better feel for the interview process as an aid to preparing for the second interview. I let them know that reading their transcripts would provide them an opportunity to give more thought to their experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy before the second interview; it would also give them the opportunity to make clarifications, corrections, or elucidations to the first interview either through email or during the second interview – which none of them did. Additionally, I asked the interviewees for feedback regarding my epoché (although I did not call it that). I asked them if they experienced any of my questioning and prompting as leading in any way.

The second interview followed about 3 months after the first interview for each participant, except for Edmond, the pilot interviewee, whose second interview was a year later. The structure of the second interview was similar to the first interview, with a few key differences. Before the interview I asked the teachers if they would be willing to open the interview by leading me in a short spiritual practice of their choosing and design. This turned out to be a rewarding experience that aided both of us in centering and freeing our rational minds, so we could more fully experience the interview. I

followed the opening with open-ended questions and prompts, similar to the first interview, but more focused on meaning making. My purpose for the second interview was fourfold. After participating in one interview, I expected that participants would be more attentive to their experience of spiritual pedagogy in a phenomenological light, and would have some ideas or anecdotes mentally prepared for the second interview. Second, I wanted to know whether participants had any reflections on the first interview or had new insights into their experience since that interview. My third purpose was to ask for elucidations and elaborations based on the first interview. After reading closely the first interview transcripts, I had many prompts as follow-up questions, which were focused largely on better understanding what participants said in the first interview and delving into the meaning behind their experiences, making the second interview more hermeneutic. Finally, if the first interview was primarily descriptive, the second interview provided the opportunity to delve more into the interpretive and meaning making thoughts of the participants. As an aside, for interviewees whom I did not personally know before the interview process, the second interview also provided time to develop familiarity and comfort.

With participants' permission, I recorded interviews using an iPad as a primary device and an iPhone and a recorder pen as back-up devices; I hired a professional service to create transcripts.

Approximately 6 to 9 months after their second interview, I contacted the teachers to offer an opportunity to participate in a focus group. Participants chose whether they wanted to gather at a designated site or participate remotely through a virtual meeting application; four chose to participate – three on location and one virtually. In preparation

for the focus group, I sent descriptions of the draft eidetic themes that I formulated from the hermeneutic process. The focus group lasted just over 90 minutes, with the following format: After a brief round of introductions and a review of the focus group protocols, I conducted one round for each eidetic theme. A round consisted of asking each participant, one at a time, to respond to the following prompts: What are your thoughts on the theme? How does the theme correspond, or not, with your own experience? What might you add? After each person responded individually, a group discussion on each theme ensued. Because I anticipated that there would only be time to discuss some of the themes, I chose themes that I felt had the most variation among participant interviews, or those for which I most desired clarification, validation, or more input from participants. I was able to ask about three themes, and I reserved enough time to ask focus group participants if they had any comments or questions about any of the other themes.

Interview Design and Protocol

Phenomenological interviews are ideally "a conversation with a purpose" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 57), which was the tone of the in-depth interviews I conducted. Common advice is to open with a visualization or some prompt to encourage the participant to remember an experience with great detail, a strategy I utilized in my first interviews. Appendices A and B include my guide for the semi-structured interviews with potential prompts.

I tried to be careful to provide prompts only as needed to keep the conversation flowing and the teacher comfortable in accessing details and insight in a phenomenological manner. I used primarily three types of prompts:

1. Prompts based on the four phenomenological existentials: spaciality, corporality, relationality, and temporality. "Can you describe how you experienced a sense of time during that scenario?"

2. Prompts that enhance imaginative variation of the participant, such as reversals: "What would be different if you did *not* teach with secular spiritual pedagogy?"

3. Prompts that ask the participant for more details: "What else?" "Can you give an example?"

4. Organic prompts that build upon responses: "You mentioned a circle; can you describe what that is, and what it means to you?"

To avoid distraction, I took very limited notes during interviews. Mainly, I wrote notes to myself on guiding the interview, such as prompts I wanted to remember to ask or warnings to myself about my biases. Additionally, I occasionally wrote notes regarding body language, tone of voice, or other reflective observations made during the interview.

In my reflective journal, which I provided to my peer reviewers, I wrote down any impressions I had about the interviewee before, during, and after the interview, in order to check my own assumptions.

The peer reviewers met with me through a digital chat format and discussed the first two interviews I conducted. They critiqued how well they thought I guided the interview without leading it, along with several insights into and suggestions for how to improve. They also critiqued my effort to avoid three types of questions:

1. Over-empathetic questions, where I talk too much about my own experience or evaluate their experience with regard to my personal emotions.

2. Leading questions that, for example, overlay my own beliefs or relate to theories.

3. Closed questions that only elicit simple answers (Smith et al., 2013).

While peer reviewers noted a few specific places where my questions might have fallen into the categories above, their most helpful comments were actually around my interviewing techniques. One reviewer, in particular, noted places in the interview where I could have improved my quality of listening. She even gave me some practice exercises for improving my listening skills. After discussing what intrigued us about the first interview, one reviewer helped me craft potential questions for the second interview.

The Pilot

I conducted one pilot interview, which was helpful in several ways. From the pilot interview experience, I learned to go ahead and use the word "spiritual" in the beginning visualization exercise, so the participant pictured an appropriate scene. Also, I eliminated an open-ended question about what the participant perceived the children were experiencing, as the interview was about the teacher's lived experience. (However, while discussing the meaning of the pedagogical practice, the teachers often brought up student experience, which was completely fine and applicable in reference to meaning making.) I also learned that I needed to conduct two interviews. My pilot interviewee was a bit tired after one hour of interviewing, and the meaning making portion of the interview was not as rich as it could have been. Finally, my pilot interviewee was a personal friend who was extremely comfortable sharing rich experiences and, in fact, we shared a dinner beforehand. This confirmed the wisdom of phenomenologists – that time spent with participants to enrich the relationship is time well spent.

Methods of Analysis and Synthesis of Data

The rationale for conducting hermeneutic phenomenology is to uncover the essence of the lived experience of teaching using secular spiritual pedagogy. To clarify again, I was not looking for mere appearances or a list of activities or pedagogical approaches, but I sought to understand what the inner experience of the teacher was and to unveil those experiences through identifying eidetic themes.

There is no patented approach to hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, but there are guidelines. The following list of analytical process steps, which I followed with iteration and intuition, is adapted from Smith et al. (2013):

1. Read the interview transcripts and other data.

2. Write and rewrite interpretations of the data.

3. Begin to identify emergent patterns.

4. Develop a structural framework to illustrate the themes and their relationships.

5. Evaluate the plausibility of the interpretation.

6. Develop a full theme-by-theme narrative.

7. At all steps along the way, and at the end, reflect on one's assumptions, conceptions, perceptions, and processes.

Below, I explain and expand on these steps, with some detail added about how I performed the analytic steps in this study.

Read the interview transcripts and other data. Using epoché and bracketing, I first freely read the transcriptions of each participant's descriptions with pleasure – without any marking or searching for particular meaning. This way, I gained an overall

sense of the participant's experience of secular spiritual pedagogy and its meaning, without any expectations.

During subsequent readings, I engaged a variety of techniques for interpreting the data. Some of these techniques included: a wholistic reading approach, a selective reading approach, a detailed reading approach (Van Manen, 2016), and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994).

When using the wholistic reading approach, I asked myself what the text as a whole had to say and how I could capture its sentiment in a phrase. I recorded these wholistic thoughts in the margins and end-pages of transcripts, and in dated entries in my research journal.

When employing the selective reading approach, I was looking for particularly compelling words or phrases, and I often read (or listened to) each of these several times, asking myself what was particularly revealing about this phrase, while being careful to shed any assumptions and truly explore all possible meanings. In this process, it was valuable to remember that ultimately, all language is metaphoric as it cannot capture the experience itself (Van Manen, 1990, p. 49). With this in mind, the selective reading approach encouraged insightful interpretation. In phenomenological research, the reader may have to read into what the participant was really trying to say, and this was certainly the case for me. Often, upon reading a phrase many weeks later, I would discern a very different meaning than my earlier interpretations. I often wrote selective reading notes by hand in the margins of transcripts. Sometimes I used different colors of ink to so I could identify earlier, versus later, strands of thinking.

The detailed reading approach is typically a line-by-line analysis of a particular anecdote or section of text, where I asked what that line said about the experience of spiritual pedagogy. I used a technique similar to one Smith et al. (2013) described, where I printed out the segment and captured descriptions, feelings, and linguistic notes. Descriptions are a rephrasing of what the participant seems to be saying. Feelings are notes about the feeling that she is portraying. Linguistic notes capture the tone she is using, rhythms of speech, changes in patterns, or other subtler clues. Remember that data are more than words. Schleiermacher (1998) posited that sometimes the researcher must use even the subtlest data presented, including body movements and the way in which phrases were expressed, to interpret what the participant's underlying meaning was (Smith et al., 2013). These, too, I "read" with a variety of approaches.

Imaginative variation is a term primarily from the transcendental strand of phenomenology, whereby the reader utilizes the imagination to seek as many possible meanings of a text as possible, or imaginable. Moustakas (1994) listed some imaginative variation devices: "varying frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions" (pp. 97-98).

One imaginative variation tool that is common among all strands of phenomenology is to think about the universal human existentials (Van Manen, 1990) of a phenomenon through temporality (time), spaciality (space), corporality (bodily concerns), and relationality (relations to self or others); some may add materiality and causality (Moustakas, 1994).

Write and rewrite. The act of writing is a vital aspect of hermeneutical analysis. Writing is not the "second step," but is engaged at many points along the analytical journey. I employed writing to aid with interpretation as a way to engage in dialogue with the data, as a creative device, a memory tool, a reflective instrument, and, of course, to report the data.

Writing as an organizational and memory tool. One of the ways I used writing was in the form of the many notes I made in the margins of transcripts, where I would point out particularly evocative words or phrases, anecdotes on which I wanted to do a line-by-line analysis, as well as overarching impressions and even early thematic thoughts. I used an online digital application organized by multiple tabs to create my research journal so I could keep my running narrative separate from the more logistical and organizational sections of the journal. Because the journal was accessible on my phone, I virtually had it with me everywhere, and could quickly jot down an epiphany or important "to-do" at any time.

Writing as interpretation. As I began to write the themes, cite quotes from within each theme, and reference themes with adult learning theories, I found meaning welling up from internal and intuitive sources. The phenomenological writer is encouraged to take the liberty of allowing these "inspired" interpretations to spill forth onto the page (Smith et al., 2013).

Writing to engage in dialogue with the data. My interpretations, as they began to develop, drew upon my personal knowledge, known as a "Gadamerian dialogue (Smith et al., 2013, p. 89) – a dialogue between the researcher's own pre-conceptions or early

analysis and evolving understandings. Sometimes this "dialogue" first took place in my research journal, and then ended up in the dissertation.

Writing as a reflective instrument. The act of writing is regarded as a reflective process in hermeneutical phenomenology that brings to the surface deeper understandings "from within" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 204). The researcher is considered so much a part of the process of analysis that she is encouraged to use first person voice in order to embody the writing (Smith et al., 2013).

Writing as a creative tool. Phenomenological writing is meant to evoke feelings in the reader. As Schutz (1967) said, "Everything I know about your conscious life is really based on my knowledge of my own lived experience" (p. 106). Therefore, hermeneutic vocative writing uses poetic description that taps into the reader's emotions in order to experience a felt inter-subjectivity (Heron, 1992; Moustakas, 1994).

Van Manen (1990) repeatedly stressed that hermeneutic phenomenological writing should be "oriented, strong, rich, and deep texts – texts which invite dialogue with those who interact with it" (p. 21). He referenced the word "pathic" to describe the purpose of phenomenological writing, and explained with the following metaphorical language:

> For example, cool water invites us to drink, the sandy beach invites the child to play, an easy chair invites our tired body to sink into it, etc. Similarly, a phenomenological human science text invites a dialogic response from us. (p. 21)

I invite any reader of this dissertation who finds the writing compelling to reach out to me personally for real-life dialogue.

Begin to identify emergent patterns. Along with reading and writing, I began to notice and identify emergent themes. I employed several tools and techniques in the

process. I first analyzed individual transcripts for patterns, noting potential themes that were both textural and structural (Moustakas, 1994). Textural themes capture the details and appearance of the phenomenon, while structural themes reveal the eidos.

After analyzing all transcripts independently, I crafted a preliminary table to identify composite themes and subthemes across participants (Moustakas, 1994). The column headings for the table were "theme," "subtheme," "participant name and excerpt example(s)," and a final column called "hermeneutics" with notes or excerpts that helped to explain the phenomenon hermeneutically.

Every time I reread a transcript the table would grow in size and adapt in shape. I would discover a new potential subtheme, for example, or I would decide what seemed like a theme was actually a subtheme, or vice-versa. I grouped and regrouped the themes within the table many times over.

Finally, I uploaded the texts into a coding application called Dedoose. The preliminary table of themes was helpful, but, true to the spirit of phenomenology, I primarily used Dedoose to aid in an *in vivo* process where the text was allowed to speak for itself, and as themes arose, I identified them inductively (Smith et al., 2013). For example, I would use Dedoose to highlight an excerpt, and I would then label the excerpt with the potential theme or subtheme related to it. More often than not, an excerpt was labeled with more than one theme/subtheme. Perhaps because of the immaterial aspect of spirituality it was often difficult to give a single, concrete theme designation to an excerpt. It wasn't uncommon for an excerpt to be labeled with three or four potential themes/subthemes and two or three memos. From the themes that arose through my process with Dedoose, in combination with my preliminary table of themes, I formulated

the final set of subthemes. At this point I had 837 excerpts and 2,019 code applications, spread among 55 codes. Most of the 55 codes represented subthemes that were now clustered into eight main eidetic themes. As this juncture, I began writing the narrative on the findings, based on these eight themes, but I discovered that more regrouping was necessary and I ultimately narrowed my analysis to the final six themes presented in the findings.

Develop a structural framework of themes. I used Excel to download the data from Dedoose into a giant spreadsheet for each subtheme. The spreadsheets provided an efficient process and location for me to access excerpts and paste them into the theme-by-theme narrative. It was not until I began writing about the findings that I finalized decisions about grouping subthemes and main themes. Eventually, I distilled the subthemes into the six eidetic themes of Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, Openness, Authenticity, and Meaning and Purpose, as illustrated in Table 1 in Chapter V. In some cases, my choices felt excruciating as I chose under which main theme a subtheme would belong. For example, the subtheme of "Oneness" could have been placed within the theme of Connection or Aliveness, or it could have been a main theme of its own. But as I wrote the section on Connection, it became clear that Connection needed to remain as simple as possible, and "Oneness," a more complex notion that could be viewed as an extension of Connection, needed to be within the Aliveness section.

Deciding how to order, or structure the themes produced some of my most valuable thinking. Among the findings in Chapters V through VIII, I explain some of my rationale for ordering the themes as I did, beginning with Connection, ending with Authenticity, and framed by Meaning and Purpose. Once I identified the order of the

themes I recognized their path-like aspect, and that is when I organized them into The Path of Spiritual Learning. This new insight happened *after* my initial draft of the findings.

Evaluate the plausibility of the interpretation. As member checks, I sent transcripts from both interviews to participants and asked if the transcripts were accurate or if they desired to make changes or additions. Additionally, I gave each participant the developed eidetic themes and invited them to provide individual feedback as well as to participate in an optional focus group to reflect on those themes. I also employed the help of peer reviewers in evaluating the plausibility of the eidetic themes after they emerged. Participants and peer reviewers both viewed the structure of the themes and subthemes as plausible and expressed enthusiasm for the results. However, the focus group participants suggested I make a valuable addition to the Connection theme. They thought it was important to talk about the use of humor as a tool for creating relational connection. Thus, I added the "Humor isn't taken lightly" section. The focus group also made a critical change to the Authenticity subtheme titled "Healing and Recognizing Wholeness Are Aspects of Uncovering Authenticity." Originally, I had "Finding Wholeness" rather than "Recognizing Wholeness" in the subtheme title, but the participants emphatically expressed the need to change the title to reflect a belief they shared that wholeness is not something one finds, but something that one always has and needs merely to uncover.

Develop a full theme-by-theme narrative. The final report is a full narrative in Chapters V through VIII, which guides the reader, theme by theme, through the interpretation using anecdotes, examples, creative writing, and verbatim quotes from interviews with participants. As explained above, my analysis process was iterative, as I

actually wrote most of the narrative before finalizing The Path of Spiritual Learning as the structural framework for the themes.

At all steps along the way and at the end, reflect on one's assumptions, conceptions, perceptions, and processes. In phenomenological research, the epoché needs to be considered and reconsidered. Earlier, I noted a caveat about providing a list of steps for the phenomenological method, explaining that one has to be flexible about applying the method and viewing the practice as iterative rather than linear. Smith et al. (2013) included what is typically seen as the first step in interpretive phenomenology – epoché – as occurring at all stages. They pointed out that during the analysis stage, the researcher may find she had preconceptions, or "fore-structures" (p. 25), that become uncovered. So while my bracketing generally came first, it also worked the other way around.

With this in mind, I also engaged the peer reviewers in the process of analysis. When I was synthesizing the individual interpretations into composite themes, I provided the eidetic themes and narrative to the peer reviewers and the three of us engaged in a group conversation (using a virtual platform) regarding the themes and their alignment with the data. I asked them for critical feedback on the analysis in regards to epoché – specifically, I asked them to look for places in the analysis that seemed to be a jump from the data presented and, instead, reflected the concepts, opinions, or assumptions of the researcher. I encouraged the reviewers to ask critical questions about the interpretations, including my process. They were also prompted to ask questions at any place in the analysis where they did not understand the writing, or where they simply had a vague "niggle." The peer reviewer comments turned out to be very focused on the narrative. As

people who were not experts in either pedagogy or spirituality, they expressed a desire for what they called more "101" language, which guided me to provide more context and explanation within the findings. After this critical conversation, I re-examined my data to take a renewed look at the themes, and rewrote, readjusted, and added to my results.

Validity. While it is in the interest of the researcher, the reader, and academic society to ensure that phenomenological studies follow enough systematic, rigorous processes to guarantee validity, there is no agreed-upon best practice for evaluating the validity of such a flexible and exploratory research method.

Lucy Yardley (2000) used four principles for qualitative research validity that work well with phenomenological research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context. Sensitivity to context can mean a number of different things – much of which Van Manen (1990) might have termed "tact" (p. 169). Early in the process, I needed to exercise sensitivity to context by being mindful of the social milieu of my study participants and their locales. I recruited a purposive sample and created interview situations that were sensitive to the needs of participants, their feelings, their voice, and the integrity of the data. Tact, as Van Manen viewed it, is of a sentient nature and unmeasurable. Each interviewee's context was a little different. Even the two teachers from the same school had different personal situations – making sensitivity to context important to evaluate. Some of the practices in my research design that aided in providing sensitivity to context were the practices of meditating before each interview and keeping a reflective journal. A regular prompt I responded to in my journal was to ask myself about my tactfulness in recent research activity.

Commitment to rigor. Commitment to rigor ensures that the researcher has integrity as a scholar and is applying scholarly methods in a systematic manner appropriate to the methodology. In this case of using hermeneutic phenomenology, I wanted to be especially rigorous about the core aspects of carrying out a phenomenological study, which have been discussed – specifically epoché, bracketing, reduction, and finding eidetic themes in a manner that was in accordance with the phenomenological attitude. I needed to be committed to the philosophy, the process, my participants (and their safety), the results, and the field.

I summarize here some of the practices described above that demonstrate commitment to rigor in the research process. As mentioned, I recruited two peer reviewers who met the criteria described (scholarly, outside the field of spiritual pedagogy, and caring). Both were in the same doctoral cohort I was in, so we were personal friends and had experience working together and holding one another to high standards through critical feedback, while also being encouraging and caring. They asked for my dissertation proposal so they could learn about this research and what their work would entail before we began the process. Again, these reviewers' job was to alert me to if I was failing to adequately bracket my own perceptions and assumptions at two key times. When I first begin interviewing, they read the transcripts of early interviews and looked for questions that were over-empathetic, leading, or closed. Then they reviewed my interpretations of those early interviews and, as a form of interrater reliability, discussed with me if they viewed my interpretations as fair and unclouded by my own assumptions or opinions. Finally, toward the end of the research process, they read my

composite eidetic themes and my findings chapters, and we discussed as a group the validity of those themes and the epoché of the findings.

Additionally, my research journal had a section for keeping records about all the processes described. This served as an orderly tool to help me keep track of the process and also to provide accountability to rigor.

Transparency and coherence. Yardley's (2000) reference to transparency is in regard to how well the stages of the study are described in the proposal, and then how clearly data and evolving thought are tracked and stored. Coherence is largely in reference to the final product. Is the writing clear and cogent? Coherence can also be with regard to the coherence, or fit, between the data and the interpretation, and between the data and the theoretical underpinnings. Certainly, keeping orderly notes and records was essential to this validity measure. My readers and peer reviewers could have asked for records at any time, and I could have found and produced relevant notes. As for the coherence of writing, discussions with my first and second readers during the analysis phase were relevant to coherence. They read all chapters as they were produced and remained closely in touch regarding feedback.

Impact and importance. There is little use in conducting a study that does not have the potential to be interesting and useful to the participants, an organization, a field, or society. In the case of this inquiry, it is of great import to this researcher that the field of education seriously consider the potential benefits of secular spiritual pedagogy described in the study.

Despite Yardley's (2000) guide to validity, the question remains: How would one know if a research study failed in its intentions? Van Manen (1990) listed three key

indicators that a phenomenological study has failed. These three criteria were the focus of the final discussion with the peer review group:

1. It has failed if, instead of describing lived experience, it provides editorials, abstract conceptualizations, journalistic accounts, biographical accounts, or some other text.

2. It has failed if the writing failed to be descriptive or to evoke a sense of human experience.

3. It has failed if it managed to be descriptive, but that description was of another type of descriptive writing, such as conceptual clarification, theoretical analysis, or something other than lived experience.

Assurance of Human Subject Protection

In the process of collecting data on the lived experience of teachers implementing secular spiritual pedagogy, I took every precaution to ensure proper subject safety and protection. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. There were no actual implied repercussions nor direct benefits from participating in, not participating in, or terminating participation in the study. For two participants who were employed at Rainbow Community School (RCS), where I am executive director, this was all made very clear through public announcements, written memos, and written letters to those interested. I limited the number of participating teachers from RCS to two. If more than two teachers from RCS desired to participate, I was going to select the most senior of the interested participant(s) who taught within the kindergarten through 3rd grade span and the most senior of the interested participant(s) who taught within the 4th through 8th

grade span, so it would be clear there was no favoritism or coercion. (As it were, only two volunteered.)

Participants were not anonymous, by necessity, but every effort was made to protect the confidentiality of participants. Each participant was asked for a pseudonym to be used or, if they preferred, I assigned them a pseudonym which I used in research analysis and reporting. Only the participant and researcher knew the pseudonyms attached to each participant, and documents linking the real identities with the pseudo-identities were written in a password-protected note-taking software program and will be erased at the termination of the study.

There was an exception to the confidentiality of participants regarding the focus group. Participants of the focus group each received a copy of the biography I wrote about them before the focus group, and they were asked if I had permission to share their biography with the other focus group participants. After I received a Focus Group Consent Form from each focus group participant, each focus group participant had access to the biographies of every other focus group participant. The Focus Group Consent Form asked participants to keep the identity and information about every other participant confidential.

A recording of each participant's interview, digital transcripts, and the focus group recording and transcripts were stored on my personal laptop and backed up on a CPU, both of which are password-protected and accessible solely by the researcher. Participants could request that the recording mechanisms be paused or turned off at any point during any interview or the focus group. Printed transcripts, researcher notes, and

printed coding materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet. Digital coding material was accessible only by the researcher through encrypted password protection.

Limitations

While I planned to make every possible attempt to ensure the validity of the study, some limitations exist.

The nature of phenomenological inquiry is unique in that the study is a quest for uncovering qualities of universal human experience (Van Manen, 1990), but universal does not mean generalizable. It would not be prudent for a reader of this study to assume that if she were to employ spiritual pedagogy in her classroom or school that she would have the exact same sensations, thoughts, and experiences. Part of the reason for this is that the in-depth quality of phenomenological interviewing requires engaging a very small sample for practicality and ensuring that interviews and the subsequent analysis are truly rich and genuine. The sample for this study was somewhat homogeneous so I could ensure we were all engaging with the same phenomenon, while it was also diverse enough that the experiences it described could possibly be transposed into other settings. If the sample were larger or more diverse, the results could have been watered down and potentially lose their profundity, or at risk of becoming empirical rather than phenomenological. Despite the lack of generalizability, this study sought to do what all good phenomenological research seeks to do – to find "possible" (Van Manen, 1990) human experiences that help the reader understand the phenomenon and to better understand herself – herself as an educator (if the reader is an educator), and herself as a member of humanity.

Another limitation is the personal relationship I have with some of the interviewees. Two of the participants are colleagues in my own school (RCS) and one of the other teachers is a personal acquaintance. My familiarity with a portion of the sample was helpful in carrying out the study in the ways mentioned earlier, but the potential disadvantages had to be carefully mitigated. Of the validity techniques discussed in this chapter, such as writing my assumptions about each participant before the interview and meditating to clear my mind before interviews, using scholarly peers who were not embedded in any of the study's locations was critical. The peers who read the transcripts were diligent in giving a critical eye to my ability to carry out an interview without being leading or assumptive.

A final relevant limitation is my personal experience with secular spiritual pedagogy. Paradoxically, and true to phenomenological intent, my experience and passion for the topic are both necessary *and* need to be carefully kept in check to ensure the validity of the study. I underwent multiple steps to carry out authentic epoché for this study. The very first step had already occurred by the time I wrote the proposal, and it had to be ongoing – learning about the practice of hermeneutic phenomenology and attaining a "phenomenological attitude." The process was enlightening and profoundly rewarding, and I treasured it throughout the research process. Throughout, I viewed my phenomenological research journey as a spiritual practice that I carried out with reverence. I kept a reflective journal, in which I recorded my intentions, thoughts, perceptions, and assumptions as they arose, so I could examine them and consciously bracket them out, as much as possible, for the study. I wrote out a narrative about my own experiences with secular spiritual pedagogy. This exercise helped me reflect on my

history with the phenomenon, and further helped bring to light my assumptions. My personal story also served as information for peer reviewers to understand what experiences may cloud or corrupt my interpretations during the analysis stage. The two peer reviewers who were not from any of the sample school sites were consulted as guards and as guides. I asked them to help guard me from the pitfalls of my own perceptions by sharing their thoughts and questions about transcripts and analysis; they were guides – somewhat akin to proverbial spiritual guides – in that they helped me to see the way beyond my own limited ego and into the realm of the universal.

Summary and Conclusion

The theme of "relational" reverberates throughout this dissertation, from the definition of spirituality, to the conceptual model and the findings, and even to the relationship between the researcher and the reader. The conceptual model for this research was represented as a triad among hermeneutic phenomenology, spiritual pedagogy, and the participatory paradigm.

Hermeneutic phenomenology as a "methodless method" is a perfect methodological match for studying spiritual pedagogy. For one, phenomenology can tolerate and appreciate the elusive qualities of spirituality. As a method, it does not ask to objectify or materialize its topic of study, which would be wholly antithetical to a spiritual topic; rather, it seeks to explore its topic – much like a spiritual quest – with openness. A phenomenological attitude on behalf of the researcher requires empathy, awareness, and other spiritual qualities, making the undertaking of hermeneutic phenomenological research in itself a spiritual act. The participatory paradigm further

consecrates the phenomenology-spirituality duo and completes the trio as the third element. The participatory paradigm uses an ontology that can withhold the inherent paradoxes of spiritual study and phenomenology. The participatory brings into dialectical relationship the "theory of the unique" sewn together with spirituality into a divine whole. The participatory paradigm is an ontology of the relational at the cosmic level.

Finally, the theme of "relational" is also embedded in the relationship between writer and reader. In hermeneutic phenomenological research, writing takes on a poetizing purpose. Like poetry, the writing in this dissertation, especially within the findings, does not always have a concrete determination or a "punch-line" (Van Manen, 1990). The writing is intended to be "living," making its meaning and purpose often left to the interpretation and the inner stirrings of the reader. For this reason, Van Manen (1990) called phenomenological writing a "poetizing activity" (p. 13). The writing gracefully moves across the pages and hopefully moves the reader. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the writer is expected to bring voice to the phenomenon, making writing part of the research experience – an experience to be shared. I invite the reader to engage with the writing, and therefore with the researcher, with an open heart.

Chapter IV

THE PARTICIPANT TEACHERS

I am immensely grateful to the teachers who participated in this study. They are
more than classroom teachers. Throughout this process, they became my spiritual
teachers, my gurus.

In this chapter, I provide a biography of each participating teacher so the reader
can understand the context of the participants before reading the organized findings,
which are in Chapters V through VIII.

Two of the criteria for teachers participating in this study were that spirituality is a
major part of their personal lives and they consider spirituality the most important aspect
of their teaching. I found each of the seven participating teachers who fit the criteria
through an organic, rolling process, except for the two Rainbow Community School
(RCS) teachers. For example, I met one of the participants through my work in the
Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, a project Lisa Miller, author of *The Spiritual
Child*, founded. That teacher then referred me to a teacher in another school. As for the
two RCS teachers, as head of school I was careful to solicit volunteers through a process
that would be as neutral as possible, as described in Chapter III.

As stated in the methodology section, Moustakas (1994) recommended a
"reasonably homogeneous sample" (p. 3) for a phenomenological study, although some

intriguing outliers are acceptable. As it were, all seven participants were White and from fairly middle-class or working-class American backgrounds, and they all were middle-aged, ranging from mid-30s to mid-50s. They all taught at private schools, except for Maya. They were divided about half and half by gender and by the grades they teach, with three identifying as female and four as male; and three teaching middle or upper school and four teaching elementary school.

The biographies are listed in the order in which I interviewed the teachers for their first interview, except for Edmond, who was the pilot interviewee and who is listed here last. (He was the last to be interviewed for the second interview.) By sheer coincidence, the first three interviewees and biographies are middle and high school teachers, and the last four are elementary teachers.

The process of reading and analyzing the transcripts from these teachers' interviews was life-changing for me. That may sound exaggerated or trite, but I say that with complete genuineness. As I read back over my research journal, I am struck by my sincerity and almost innocence with which I described the experience. The following is an excerpt:

> There is nothing I love more than reading one of these transcripts (when I am alert and relaxed). They give me…a stirring in my soul. Many times I referred to a transcript for personal reasons – like looking up a slice of wisdom a teacher dished out, or an affirmation they like that I knew could be helpful in my spiritual life.
> Physically, I feel a little excitement deep in my belly when reading the transcripts, or a little below – in my second chakra, the creative area. I become filled with a deep, deep respect and awe for each of these teachers…
> I feel almost closer to them while reading and re-listening to their interviews. Like, some part of them became a part of me. We share something now…like I am tapping into their feelings, thoughts, and souls, and I get to share that with them. A deep undercurrent we are riding together….
> Many of them expressed how no one can fully put into words the experiences and concepts they are talking about – and some said that once they do that, it is

sort of watered down or cheapened. So I think part of what is special that we shared is something that can't be put to words – a connection that was there. I know it was there, but I can't explain it. I know it makes me feel alive.

While words cannot accurately convey my experience with this research, my hope is that the biographies in this chapter will give the reader an inkling of what it was like to be in the presence of these teachers.

My process for writing these biographies was very intentional. I dedicated seven consecutive days to spending a full day "in spirit" with each teacher before writing his or her bio. During that day, I reread all of that teacher's two interview transcripts in order, word for word. While I read, I listened to the audio recordings, pausing them to take notes, making some corrections in the transcripts, hearing each voice, dialect, rhythm of speaking, and pauses. Then before writing the biography, I engaged in the same meditation or centering that each particular teacher led me in before his or her second interview. I did this to bring me further into communion with the teacher and also as a focusing tool to prepare me to write.

As a result, these biographies are fairly thorough. I want the reader to get to know each participant before reading the findings, because the subjectivity matters.

Rebecca

Rebecca is a gentle soul. She teaches sixth grade – an age she lovingly and jokingly referred to as "an absurd age." She is in her 30s and has been teaching for about 13 years. After her first position, which was teaching English to 80-100 students a day and feeling "how wrong that felt," she desired a teaching position where students would feel "seen" and "understood," where they have some "agency," and where there is space

for the "mystery in learning." She landed at Blue Rock School for several years, and finally at Rainbow Community School (RCS).

RCS was founded by Sufi leaders in the 1970s on the values of love, harmony, and beauty. It has a holistic teaching model that is in line with Rebecca's view of truly seeing children, and that allows Rebecca much freedom in her curricular approach, which she describes as interactive. Spirituality is explicit at Rainbow, with spiritual development being one of the primary goals of the learning model. Each day opens with a "centering" practice that Rebecca described in her interview.

I have known Rebecca for 5 years since hiring her to teach at RCS. She is fairly quiet – not one for a lot of small talk. I have had fun with her at various faculty events and parties, but I had never found the opportunity to engage deeply in much one-on-one personal discussion. So when she volunteered to participate in this research, I selfishly looked forward to getting to know her better.

Rebecca has strong, supportive relationships with many of the faculty on campus, including her assistant teacher with whom she has formed an inseparable teaching team. RCS is a school that places a high value on faculty collaboration and connection, so that is not uncommon, but Rebecca has developed some almost family-like relationships with several of the women who work in support positions. She recounted a time when she was working through grief:

> I think it was before school even, which could be a tough time if you're not feeling emotionally well. It's like the day is sort of ahead of you, and I went to find Alice. She's just a really open-hearted person and I was crying and…feeling panicky because my emotions are just, like, bursting out of me and I'm trying to keep it in. And she took me outside and she told me that her therapist said, or she had read somewhere, that you should touch the dirt when you're feeling panicky. So, we just crouched down and just kind of, like, pawed at the dirt; and parents were arriving, and the kids looked...

So, it became a moment of laughter and crying, and just...it feels good to know that...I feel like I could go to anyone at Rainbow. If I were really having a hard time emotionally, even someone I didn't know very well, I feel like I could go to that person and just ask for a hug or...I don't always do that. I'm a pretty reserved person until I'm, like, until it starts to burst out, and then I would go to anyone, but it feels good to know that that support is here. (Rebecca)

RCS is an alternative private school that attracts many "interesting" families – artists, entrepreneurs, and so on. It has a moderate tuition and a number of students on financial aid, with students ranging from those living in housing projects to the very wealthy. Rebecca's classroom has 20 students; this year, about one third are of minority race, and about one third are receiving student support services due to learning differences or emotional challenges.

Rebecca is adored by her students. She is light and goofy with them. Perhaps because of her empathy and sensitivity, she gives each of them plenty of space to be uniquely who they are. For example, she told a story about a student whom she allowed to sit on the sidelines and not participate in centering for months until he was ready on his own volition.

She did not talk about "giving" lessons to the children but *sharing* lessons. She respects her students as equals: "We are their teachers and they are the students, but we're also both humans." She referred to the archetypal hero's journey as she talked about her and her students being on the journey together: "…we're all in this same story with different elements to it."

Rebecca described her own spirituality as very practical. She grew up in a Catholic household and viewed attending mass as a "dreadful chore," something she did not have much connection to, nor did her parents seem to, except for the ritual. However, she thinks of her spiritual life as being strong ever since she was a child, but very private.

When she was a girl, her "super-cute," "little tiny Italian" grandmother told her about the power of the rosary prayer and about her pilgrimage to a site somewhere in Eastern Europe where the Virgin Mary appeared. Rebecca said:

> So, I decided that I was going to pray the rosary and get Mary to appear to me. That was my spiritual goal. So I would pray every day and I think in that, it is like a mantra meditation. It's got beads and it's got these repetitive prayers.... I've never told anybody this, but I did.... I didn't exactly see Mary, but I did have a, sort of, transcendent experience one night when I was praying and it just felt like my bedroom filled with light. And I just felt this sense of peace and well-being, and it was just like a really powerful healing.… My point being that there were aspects of my religion of origin that I could connect to, but it was.... That's another sort of theme of my spiritual practice. It's that it was, sort of, furtive and on my own and in my bedroom. Like, it wasn't I ran downstairs and it was like, "Mom, Dad, Virgin Mary came to me! Not as a being, but as light!" Like I said, I never told anybody, I don't think.

Rebecca told this story with both tenderness for her own childhood and a humorous twinkle that I have come to recognize in her personality.

In college, Rebecca found meditation and the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. She felt drawn to American Buddhism because "It's just about how spiritual practice doesn't have to be a sort of lofty thing. It can be a very everyday thing." She does not belong to any religious or spiritual group today. Her personal practice includes journaling and meditating.

As hoped, the interview process was an inroad to understanding the inner life of this tender person, but more importantly, connecting with her. For our second interview, Rebecca opened by leading the two of us in a centering. Seated across from each other on a picnic table outside under a white pine tree on RCS's campus, we each assumed the pose of three different mudras: one for groundedness, one for heart, and one for voice – each with a mantra that she read aloud for me to repeat. "I am grounded…; I listen with my heart…; I speak my truth clearly, with integrity and compassion." After this

centering, our conversation felt easy to me. I was comfortable with her, and even comforted. I imagine this is how her students feel too. I was grateful for the open-hearted connection, or as Rebecca described relationships in her poetic way with words, "…it just feels like…an energy sort of like a tube. Like an energy connection that exists feels very tangible between two people."

Rebecca's Personal Life

Rebecca is in her mid-30s. She had never been married or had children, and she hopes to be a mother one day. She lives in an apartment with a girlfriend whom she works with at RCS. Writing is one of her most valued personal pastimes and she participates in a writing group. She also loves going out dancing with her friends.

Rebecca's Timeline

1980: Year born

2005: Student teaching at public high school

2006-2013: Teaching with spiritual pedagogy at a private holistic school

2013-present: 6th grade teacher at RCS, a private holistic school

Maya

Maya has a fierce love. She teaches high school English at a large public Tech Center in a rural New England town. From the very beginning of Maya's teaching career, she has worked with some of the toughest kids, what some people might call "un-teachables." She got her first job without having a teaching license because a dorm parent was overwhelmed and being threatened by the students. Maya said the students at that

school were never mean to her because her natural instinct was to give them what they needed, "which was just to be seen and heard."

Maya's intense personality and strong-willed nature allowed her to relate to strong-willed kids. Later, Maya taught at a therapeutic high school with really troubled kids:

> They feel broken. They believe they're broken. They act broken. They think that's their life sentence. And so I tell them, "There is an unencumbered spot in you that is your true nature, and it can't be wounded. It's covered up by lots of layers, and those layers are really distorted. But I can see that spot, and I will not let you forget about it." And that's all you basically need to say to a kid to get them to relax their defenses, you know?... And I just basically used the same tactic about talking about their true nature: "And of course, you're gonna act like a jerk. You know, this is your shell, and good for you for making it so sophisticated. You have a sophisticated defense system, and it's served you well. But in here I wanna create the conditions in which you don't feel you have to use that system to get what you need. I'm hoping that you and I can connect through our essential selves." And that worked, you know?

Maya's ability to connect with tough kids probably has something to do with the tough attitude she grew up with. She used a lot of strong language and described herself as being from a family of doers – Irish-Catholic. "In our family people work hard, suck it up, pull up your boot straps." She described herself as "always working fifteen jobs" and her personality as big: "Most of my life, I felt like I was too much for other people." Like her parents and siblings, she was an elite athlete. That was her model of strength until she realized that being faced with emotions was harder for her than scaling a mountain.

Maya remembered a farmer's wife knocking on her door to invite her to her first "circle" – a women's circle – not something she would normally attend. Her background

> …did not develop me into someone who would be super psyched to go to a circle. You don't get things done sitting in a circle talking about your feelings, right? And the world needs people that get things done.
> So I went to it, though, and the first time I held onto a talking stick I cried, you know? Because I was the youngest of seven. My mom had seven kids in ten

years. She had seven kids in ten years, my mom, and at the time I was born she had started working and I was raised kinda feral. I was definitely a feral child. So I didn't really ever feel seen, you know? So here I am, and all these women, and they say to me, "Now is your time, speak your truth." And like, whoa, you know? It's very powerful, a very powerful feeling.

So in the last twenty years or more, I've led circles, because over time all the shame that I felt as a young person kinda dissolved, because shame dissolves under the force of belonging and love.

Today, Maya teaches three sections of English at the Tech Center mostly to high school juniors and seniors who are in various programs, such as mechanics, cosmology, culinary, and so on. Her students are mostly boys from low- to mid-income rural families, and she says most of them will not attend college. Since her students are training for vocational jobs, she says English has a very utilitarian purpose for these kids. At least, that is the way Maya believes it should be. "I don't teach books…. I'm very spiritual, but I am a hard-ass in there around the realities of life." She makes sure her students learn how to use English to advocate for themselves: "Like, if you cannot write an email to ask for extended sick leave in a way that the boss is gonna say yes, you're screwed." She called it "the craft of how you get your voice in the world." She went on to emphasize to her students, "Because you matter and your life matters."

Maya was the only teacher at her school who was using spiritual pedagogy, but an administrator, upon looking at her class list which included some of the most challenging students in the school, was in disbelief that Maya had never sent any student to the office. The administrator wanted to find out what Maya's "secret" was and ended up asking Maya to train the other teachers at the school in restorative practices.

Maya believes that the teacher's most important role is to help students understand the life force to which they are connected. When they are in touch with their true nature, they can connect with others, and that is what heals. In fact, she thinks it

would be "cruel" to not teach them about spirit. She uses school shooters as an example: "Like, the worst possible thing is a shooter, right?" In short, to prevent a shooter, people need connection. "So you could talk all day long about social emotional learning, but if you're not giving kids in your classroom a chance to really feel their interconnection, then it is a waste of breath."

Maya has lived an extra-ordinary life of helping others, of adventure, accidents, and pain. For 10 years, she and her previous husband at the time ran a magazine where she interviewed people who "were willing to take a risk for living their truth," and she led a popular 3-day retreat called "Reconnecting With Your Wild Soul." But when that husband left her, she lost everything, "including my identity." To find herself, she went on a 4-day wilderness fast that she said was like experiencing death. A recent, powerful mentor was a Buddhist monk who taught her mindfulness. She described her life story as "Crooked Path to Happy Life."

Now in her 50s, Maya's work with students (and adults) is largely centered around restorative practices – something she was doing before she knew the name for it. She remarked how experiential her life learning has been – something she described as a gift – and that she later learned the academic theories for her own experiences. She is incredibly sharp. Throughout the interviews, she quoted writers, scientists, psychologists, and spiritual leaders. I learned a lot, and from her have a list of books and references to look up!

To start our second interview, Maya led me in a Qi Gong morning routine. It felt amazing. I felt relaxed, yet energized; opened, and also more connected with her. She invited me into her home, where I was honored to bask in her wisdom and her intimate

telling of her life's journey. While listening to the recordings of Maya's interviews, a powerful sense of healing came over me, and I felt that I could forgive myself for my own fallibilities. I was feeling the power of fierce love.

Maya's Personal Life

Today, Maya is married to a man who shares her love of the outdoors and athletics. She says the younger Maya could not have imagined life could be this good. She has a grown daughter and son from a previous relationship and two grown stepchildren. She and her husband live in a simple, comfortable home on a country crossroads corner in rural New England, where they can go biking, hiking, or cross-country skiing right out their front door.

Maya's Timeline

1965: Year born

1990: First teaching job and first use of spiritual pedagogy: English and dorm mother at a boarding school

1998: Director of a residential program for learning disabled youth

2000-2011: Editor, writer, workshop facilitator for adults

2006-2009: Farm caretaker and school cook at a farm/school for at-risk teens

2009-2015: Teacher at a therapeutic school

2016-present: English teacher at a large Tech Center in rural New England, and educational consultant in mindfulness and restorative practices

Patrick

Patrick is on a curious quest to unveil life's deepest mysteries. He teaches mathematics at one of the most elite high school boarding schools in the country – let us call it Palmetto School. About 240 fortunate kids from all around the world attend Palmetto. It is perched on the rim of a gorgeous valley in Southern California, and it uses this setting to engage the students in a horse program that Patrick teaches after school. About once a year, he takes a small group of students into the wilderness on pack trips. He also teaches an informal meditation class at Palmetto.

Patrick's described his relationships with his colleagues at Palmetto as a "trajectory" as such:

> When I first started teaching at Palmetto School I was kind of, like, in the closet as a spiritual practitioner, because my perception of the school was this is sort of conservative, secular place and doesn't really have room for someone like me…. So I'll just kind of...I'll live two lives. I'll live, you know, my Palmetto life, which I can certainly fake…and then I'll have my other life, which is my spiritual life. And as the years have gone by, I've become more and more courageous to bring those two worlds together. And at a certain point, maybe three or four years ago, that this stopped being two different lives. You know, I was just this crazy Buddhist dude, you know, who does things and says things that confuse us.... But I stopped worrying about that. I stopped worrying about what other people were gonna think. And part of that was the fact that people got to know me. You know, they started to trust me, and they recognize that, you know, maybe he's a little strange but has something to offer. And I got a lot of feedback along those lines, you know. I made a lot of connections with people and offered things to the school, and people were like "Thank you for that."

Patrick teaches the most advanced mathematics classes and computer science, with typically fewer than 15 students in a class. His students are primarily from extremely privileged families – including some of the world's wealthiest families – from diverse ethnicities, who are focused on getting accepted to the finest universities possible.

Whether Patrick is teaching meditation or math, he considers his real job is "to open a door for these kids into their own experience." He wants to help kids discover their true potential to develop as a human being. He considers his true calling to be a spiritual teacher: "…the context I happen to be doing it in is here in the classroom." Along the way, he has found teaching to be a path to help him find his authentic self.

Patrick's quest to find his most authentic self has included suffering, as he called it. He remembered taking on a "cocky asshole bro" persona in high school as a reaction to some deep rejection he had suffered at the hands of peers. Later, he was well on his way to being a brilliant scientist and earning his Ph.D. when life took another turn. His fiancée and he broke up in a very painful manner. He had already discovered meditation, and that spiritual practice helped him to get through that painful experience. Then, while on a research trip to Tibet, he realized that his deepest curiosity was not science but a spiritual curiosity. He suddenly dropped out of his doctoral program without finishing the dissertation.

Patrick said he had always felt a lack. His parents did not have a spiritual practice; his father was an atheist Jew and both of them were rational, materialist scientists.

He found a Western teacher of Buddhism who he felt really "understood my dilemma and where I was coming from and the questions I was asking and the mystery I was trying to unravel as a young American man." Patrick called this the beginning of the second part of his life. Patrick said he "gave away most of my stuff, said goodbye to all of my friends…and moved up to a retreat center." He took vows and was devoted to Buddhist practice for many years – helping run the retreat, teaching yoga and meditation, and maintaining a very disciplined practice.

Patrick never expected to be a high school math teacher! But, living in a small town, the head of Palmetta School knew about Patrick's math background, so when the school needed someone to teach advanced calculus class in a pinch, he called Patrick. That is when Patrick learned that he loved working with teenagers.

After years of practicing Buddhism, Patrick now calls teaching his spiritual practice, and it is not easy!

> Teaching is a hard practice.... This is sort of a...kind of trite thing to say, but I'm continually learning from my students. Over and over again, they're teaching me how I can be more open, how I can be more flexible, how I can be more compassionate, how I can be more skillful, how I can choose when to say less, choose when to say more. They're constantly giving me feedback. It's completely transformed my life and this is the greatest practice for me, right now. Continually, it encourages me to keep growing. I'm growing more than they are in some ways, I feel like, sometimes. It's like cheating, almost.

Patrick's spiritual quest and practice brought him healing from those high school years, and he matured into a compassionate, reflective man. A couple of times, Patrick said he may seem arrogant, but I think "bold" would be a better word for it. He boldly loves his students. Several times he expressed gratitude for them, and for the healing that teaching has provided. He says that teaching is all about love for him, and he likes to tell his students that he loves them. He sees every child as a Buddha – "perfect beings, slightly obscured. And my job is to help reduce the obscurations a little bit." He lives a path of service.

Perhaps because of the subject he teaches, or maybe because his school is not particularly spiritually oriented, he has not received training or practice on bringing a group together with spiritual pedagogy, and prefers reaching kids through one-on-one opportunities, where he can build connection and where he feels "the magic" really is.

I conducted the first interview with Patrick in his math classroom after a full day of work. He was very forthcoming, and we got to know each other a bit.

Shortly after my first interview with him, a huge wildfire came within yards of burning down his school and his home. While being in evacuation with his family, he had an existential contemplation: "Well, you know, the slate could be wiped clean pretty soon here. No jobs, no place to live." Out of that contemplation, he decided he would resign from teaching math at the end of the year to directly teach and help adults with their spiritual journeys.

For the second interview, he invited me to his gorgeous home overlooking a beautiful valley, and we met in his office. He led a meditation that was profound. I think it put us both in a state that made the second interview richer. I have been trying to use the same technique ever since – I even ordered the same style meditation pillow that was designed by one of his Buddhist teachers! I am grateful to Patrick for sharing his life and his practice.

Patrick's Personal Life

Patrick lives with his wife of 13 years, in a home that was beautifully designed by an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright, with extensive artistic gardens and sweeping views of the California landscape. Patrick never had biological kids of his own, but he has been a stepfather to his wife's children since they were boys, and they seem to have a close relationship now as adults. Having lived in this valley for several decades, I got the impression that Patrick and his wife enjoy a vibrant social life. He still has a very close relationship with his spiritual teacher and hopes to work closely with him in the near future, perhaps focusing once again on teaching spirituality to adults.

Patrick's Timeline

>1970: Year born

>2002: Started teaching adult spirituality (director of a Dharma Center)

>2007: High school math teacher, riding instructor in the horse department, and
faculty advisor of the meditation club at a private boarding school

Rose

Alert and precise, when Rose speaks, a bell of truth rings. Rose teaches 5th grade at Oak Grove, a K-12 private school in Ojai, California, that was founded by Krishnamurti.

Rose is the youngest of the seven participants in this study, but an old soul. She said the nuns at her Catholic school used to teasingly call her Sister Rose, because she seemed so nun-like at a young age. She was always a diligent straight A student.

Rose did not speak of any particular religion when she was growing up, but in high school her father started sharing the teachings of Krishamurti with her. Krishnamurti was born in India in 1895, but at the age of 12, he was chosen by the European Theosophical society as a guru because he appeared ego-less. After that, he was raised and educated in Europe, and was the chosen leader of the Theosophists until the age of 34. At that age, he saw falseness in such leadership and abandoned the position and all the property, wealth, and esteem that went along with it. He was a secular philosopher who spent his life speaking to people. Rose confessed she never enjoyed reading for pleasure, but she can read Krishnamurti passages for hours, like a meditation.

And then when in college, after my sophomore year, I suddenly realized that I wanted to be a teacher. My mother is a teacher and has been all my life. My father was a professor, and is by nature a teacher. And yet it wasn't entirely apparent to me that I wanted to take that on, until one day I would read a passage from Krishnamurti where he said that teaching is the noblest profession. Right then, it really struck me that that was my purpose in life. That it wasn't imparting knowledge on others, it was this continued, lifelong learning, this journey of learning, again, not in order to become smarter or more of an authority, but rather to continue to question the known, to continue to question things that people don't question, or have sort of become complacent in. So it was really Krishnamurti's vision of learning that appealed to me the most. Again, that has a great deal to do with understanding, watching, listening. It's this living process. It isn't this final process, or one might even say, dead process that ends. It's this ongoing process.

Rose then completed her Master's in education and dreamed of someday working at the Oak Grove School. She did a year-long internship at another school founded by Krishnamurti in India – a "coming of age" experience, where she said she had to relinquish her identity. She spent long solitary hours there in nature, studying the teachings of Krishnamurti, and found it to be an awakening experience. She returned to the States and taught public school for a few years.

She was hired as Oak Grove's 5th grade teacher 4 years ago. Oak Grove extends from kindergarten through high school, with some kids coming from as far away as India for the high school boarding option. The land and gardens at Oak Grove are extensive, but the enrollment is fairly small and intimate. As a very moderately priced private school with a unique philosophy, Rose's students come from primarily middle-income White families, many of whom have very diverse, alternative backgrounds rather than conventional careers.

Within 4 years, Rose seems to have become a highly respected teacher at Oak Grove and a leader. She was surprised to discover when she began at Oak Grove that not many of the teachers were embodying Krishnamurti's teachings into their pedagogy or

personal lives. She established a once-a-week "dialogue" time for faculty to ponder his

teachings, and she has led this sacred time ever since. When I asked a school

administrator at Oak Grove for a teacher she would recommend for my study, Rose was

unequivocally her referral.

Rose teaches 18 students each year as the only 5th grade classroom. Her first class

at Oak Grove was with a group of students who had a reputation for being very difficult

to teach because of the constant conflict they had with one another.

> I was so head over heels for the fact that I was actually here. I couldn't
> really still believe it. I was just so full of love and acceptance that I think that
> immediately transferred to [my students]. Because they were so used to people
> having an image of them as a group, and I didn't have that. So instantly, this
> relationship of trust, as almost newness for all of us began to unfold.

When contemplating how to help this group get along, Rose came across a

passage from *Beyond Violence* by Krishnamurti that spoke to her, and she was inspired to

share it with her class, having no idea how it would be received. She asked them to sit in

a circle. She read the passage, and they were stunned…and then applauded.

> And it immediately brought tears to my eyes, because I realized without
> anyone saying anything, it had touched each and every one of them precisely in
> the way that it touched me…it was an incredibly moving experience.

From that point on, Rose has facilitated these circles that she called dialogues, where she

and her students read a passage and learn together through thoughtful discussion where a

talking piece is passed around the circle.

> I realized in that moment that my job was not to "fix" everything for them or
> even necessarily give the students advice on how to resolve their conflicts, but
> merely meet them where they were with love, compassion, and the willingness to
> explore with them the human conditioning from which we all suffer day in and
> day out. From that day forward, I was shown that my role as a teacher was to
> create a sacred space…. (from Rose's writings)

I asked Rose what would be different if she were not facilitating spiritual practices and attitudes in her teaching. She replied, "I'd be a lot more mechanical. I tend toward being very efficient, almost robotic in some ways." I also noted that Rose is highly cognitive and logical, but Rose is able to find balance and an openness that her students appreciate. Despite being described as "strict," the love that Rose cultivates in her class is palpable. From a treasured letter from a student:

> It's not very often that you meet a person who [you] can disagree with without feeling anger.
> Or learn so much just by seeing their face.
> Who is this "person," we wonder. They seem too important, but…do they know that? You could call them a savior.
> Who are they saving? What mythical city lies in their hands?...
> Love. The force that connects us all. The longing that brings even those most divided together in the end. The knot that ties together me and you.
> You.
> You are the person.
> You are the figure of great importance. You are the face of breathtaking beauty.
> You are the "savior."
> That might be hard to take in. But know that I am not worshipping you. I see us as equals. As companions. As humans. As friends.

Only in a classroom where love is openly felt and expressed could a student so unabashedly share such deep feelings – feelings that I think Rose shares for each of her students and for her chosen life profession. She described teaching this way as "her reason to live." She makes sure her students understand that life is "pure bliss" when you are doing what you love.

Rose's Personal Life

Rose shared the least about her personal life of the teachers interviewed. I learned that she lives with her husband, with whom she has been for 11 years. She describes him as a gifted mechanic who never enjoyed school – very different from herself – and a

happy marriage of opposites. She and her husband have no children, and she says she has no desire or plans to have children of her own, making her classroom her kids. Rose's mother retired from public school teaching a few years ago, and now also teaches at Oak Grove, so they enjoy a close relationship with one another.

Rose's Timeline

1985: Year born

2008: Internship at Krishnamurti school in India

2009-2014: First teaching job in public school

2014-present: Teaching with spiritual pedagogy at Oak Grove as 5th grade teacher

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Charles

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Charles is tender-hearted. He teaches a combined 3rd and 4th grade classroom with six students at a school I will call Living Hearts School. Living Hearts is only about 6 years old and just beyond the fledgling stage. It is on a 300-acre property in Southern Appalachia that includes a small intentional housing community and farm, a bald mountain with 360-degree views, and a large forest with old-growth trees. The school was founded with a Waldorf/Steiner influence, but it is not officially accredited, and it has its own personality. Living Hearts has also been influenced in its educational philosophy by a previous executive director of RCS, who actually referred me to Charles. He called Charles a "gentle giant" (he's 6'9"), who deeply loves children. Charles teaches in a yurt, and like all the teachers at Living Hearts School, he spends a lot of time

outside with his students, as he believes that communion with the natural world is core to their educational experience.

Charles grew up in Georgia – the source of his slow, regal, Georgian accent. His parents belonged to a Baptist church, but they were not spiritual or religious. He cannot recall them ever quoting scripture to him, which he regards as a blessing, but he remembers a longing to connect with God.

> As a child I do remember having this fascination with the spiritual realm and with angels, because someone once told me that the angels lived in the steeple. So I was always trying, as a child, trying to find a way into that steeple because I wanted to meet the angels.

He said his personal relationship with spirit did not come until he was 20 when a friend brought him to an Easter play. He said he experienced a profound feeling of love. "And for me, that was sort of the opening, the beginning of it all. It was more of a religious path for me at the beginning." Then he started reading the transcendentalists – Emerson, Thoreau – and he moved away from the church, but remained open to the mystery of life.

> I remember having still this longing to connect with God. And I remember I would go out in the evenings and I would walk under the stars, and I would find a field, and I would bring a blanket, and I would sit in the field, and for hours I would just gaze up at the stars. And sometimes I would sit in silence; sometimes I would talk; sometimes I would cry out. But there was this deep, deep longing to know, because for me, at that moment, it was hard for me to understand my belonging in this world outside of a relationship with the divine. And that for me, there was this gap within, this yawning gap, and I felt that only some connection with a higher being could ever bridge that gap. And for me, those moments – those moments of walking in the fields and being out in the world were.... It was almost like each time was this opening…this opening into something new. This insight, this revelation into who I am as a human being.

Charles described this story in a warm speaking voice that was almost a whisper – like he was beckoning the mystery.

After delving deeply into literature – especially poetry and philosophy – Charles was about to start a graduate degree in English, but at the last moment he recalled, "Something just said, 'No.'" Then a friend invited him to visit a Waldorf school.

> And I remember, Renee, walking through the front doors, and the first thing I saw was watercolor paintings lined on the wall. And I thought, oh my goodness – there is spirit – in these paintings!...and I remember in that moment I said, "This is what I want to do with my life. I want to take up this work."

He described his Waldorf training at Antioch as "quite a journey," partly because Waldorf really embraces the arts as a form of learning, of connecting with the whole person, and teachers have to experience many different art forms. He said he still needs to practice ("I'm still learning") because he came from more of an intellectual background. One of his graduate school professors at Antioch told Charles he was in his head too much and encouraged him to be less cerebral. Rather than "cerebral," I would say he is thoughtful nowadays.

Living Hearts is a cooperative school with very low tuition, and parents have the option of trading work for tuition. Charles' students are primarily White and have diverse learning styles and personalities – some of them with unique learning needs, and several who would most likely be homeschooled or unschooled were it not for the Living Hearts program.

Charles is skilled at telling stories, and he loves to take his students on something he called "imaginative journeys," where they sit with their eyes closed while he talks them through a made-up story and they create the details. Charles often commented on the importance of developing the imagination, especially in today's world, where the glut of visual media is robbing children of the opportunity to imagine their own images within

stories. "It's really through the imagination that we make sense of our lives. We can dream, and new ideas emerge."

Charles has only been teaching for 4 years, but he has learned much about teaching from his mentor at Living Hearts and from his colleagues. Living Hearts is extremely small and grassroots. A few of the other staff members live in the communal living area associated with the school (and on the same property). Thus, some of them are very close to one another. They get together as a staff for learning from one another and for sacred ceremonies and celebrations. After our second interview, he was on his way to a fundraising event for the school that sounded enjoyable and very informal.

Charles said he has learned a lot about himself through teaching. He said his personal practice of sitting in stillness is essential. He reflects on each day and each child. From this place, he has gotten in touch with his true voice, or inner guide, "through my own deepening, my own relationship with silence, with mystery, but also learning to trust…" He said it is in this space of silence that a "living curriculum" comes through – something that is alive in him is more likely to spark the children.

Finally, Charles said that through silence, he has learned to be present with himself and the children, so he can respond in the moment to what they need. In turn, his goal is for the children to find that sense of presence so they trust themselves. He said that from his experience, academics are easy to learn when children are opened to their inner capacities.

For our second interview, I asked Charles if he would share some type of "centering" activity with me. I did not clarify that I meant to actually engage in a centering practice together, so he literally explained a practice he does called

"beholding," where he asks the children to choose a small item in nature that calls to them. After observing it very closely, they shut their eyes and try to remember every detail, and upon opening their eyes, they see what they missed. At the end of this centering, he directs the children, "Now I want you to take that image, and I want you to move it down into your heart." Before writing this bio, I engaged in my own beholding activity with a tiny juniper branch with berries on it. I was able to imagine Charles on a hillside at Living Hearts School, basking in the moment with his little "family" of six students.

Charles' Personal Life

Charles is single and lives alone. He talked longingly about being married for 7 years previously and mentioned some recent dating experiences. In general, I got the impression he lives a fairly simple and peaceful life. All of these teachers considered their work to be at the center of their existence, and Charles talked about the need to balance that with a personal life. I asked him how he does that:

> Silence is one. Number two, writing poetry. Like, writing poetry really brings me into this blessed wholeness. Walks in the natural world. This last thing is...like, I don't know, it's hard to explain how it helps me, but I have started boxing…and it has really helped me be more firm, be more direct, and it is actually helping me form better boundaries with my students. Because, you know, when you're boxing, you don't want to let anybody into your space... So, it's helping me in ways that I've never imagined.

Charles's Timeline

1981: Year born

2009-2010: Psychological testing and tutoring

2014-present: First teaching job, as 4th grade teacher at "Living Hearts," a Waldorf-inspired school

Albert

Albert has a loving intelligence. He teaches 2nd grade at Rainbow Community School, the P-8 private holistic school, in Asheville, North Carolina, where I have been executive director for 11 years (see more description of RCS in Chapter I). Albert was 33 when he completed an M.A. in Education and accepted his first teaching job in a 2nd and 3rd grade combined classroom at Rainbow Mountain Children's School (as it was called at the time) in 2003.

Albert said he was blessed to grow up with "parents who were just really cool." His dad was a chaplain in the army. His father was politically liberal and concerned about the environment. "I remember he had an organic gardening magazine when I was like, seven years old, in 1977." Learning about God, going to church, and singing in church were part of growing up. Because his dad was in the military, there were many different churches and religions around, and his father would take him to many different services and ceremonies besides chapel: Filipino Catholic mass, Jewish Passover and Seders, and an African American church when they lived in Harlem. As positive as this experience was, Albert stopped going to church as a teenager:

> The stories just seemed too complicated and too made up, the whole church thing…this God is so needy. He gets all sad if you don't worship him and stuff. It doesn't make any sense for an all-powerful God…. My brother, again, he really just laid it out, and I've always had this image in my mind, of those old computer cards that they would program computers with. It was like cards with holes in it, right?… He said this to me when I was a kid and it stuck in my head: He said, the way he imagined it, he imagined all the different religions have their own little card with the holes punched in it for their program – what it's about, what's

important to you. He said, "If you stacked all the religions, stacked all the cards up, and you held it up, there's gonna be just a few places where the holes go all the way through. The same for all the religions, right? So that's kinda what I believe." And I was like, "Cool." This informed my ideas too, you know? Just the universal truths of love and service and that kinda thing.

Albert majored in Anthropology in college, where he enjoyed studying the religions of many people and experientially exploring many spiritual paths himself, including Native American, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Rastafarian. Then a potter he worked for gave him a copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and through Yogananda Albert experienced deep spiritual understanding:

> Boom! That really did it for me, really, big time because a lot of them talk about God, who use that language, God, which I was used to, you know, but he [Yogananda] made it really personal, really made it about the way to God is through yourself, you know, not looking for some outside stuff. And then I just really got into that and some meditating, definitely I started meditating and like, almost positive affirmations, but more just affirmative prayer.

Affirmative prayer is still an important part of Albert's spiritual practice today.

After doing myriad jobs, including working in construction and a metaphysical shop in Sedona, Arizona, Albert decided to pursue teaching. He has an acute memory of his teachers growing up, from the ones who were really inspiring and "the best teacher ever" to the ones who were a disappointment. As a precocious child, he would find himself thinking from a teacher's point of view, and he remembered saying to himself, "I could do this." Plus, he realized that he could "never sit in front of a computer all day. I can't sit still." He likes the physicality of teaching and the variety. "It never appealed to me or occurred to me that I would just do some job just to make money." So he got an M.A. in teaching.

Albert still works at the first place he was hired: Rainbow Mountain Children's School, now called RCS. He remembered being asked about his spiritual practice at the interview. When I asked him if that question was a surprise to him, he replied:

> Not from this school, I wasn't, because of it being a holistic school. And even back then I could get online and look at the philosophy of the school. And back then, it was five domains [physical, social/moral, emotional, mental, spiritual] and multiple intelligences was their model. Then, you know, the school was founded by Sufis in the 1970s, Sufis from Harvard, I guess, so they had the Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory. That was big when I first started. That was talked about a lot.

Since his original teaching job was at a holistic school, Albert incorporated spirituality into his teaching from the beginning. He would "pick and choose and borrow what I consider the best of each of all religions or spiritual traditions. And so that's what the school was doing. That's what I had always done also, so I could do that." He started with a co-teacher who trained him:

> We would just try to create a magical atmosphere. That was a lot of the spiritual thing, the spirituality, to create a magical atmosphere where anything is possible, believing in the unseen things, or not and just honoring people's beliefs. There was…so much about fairies back then, flowers and fairies and the little people. Yeah. Just a desire for the magical, fostering the unseen. But like I said, honoring people's beliefs.

By the time I started as executive director at RCS in 2007, Albert was a very popular teacher – very beloved by children and parents for his deep love of children, his joy of singing with his students, and his engaging teaching style. I looked to Albert as a mentor, and he helped me understand spiritual development in children and how to foster that through holistic teaching. Albert also welcomed me and my husband to Asheville, so I consider him one of my first friends there.

Today, Albert teaches 20 2nd graders with an assistant teacher. Generally, about 20% of his students have special needs that require some interventions or modifications.

Albert gets to know some of his families quite well on a personal level and, in particular, is very good friends with several RCS alumni families from previous years. He is viewed as a leader among the faculty at RCS and is the faculty "facilitator" for the year, and was voted by his peers to be the next faculty representative to the board.

We had Albert's first interview at his house. It was the first time I had heard Albert's history put together into one story. I was incredibly touched as he became emotional more than once while talking about the children. For our second interview, which was in his classroom, Albert led a centering where we had our eyes closed and he directed me to move my eyes around and touch them while seeing different aspects of light. Before sitting down to write his bio, I engaged in another practice I learned from Albert, a five-part affirmative prayer. I was so glad Albert volunteered to participate in the research. It is always a pleasure to learn from Albert.

Albert's Personal Life

Albert lives with his girlfriend of 2 years, who also works at RCS. Combining work and a relationship is a good arrangement in some ways, as he noted that part of the difficulty with his previous marriage to a woman who was not a teacher was that he worked too much! He has a grown daughter from that previous marriage who also lives in Asheville, and his parents, to whom he is close, live within a 2-hour drive. Albert loves to spend time in the outdoors and said he needs time alone in nature to be grounded. He and his partner live in a very modest home outside of town, where they have easy access to the wilderness. They especially like to canoe and paddleboard down the mountain rivers, and Albert, always a music lover, likes to sing and play guitar around the fire.

Albert's Timeline

> 1970: Year born

> 1996-98: Early job(s) as a metaphysical shopkeeper and in construction

> 2003: First teaching job, teaching with spiritual pedagogy at RCS in 2nd and 3rd grade

> 2010-12: Break from teaching

> 2012-2013 Reunion with teaching at the 4th, 5th, and 6th grade levels

> 2013-present: 2nd grade teacher at RCS

Edmond

Edmond described his teaching persona as "the jester king," which matches his playful and snazzy style. He has about 18 years of teaching in his career, and currently teaches 1st grade at a small Waldorf school in a small southeastern city. He so badly wanted to teach in a Waldorf school that he helped initiate and found the school where he works and accepted such a small starting salary that he is still in debt from the school's early years. His school started out very small with multi-age classrooms and has recently developed stable enrollment. In traditional Waldorf schools, elementary teachers "loop," or follow, one group of students – starting with them in 1st grade and remaining their teacher all the way through 8th grade. This year, Edmond is "starting over" on a loop so he teaches 17 first graders.

The tuition is very modest at Edmond's school, which is also a cooperative. Edmond's students are primarily White, many with unique learning styles. This year he said was his most challenging year in terms of the behavior of many of his students, who

already had a reputation from kindergarten for being an incredibly difficult group. He said he had one student, in particular, who once "looked right at me and swiped everything off my desk," who is also teaching Edmond a lot about love. "This guy could make four or five people cry just on his way to wash his hands for a snack. Maybe not cry but definitely complain, and that's not just once a day." Since Waldorf schools loop, he will be with this group at least until 6th grade.

Edmond is a teacher leader at his school. Many people see him as the founder, as he certainly was tenacious about bringing his school to life. He has seen many teachers, staff members, and board members come and go during the 7 years his school has been open, and many of those with whom he co-founded the school will be lifelong friends. As a gregarious person who loves the Waldorf model, Edmond welcomes new teachers and happily mentors them, building friendships and collegial support.

I have known Edmond for about 10 years and always considered him someone fun to run into at music shows or other events. I first interviewed Edmond for my pilot interview almost 6 months before engaging in any other interviews for this research. After completing all the interviews with the other participants in this study, I asked if he would be willing to become an "official" participant, and we conducted the second interview almost 1 year after his first.

Since Edmond was interviewed for my pilot and before I had developed my interviewing protocol, his interviews are not quite as rich and full as the other participants, and the reader will find his quotes are not represented as often as the others; but I found his way of looking at spiritual pedagogy somewhat unique from the other

participants and too valuable to leave out. He expressed the most esoteric views of the group, often referring to past or future lives and spiritual beings.

For both interviews, Edmond was incredibly amusing and delightfully distractible. The first interview was in his backyard, and he would slide seamlessly from a narrative about teaching into naming all the birds in his yard and telling me about their humorous habits and personalities, saying things like, "Those Carolina wrens have pluck!" At one point he started weeding while talking. The second interview was in his classroom, and he spent about half of it moving about his room, watering plants, and so on. Clearly, Edmond has a lot of energy.

Edmond said he grew up in working-class suburbia outside a steel-belt city. He said he "liked being normal, I liked being average, because it meant I could connect with anybody." He remembered his childhood friends with great fondness, having been in the same neighborhood through high school:

> On the other side of the street is the Polanski brothers, it's like three bruiser boys. Just add me and we can play two on two any game, all kinds of tag. The woods behind their house had a great creek. We'd build dams and find crayfish, and up behind my house through the woods there was a field at the top of the hill with the water tower there that we would climb when we were teenagers. Don't tell Mom.

His mother was a devout Catholic, his dad not so much. He went to Catholic school through 3rd grade and then public school after that. He and his family all went to mass twice a week.

> I grew up around a lot of really, kind of, pure people, and I had a beautiful experience of having that family with both sides of grandparents. I even had great-grandparents, you know? So I got to have a really cool childhood as far as family and friends, and very healthy childhood.

The one tragedy of his childhood occurred when he was 10. As a Boy Scout, he was going door to door when a German Shepherd attacked him to the point of being hospitalized and undergoing surgery, resulting in lifelong pain. "He would [repeatedly] bite a chunk off of my leg (I was in shorts), run away, chew it up, and then come back and bite me again." But even that experience Edmond recalled with a positive attitude. As he showed me his huge, deep scars, he talked about how much worse it could have been:

> The angels saved me down here [pointing to his ankle]. There was scrapes across my Achilles tendon and nobody knows whether it was teeth, or claws, or what. But that would've changed my life. Everything. I'm sore but I'm okay.

The settlement from the dog attack ended up paying for Edmond to go to college in Hawaii, which was an extra-ordinary experience. He says he got into "all things Hippie," including an expanded spirituality, which was especially heavily Native American-influenced. He had always loved children. One of his grandmothers had more than 100 foster children over time, and he loved playing with the toddlers. In his senior year of high school, he ended up in a childhood development class that was also a childcare center. "I had a blast!" So he just kind of assumed he would become a teacher. He did not even remember it being a "decision."

Edmond said that learning about the "anthroposophic" teachings of Rudolf Steiner for his teacher training made his spirituality come to fruition. "And Steiner, really that whole world view, fits it all there. And so one of the things I already believed were almost substantiated and then way expanded upon for me." He explained in his animated, humorous, storytelling style:

> I believe that all things physical are representations of spiritual beings that is almost a greater, all-impenetrating reality that really supports and carries us through…. I personally believe in karma and past lives and future lives and coming back together with similar groups of people to work on things and

screwing it up sometimes and knowing you're gonna have to do it again – like, crap! And hopefully, do the best you can so you don't have to do it all over again.

And almost like as you're walking through your days, they're like these arrows that kind of come from your past. And it might be a beneficial arrow that shoots a bag of money out of the sky or it might be one that hits you in the leg, like, "Oh god! Why'd that happen!?" But it's something that you created in the past and you're constantly creating those same things and sending them forward in your next life and kind of the cyclical experience of moving through time and experiences.

Edmond's spiritual views and Steiner's teaching greatly influence how he views children and his purpose as an educator. For Edmond, teaching is important karmic work, and he takes the development of children's souls and spiritual life very seriously. He also likes to have fun. He told a story about a meditation he did with his fellow teachers, where each of them "saw" who they are in terms of their teacher persona:

For me, I was like, "I'm a jester king." [In a cartoony voice] I'm like, "Hey! Look at this! Woah! It's so crazy. And then this happened and this did. Can you believe that?! I can't believe that! Woah!" And then [in a mock formal voice], "Thou shalt sit down now. Sit. Thank you." And that's how I roll. It's like if I'm not having a good time, no one's having a good time. And I refuse to not have a good time, so we're gonna get back to it soon.

…Yeah, and so for me, like how do I treat the students? I treat them like we're all on this adventure, on this adventure tour: 'These people did the craziest things! Egyptians, they actually drank beer all the time and ate fish and bread. That was their favorite. Fish, bread and like they had some fruits and some different things, but where's the fish, bread and beer? That's pretty good actually. And the beer wasn't as alcoholic. They didn't get drunk. It was like a multi-beverage thing. But it's still funny to say beer, isn't it?' That kind of stuff.

As Edmond told stories about his playful teaching experiences, I found myself laughing at his amusing phrases and made-up dialogues, complete with comedic voices and sound effects. He considered joy one of the most important spiritual aspects of teaching. I very much enjoyed studying Edmond's transcripts and hearing all his stories. I hope to embody joy in my portrayal of him.

Edmond's Personal Life

Edmond has a beloved wife of 2 years who is also a teacher, and actually gave up her fairly lucrative teaching career in the Northeast to move to Edmond's location. They have a 2-year-old with whom Edmond loves to play and tell stories about. They live in a tiny cabin-like home in a vibrant neighborhood where everyone has small houses, so the vibe is very communal, with people spending time outdoors. As a family, they enjoy going to family-friendly shows and events around their town.

Edmond's Timeline

1979: Year born

2000: Afterschool teacher at YMCA

2003: Assistant teacher at a Montessori school

2006: Assistant teacher at a Waldorf School, using spiritual pedagogy

2007: Regular classroom teacher at a Waldorf school

2009-2010: Homeschool Waldorf-style teacher

2011-present: Lead teacher at a Waldorf school

Conclusion and Reflection

I got to know each of these people for their deepest longings, their highest selves, their quirks, and their failings; I love them for their flaws and especially their humility, which they openly shared with me. We experienced being human together. While being in their presence, I experienced a feeling of love, perhaps a feeling similar to what they expressed feeling for their students. As so many of them said, "Children just want to be seen and heard more than anything." But who is going to replenish these teachers who

give and give so much of themselves? Who is going to see and hear *them*? I hope I did…I

think I did.

Chapter V

THE FINDINGS:

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PATH OF SPIRITUAL LEARNING

As explained in Chapter III, the methodology for this study was phenomenological and hermeneutical. I interviewed each of seven teachers twice, with the second interview providing an opportunity to probe more deeply and reflect upon responses from the first interview. Questions were open-ended, with the intention of gaining a phenomenological understanding of what teaching with spiritual pedagogy looks like, feels like, and what teachers learn from it – with the intention of addressing the question: *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?*

My approach to the inquiry was not to gain as much data as possible, but to unveil insights into the inner experience of participants and the meaning they ascribe to their experiences. I did not begin the research process knowing which adult education theories I would end with so that I could, with as much epoché as possible, explore participants' inner lives without guiding the path or destination of their expressions. I often relied upon intuition and insight to guide my questions and conclusions.

The process was one of discovery from beginning to end. The interview experience felt participatory as each interviewee and I were carried away with a mutual experience of co-created learning – a collaboration between one another and with spirit. I

left interviews feeling elated, as if both the teacher being interviewed and myself experienced something profoundly shared yet transcendent. As Charles reflected on the interview process during our focus group:

> I kept overhearing myself say things that I didn't know I knew.... I wish I could remember the questions now, but just remembering this opening that occurred in me when they were asked. But also I remember – as I was answering some of your questions and just speaking on that – how much enthusiasm and how much love for teaching, so just remembering why I chose this path. So I am very grateful. (Charles)

Seven participants were few enough in number that I could build relationships with each teacher and have time to probe deeply through empathetic understanding, yet large enough that I found mirrored experiences and thoughts among the participants that seemed to capture the essence of the phenomenon.

I waited until I had read every interview transcript at least twice before I started making a preliminary table of possible themes and subthemes – something that started to occur very naturally when the time was ripe. From my research journal at that time:

> TO SELF – remember that themes are ESSENCES. Essential themes. Eidetic. Remember to feel them and not start thinking about them too much. This is not a deductive process. Be sure your early exploration into themes is not driving your analysis.

Six Themes

After spending months reading and working with the data, six eidetic themes eventually emerged along with many subthemes (see Table 1). The six primary themes are: Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, Openness, Authenticity, and Meaning and Purpose.

Table 1

The Six Eidetic Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes and Descriptions	
Connection *A special and secure sense of relational connection creates a field for spiritual learning.*	**Emotional and spiritual safety**	Teachers engage in intentional practices to create *emotional and spiritual safety.*
	Vulnerability	A shift in consciousness and greater empathy emerges from courageous *vulnerability*.
	Unconditional love	*Unconditional love* enhances relational learning.
	Co-learning	Teachers and students share mutual respect as *co-learners* – equals in the spiritual realm.
Aliveness *Spirituality is recognized as a felt aliveness – a force.*	**Awakening the senses**	Teachers engage in *awakening the senses* to the wonder of life
	Oneness	This felt aliveness can be sensed by anyone, anywhere, because of an interconnection of all beings – *a oneness*.
	Interconnectivity with the natural world	*The natural world* can animate the sense of aliveness and interconnectivity.
	Infinite learning	This living "force" is perceived as eternal, endless, and infinite, making *learning unlimited.*
	Eternal beings	Children, as part of this interconnected, alive force are perceived as *eternal beings.*
	Intuition and imagination	Felt aliveness can be tapped into through *intuition and imagination*.
	Experiential	Aliveness can be felt and shared, but it cannot adequately be articulated, *only experienced.*
	Timeless	Felt aliveness eludes time by arriving at unplanned moments when *time disappears or expands.*
Mindfulness *Mindfulness builds spiritual capacities that inform learning and loving action.*	**Being present**	*Being present*, or "in the moment" and *aware* is a cherished aspect of mindfulness.
	Non-judgment	Being *without judgment* is an aspect of mindfulness that is essential for unconditional learning.
	Listening and seeing	*Listening and seeing* are aspects of mindfulness that help humans to learn and to heal.
	Practice	Disciplined *practice* and ritual help to develop mindfulness.

Table 1 (continued)

Openness *An open ego and reflection turn uncomfortable experiences into opportunities for spiritual learning.*	Flexibility	**General *openness, along with flexibility*, is a trait that lubricates learning.**
	Self-reflection	Teaching, as with life, inherently involves suffering and struggle, and *self-reflection* creates learning out of suffering.
	Not-knowing and questioning	*Not-knowing and questioning* can be an uncomfortable state that is necessary for true learning.
	Unlearning societal conditioning	Learning also involves "*unlearning" societal conditioning* and shedding attachment to one's identity.
Authenticity *Authenticity is a gateway to internal freedom.*	Individuality and universality	Authenticity is a combination of expressing one's *unique individual creativity and one's universal true nature.*
	Healing and wholeness	Healing and recognizing wholeness are aspects of uncovering authenticity.
	Developmental process integrating multiple aspects	Building authenticity is a *developmental process* that integrates all aspects of The Path –Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, and Openness
	Inner freedom	Authenticity is a gateway to inner freedom
	Transformative journey	The path to authenticity is a *transformational journey* that is ever-unfolding
Meaning and Purpose *Imbedded within teaching with spiritual pedagogy is deep meaning and purpose.*	Most important learning	The *most important learning moments* are spiritual in nature.
	Practical	Spiritual pedagogy has *practical purposes*, such as helping the classroom run smoothly, enhancing academic potential, and helping students prepare for the rigors of life.
	Individual	Teachers use spiritual pedagogy to *help individuals* learn, develop, and heal.
	Collective	Spiritual pedagogy has a larger purpose to work toward *collective social change.*

Each participant was offered the opportunity to participate in an optional focus group experience, which acted as an informal member check on the data. Of the seven teachers, four – Albert, Edmond, Maya, and Charles – chose to participate. I shared the themes and subthemes with the teachers before the focus group, and we used our time together to question whether the themes resonated with each teacher, what they might add, and to find out what clarifications or contradictions they had. Some salient data were added to the themes and one critical correction, which will be discussed in Chapter VII.

As a phenomenological study with open-ended interviewing, I was not trying to confirm participants' congruency on a series of theories or themes. Nonetheless, the responses of the teachers, though very different in texture and style, were uncannily similar. The level of similar thematic thoughts and experiences that were expressed among participants was widespread, nearly 100% on many themes and subthemes. Since the interviews were so open-ended, if a teacher did not mention a particular aspect of a theme or subtheme, I did not believe it was necessarily because she did not agree with the aspect or did not experience it, but merely because it did not come up in the interview. For example, without any "leading," all but one of the participants called her or his teaching practice either a spiritual practice or a spiritual path. Since I did not ask any questions to imply this, the fact that one teacher did not make this statement did not seem as if he would necessarily disagree with it; in fact, at the focus group, when I displayed the findings in the form of a path, this participant seemed tacitly in agreement with the idea.

Therefore, as I discuss the findings throughout the next three chapters, I will often say "most" of the teachers or "many" of the teachers, without confirming how many, as

the quantity seems immaterial to the concept. Likewise, occasionally it is interesting to

note that one or two particular teachers emphasized a particular point. Sometimes I verify

that "all the teachers" spoke about a thought or feeling, but usually I simply state "the

teachers." I hope the reader will afford me credibility based on the heartfelt integrity I

have poured into this inquiry.

Introducing The Path of Spiritual Learning:
A Conceptual Map Illustrating the Eidetic Themes

> Having this explicit spiritual component of education and spiritual
> goals for kids – the goal of spiritual growth – I think it makes me
> much more aware of my own spiritual growth and development.
> ~Rebecca

As the eidetic themes emerged from the data in reductionist fashion, I was trying

to decide in which order I should list the themes, and it became clear that some of the

themes should come before others. I began to sense how the themes built on one another,

and eventually I formulated a conceptual map that describes how the themes interrelate to

create what I am now calling "The Path of Spiritual Learning." In particular, I noticed

that everything seemed to grow out of relational connection. Therefore, Connection

became the name of the "field" out of which The Path emerges. I decided that Aliveness,

Mindfulness, and Openness all belonged together as the steps on the path. I placed

Authenticity as the culmination of the Path because teachers seemed to need to "master"

each of the previous themes, before their spiritual development advanced to a state of

authenticity. Authenticity is the golden state of *being and becoming* that these teachers,

as spiritual learners, were working toward gaining and sustaining (see Figure 3).

The Path of Spiritual Learning

Figure 3. The Path of Spiritual Learning with six themes: Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, Openness, Authenticity, and Meaning and Purpose

All that said, The Path exhibits three inherent paradoxes.

1. There is a tautological nature to The Path. It is impossible to define one aspect of The Path without referencing other aspects. They echo one another and circle back to one another. It is no coincidence that spirituality is sometimes represented by a circle in ancient traditions. Therefore, I represent The Path with a circle.

2. The themes are interrelated, interdependent, and indistinct. Teasing the themes apart into distinct items feels disrespectful to their sacred, interconnected nature. In our focus group, for example, Edmond commented on how Connection and Authenticity

seem impossible to separate, as if they are one and the same thing. Indeed, the themes are webbed in an interconnected manner. Phenomenological inquiry is said to be a "parts and whole" experience, where the parts and the whole must be considered together.

3. The Path is iterative and not linear. It has no beginning and no end, creating a chicken or egg dilemma. For example, while Connection is the condition out of which The Path emerges, without Authenticity can Connection genuinely occur? Connection creates the field or the ground that "holds" the path together, while Authenticity is a circle in the center. Does the spiral move from the outside in or from the inside out? So while the steps on The Path are represented in a particular order, they are actually iterative. For example, throughout the teacher excerpts, "presence," an aspect of mindfulness, is a continual theme – almost as pervasive as "connection." Every time a teacher developed greater presence, it seemed as if it sparked more authenticity and openness, more aliveness, richer connection, and so on.

Finally, The Path has no ending; no one ever "arrives" at her final destination. In the classroom, this means that the teacher is not the spiritual expert who is done learning. The students and teachers are all learning along The Path. Teachers commented on how the children sometimes offer a masterful display of connection, aliveness, mindfulness, openness, and authenticity. Their comments suggested the possibility that children's spiritual development echoes that of adults.

Since the spiraling nature of The Path harkens concepts of human development, one might assume that a spiral occurs at various levels of complexity, with the children at a less complex level of spiritual development on the path than the adult teachers. For practical purposes, this is an assumption we will make – that the teachers' learning is

similar to the children's, but at more advanced levels, as the findings indicate (Figure 4).

However, creating a model of spiritual development was not the intended goal of this

study, making the whole notion of the complexity of spiritual developmental levels

beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Figure 4. Children and adults experience the spiral of
The Path of Spiritual Learning at different levels

What is important and within the scope of the phenomenological findings of this

research is that the experience of the teachers parallels that of the students – something

the teachers consistently commented on. The following comment by Albert is a perfect

example:

A lot of what I'm doing with the kids, for the kids, is for me, too, you know?... Because of stuff that I think and I believe that helps me. It's the same stuff that I teach the kids, too. You know, some basic ideas.

At our focus group, Albert added:

My perception of time also is seeing the kids grow…. And just a recent realization I've had is like, "Wait. They are not the only ones getting older! I am too! I am aging too! I am changing, developing. My life is changing too!" We talk about the kids' growth and development; it is not separate. It's all the same.

According to the responses of the teachers in this study, the experiences the teachers are offering the children are of equal value to the teachers themselves. Furthermore, the themes seemed to build on one another for the students in the same manner as they do for the teachers. As teachers analyze their students' spiritual growth and their own spiritual development, the parallel path progression emerges.

Therefore, throughout the findings, I refer to the students' experiences and the teachers' without qualifying one as more important or different from another, or even clearly distinguishing them from one another. A general rule as one reads the findings: As with the student, so for the teacher, and vice versa.

With those "ground rules" in mind, we begin our journey along The Path of Spiritual Learning. Since Connection is the foundation for the rest of the path, and less of a "step" than a condition, or a "field," I include it here in Chapter V, with the introduction to The Path. Chapter VI explains each step of The Path – Aliveness, Mindfulness, and Openness. Chapter VII is the culmination of The Path, with Authenticity as the final resolution of The Path. However, there is one more aspect of The Path that is covered in an additional chapter on the findings: Chapter VIII discusses the meaning and purpose of teaching with spiritual pedagogy, according to these teachers. Chapter VIII on the theme of Meaning and Purpose provides the "So what?" of the whole experience.

Theme One: Connection –
Relational Connection Creates a Field for Spiritual Learning

  This is the greatest environment of [spiritual] practice that I have
ever encountered…. Teaching is a hard practice. The only way you
can really effectively teach kids is to connect with them. That's where
the power is, the magic is. And in order to do that, you have to open
your own heart to them and in response, they'll open their heart to you.
And then, you have an intimacy that allows teaching to happen. And
it's always a two-way street.

                    ~Patrick

Figure 5. The Field of Connection

  The teachers of spiritual pedagogy in this study clearly expressed the importance

of connection. Relational connection – a felt connection among humans – truly is the

foundation for learning in these classrooms. Out of the safety and vibrancy of secure

connection, the conditions necessary for spiritual learning emerge. Connection provides a foundation of emotional and spiritual safety from which all learners, students and teachers alike, can explore their inner depths and take vulnerable risks. Connection can be equated to love, and love is highly motivating. The love of learning spurs growth, and the love for another inspires dedication – a motivation to please.

The teachers in this study continually emphasized and returned to the theme of Connection. It filtered into all other aspects of spiritual pedagogy, and we will continue to see it sprinkled throughout the findings in other themes.

This section discusses the subthemes of Connection (Table 2). It provides some extensive examples of activities teachers engage in to build connection and some of the resulting experiences, so the reader gains a phenomenological understanding of a secular spiritual classroom. There are four subthemes for Connection: emotional and spiritual safety, vulnerability, unconditional love, and co-learning.

Table 2

The Theme of Connection and Its Subthemes

Connection *A special and secure sense of relational connection creates a field for spiritual learning.*	**Emotional and spiritual safety**	Teachers engage in intentional practices to create *emotional and spiritual safety.*
	Vulnerability	A shift in consciousness and greater empathy emerges from courageous *vulnerability*.
	Unconditional love	*Unconditional love* enhances relational learning.
	Co-learning	Teachers and students share mutual respect as *co-learners* – equals in the spiritual realm.

Teachers Engage in Intentional Practices to Create Emotional and Spiritual Safety

> I'll just say it in terms of energy…. It's sort of a visual for me of an
> energy…sort of like a tube…. That connection that exists feels very
> tangible either between two people, like, between a student and me;
> and then during a group experience it sort of feels like a force field,
> like an energy field that's created. That feels tangible. Tangible.
> ~Rebecca

Rebecca's quote speaks to two types of relationships that are essential for the spiritual classroom. One is the relationship between the teacher and each student, which she described as being like a tube, and the other is the connection of the whole group (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Two types of connection: Teacher-to-student(s) on the left
and interconnection between students on the right

The first – the relational connection between the teacher and each student – is foundational to spiritual learning. All the teachers in the study spoke with emotion about the special bond and connection between them and their students, and how important and meaningful those relationships are for both the student and for the teacher.

Participant teachers said they consciously engage in different ways to nurture and express their love and caring for their students. Teachers of younger students talked about personal practices such as holding each child in their heart every day. For example, Albert does this in the morning before the students arrive. He and Charles both said they make sure to give eye contact, and preferably physical contact such as a hand on a shoulder, with every student as the children arrive.

Albert made a point to mention that physical touch is a basic human need, and he will usually ask for consent before touching someone, but a simple hand on the shoulder or a hug can go a long way toward building connection: "I had a kid the other day so frustrated. She did so well. She tried so hard. She did it! And then I said, 'I need a hug'" (Albert).

Several times throughout their interviews, teachers quoted themselves in expressing their deep caring directly to individual students, with phrases such as "You know me. I'm for you" (Maya) or "We're here to support you. I love you and we're here. I believe in you" (Albert).

Albert, in particular, also stressed the empathy a teacher needs to have for each child. He is "actively, actively, *actively* trying to see it from the child's perspective." Albert meant this from an emotional and psychological perspective, and also from a practical perspective:

> You have to think of the flow of, like, an activity or lesson, and your materials, and space, and time, and stuff like that, on how it's gonna flow. But also, with the kids, you gotta be doing, like, how long they're gonna have to be sitting there, what they're experiencing, and what they're doing. Like, I'm trying to make it fun. (Albert)

The other type of relationship, which Rebecca described as a force field, is the relationship of the whole group. All the teachers said that in order to develop a safe and secure environment for a group to experience spiritual learning, students have to feel connected to one another and to the group as a whole.

Maya, who works with high school students, described how critical it is to establish trust between students:

> What good are all the deep relationships you make with students if you're out sick and it becomes a dangerous place, quote-unquote "dangerous place," for students? And it does. It becomes "Lord of the Flies." And that's no fault of theirs. I mean, students with trauma, even fairly mild trauma, their first instinct, you know, the first kinda instinctual thing they do when the alpha is missing is, "Who's in charge? Like, who has the power here to hurt me?" I mean, it's not conscious...they reference to the person who has the most power in the room, and they're extremely good at it, right? They're so vigilant and so observant about, "Who has the power to hurt me and/or to control this space?" And so, many of them, with the teacher missing, "Oh, shit," you know? "I'm gonna do it." Like, that's when they exert their power, whatever way they do, as a bully, as a clown, but they're gonna control the space because the central person who was holding everything together and had deep relationships with everybody is missing.
>
> So, I have a graphic I use in my slideshow that shows this teacher in the middle with a cape on, and it has all these arrows to all the students, and she's managing or he's managing relationships with the admin, and the faculty. There's arrows out and there's arrows to each student, and it's great. They have an amazing classroom. But take them [the teacher] out, and it's terrible. So the restorative diagram has the...she still has her cape on. She's a little bit smaller. She's part of the circle, and the arrows...yes, she has an arrow to each student, but it's lighter. You know, it's a lighter shade, and the kids' arrows to each other are stronger…. So you take away that teacher, what happens? You still have all those kids referencing each other and having an understanding of where they stand. (Maya)

Patrick likes to use experiences in the natural world to create group trust. He has the privilege of taking groups of students on multiday pack trips, where they have to rely on one another, sometimes in matters of life or death:

> I spend a few days kind of just creating some intimacy in the group where we're all there working together, everything we do affects everybody else, you know, and we try to support each other. (Patrick)

Patrick said that after a few days of living and working together, students form bonds that aid in safe connection:

> And so you can set up these dialogues, which, you know, they're difficult conversations. They're awkward topics: racism, culture, different cultures, you know, different sexual orientations, all that sort of thing. And they're always hard to talk about, but in this environment it's pretty safe. (Patrick)

A circle of trust. All of the teachers configure students in a circle for particular practices that build sacred trust. Some of the teachers called these practices "being in circle," such as Maya. The configuration of a literal circle seems to help build a connection of trust. Each person in the circle can see one another, and each has an equal place in a circle. It is no coincidence that connection is represented as a circle on The Path conceptual map.

Albert uses a circle for the daily morning practice that he and his colleagues at Rainbow Community School call "centering," which starts the day by strengthening the group's connection. Centering is about 25 minutes long, and it starts with an opening ritual designed to bring everyone's attention to the room, to their inner being, and to each other. He described his opening ritual of centering:

> We sit in a circle, and the expectation is silence. It's not like, hanging out, chatting with your friends time, which they need reminders of that. Anyway, we have a candle in the center, in the middle, sitting on a tray that we call the altar. And children can set that up with different crystals and rocks and objects of beauty from nature to have in the classroom.
> …We start off, somebody draws, it's their job to draw two names from the bucket. And the first name, that person leads us in three deep breaths. We all do three deep breaths together. And then the second name, gives us a word, something that we can all think of, as I light the candle. And sometimes I say like, "Something that inspires you. Something that helps you…reminds you to be your best…something that we can all think about. It helps us feel good, or inspires us, or helps us be our best."
> And they might say something like "kittens," you know? "How does that inspire us to be our best?" Or, "Well, why did you choose that word?" And if they don't know, I'll try to…make a spiritual connection. I'm good at metaphors and

just making analogies and connecting things.... I'll say a few words almost every day about what the children light the candle for, of what it means to me. And for me, that's kind of a spiritual thing, looking for the best that's in this word. What can inspire me about this? Oh kitten? Just like, innocent, cute, curious about the whole world, adventurous. All right. I wanna do that. I wanna be like that. Yeah. Kittens, cool. And then it's time for me to light the candle.

Oh, when we do the three deep breaths, I often say to them, especially in the beginning of the year, and then periodically throughout the year, remember we're breathing all the time. Our body is so intelligent. We're so wise inside that our body is breathing all the time. From the minute you were born, your body has been breathing and without even thinking about it, asleep, awake, whatever.

And then invariably some child says, "Well, I'm not breathing when I go underwater and go swimming." And I'll say, "Thanks for raising your hand for that. But that's right. There are times when you're not breathing because you can control it also. It's something that's automatic, but you can think about it and have control over. You can hold your breath if you want to, or we can think about our breathing right now as we're doing these three deep breaths. You can actually think about it."

And when we're thinking about it all together and we're all breathing together, it can be called harmony. We're all coming together as one. And so yeah, it's like automatic or we're thinking about it. So we breathe together." I say that a lot.

After the three deep breaths and lighting the candle for a word, we do a greeting around the circle just saying each other's names…I'll tell them…. "A person's name, a person's own name, that's the sweetest sound to that person. That's the sweetest sound in any language, the sweetest word that they could ever hear. So when you speak to someone, it's great to say their name." So we practice that and look into each other's eyes as we talk a lot about seeing the best in other people when we look at them, to see the very best in them, say their name.

So I'll say, "Good morning, Renee." And Renee would say, "Good morning, Albert." And we go around the circle like that. I mean, it's just a little thing, and sometimes it goes…it's sometimes it's silly, sometimes it's fun, and sometimes we're a lot deeper and we're doing a namaste and being the best we can be and seeing the best in others.

I say that a lot throughout the day. "Look around. Look around at these people in the circle. This is your community. You wanna be the very best for your community and see the very best in others." Yeah. I say that a lot.

We do appreciations for each other, fairly regularly. I'm pretty sure it's just a social thing just to say like, "Hey, I appreciate somebody playing with me on the playground." But to look at someone and say that, it's pretty deep and it feels great to be appreciated. It's really good. You're a part of a community. You're a part of something bigger. You see that your actions have an impact on other people.

We sing songs. That's a big, for me, a spiritual thing. Like I said before, when everybody's coming together and singing…. "Breathing in, Breathing out," words are attributed then, I guess, to, I can't ever say his name, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist.

Renee: Do you know the words to that?

Albert: "*Breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out. I am blooming as a flower. I am fresh as the dew. I am solid as a mountain. I am firm as the earth. I am free. Breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out. I am water reflecting what is real, what is true. I feel there is a space deep inside of me. I am free. I am free. I am free.*"

Whenever I play that song, that's definitely when I look at each individual child around the circle, because I've played this song so many times on the guitar. I've played it for years now…. For about six years now, I guess, I've been playing that song. So I can play it without really even thinking about it. I play it a lot of different ways. So I'm very mindful during that song too. I go around the circle. I look at each individual child in the…well, in the eyes if they're looking at me. Sometimes, they're usually not, but sometimes they do look up at me. And if they look up at me, I maintain the eye contact with them until they look away. I never look away. I'm just singing, just looking right into their eyes. Yes.

I get goosebumps nearly every day, like major, just *huge*. And sometimes, I get choked up singing the same song that I've sung so many hundreds of times! And, you know, I just want to see their best. So we talk about, I'm water reflecting what is real and what is true. And we say that water reflects best when it's calm. (Albert)

Rebecca, who also works at RCS, engages her students in centering every morning as Albert does, but as a 6th grade teacher, her centerings have some age-appropriate differences. No matter what age or what style, the most important aspect of centering is the sense of connection that is created from this time spent together in a circle, usually seated on a rug.

Rebecca talked about "the rug" symbolically as a place where good energy collects. She made reference to a science experiment one RCS student conducted where he gave "ugly energy" to an apple slice for a period of time, and to another apple slice he and his family gave positive, loving attention; the difference between the two apple slices over time was clearly visible, with one appearing brown with icky gooey slimy areas and shriveled edges, while the other looked tarnished but still edible.

The rug [the circle] is like the apple, or the famous water experiments with the water molecules. So the rug is just a container where you can either create… positive energy that builds up over time in a tangible way, and I don't exactly

know how to explain it, but I know that you can feel it. I believe you can feel it when you walk into a space. I think people feel it when they come to Rainbow just as a school. It just is a good feeling. (Rebecca)

Rebecca compared the feeling in her class to that of "a family," as did several other teachers. Rebecca said her class forms a group identity. They even have a class mascot they choose together each year, with this past year being "the Pegasi." That group identity, whether represented symbolically, as in Rebecca's class mascot, or tacitly understood, is the foundation for the group relational connection, and it must be intentionally built with the guidance of the teacher for spiritual learning to occur.

Maya builds safety and trust among students through a deeply felt connection of oneness. The students she typically works with are "emotionally damaged," and their response to previous trauma is to be constantly in a state of vigilance. Her task is to help them build safe connection so they can relax enough to drop their "masks."

Really, what is spiritual learning for the students? And what am I attempting to teach them in terms of the spiritual realm? And so, I think about a simple goal of creating the conditions in which they can feel themselves as the oneness, that they can feel a deep connection to others in a spiritual way.

That is, "I am part of this huge mass of creation and I am okay in that," meaning, "I am held by that," meaning, "I am not alone." So…then there's two things I want to do. One is to create the safety necessary to drop your masks, because the masks prevent kids and myself from tapping into that connection, the oneness and our kind of true nature that wants to be expressed but is buried, so safety is required.

And then also, secondly, a felt sensation of connection. So that is where the cool science piece comes in…and actually how deeply affected we are physiologically by each other. All the experiments having to do with couples and how one person can be in one room and another person in the other room and they can actually feel touch in some instances from their partner in a different room. If that is true of people who are married, then there is something more subtly true of people who spend an hour and a half or an hour in a classroom every day together.

And that is something that you can't feel unless you are really present and connected to that safety. Because you can't be present if you are vigilant for what is going to harm you. (Maya)

Humor is not taken lightly. In our focus group, participants emphasized the importance of humor in building safe relationships. Humor breaks tension and softens hearts so humans can be more open. Teachers in several interviews talked about moments when humor created a breakthrough with a student.

> This year I'm teaching in the high school and there is angst everywhere.... And you will see that student where they are hunched over. This is their gesture. And then you start bringing in humor and what I've noticed in the student is their gesture begins to open up like this [sitting up and arms opening]. And by the end of class, they are no longer sitting with their head hunched over their heart, but you actually see their heart is out in front of them.
>
> That's the best I can describe it right now. I think there is definitely an opening and release. It helps to release tension in the body.... Sometimes I think humor can even bring you back to a sense of belonging. (Charles)

Maya summed up her approach to classroom humor in a plaque that demonstrates the importance of humility in building connection:

> Laughing at yourself in the moment of making big mistakes or little mistakes, like really laughing, I find that to be very powerful for the students, and I think a very important spiritual lesson….
>
> I have on my desk this little block…. It says, "Number 1. We are in space. Number 2. No one knows what is going on. Number 3. I love you." It's just the best. It is laughing at the craziness of this journey we're on, flying through space on this rock. No one knows what the hell is going on and "I love you." The humor in my classroom is about that. And when I make mistakes, and just to see them – they will laugh at themselves when they make mistakes – is the greatest joy for me. (Maya)

Albert added that humor can build connection through building empathy:

> I think a lot of humor has to do with metaphor and the change of perspective, shifting perspective again. It is taking one thing and putting it into another perspective that makes it funny. "We're all on a big rock." It is a different point of view that makes it funny. Tones or taking the words and putting them in a different point of view and that is a spiritual thing, I think. It is a step on the way to empathy, and compassion, and other things, seeing from different perspectives and different points of view. So I think that is where a lot of humor can help that open up. (Albert)

Finally, regarding humor, Edmond clarified that sarcasm is to be avoided:

Like, sarcastic remarks and stuff, that is not a safe area… And for me, I realized, "Wow," that sarcastic remarks are just untruth. It is saying the opposite of what is true. And that is not safe. (Edmond)

A Shift in Consciousness and Greater Empathy
Emerges From Courageous Vulnerability

I'm proud of the kids when they share [vulnerable] things, because I feel like it really takes courage. And I think it makes everyone feel closer. I think it makes me feel like I know them better and...I imagine that that is part of why we have less teasing and less bullying…because when you understand someone's most painful moments or when you're even just aware of them, I think they have more compassion for each other.
~Rebecca

All learning, but especially spiritual learning, requires risk-taking in an emotionally safe space. This subtheme demonstrates why Connection, as a theme, is described as a "Field of Connection" on The Path of Spiritual Learning. The "field" creates conditions of safety. Rebecca told a story about how the tenderness and trust that centering creates after many years "holds" the group in safety and helps adolescents process life's experiences together. She told about a 6th grade student with Asperger's who typically has a hard time expressing emotions. When his baby nephew passed away from medical complications, he courageously asked Rebecca if he could lead the centering that day and share about Baby Randy. She explained in her interview that some of the kids had experienced death in their immediate family, so it was not a new topic, but hearing and seeing the photos about a baby with serious medical issues dying was not easy. She called it "sad, but really beautiful," and she knew that the relationships and rituals in the class were strong enough to hold this boy's grief. She summed up her words and thoughts during that centering as such:

There's nothing elaborate you have to do or say, but just to say, "That's really sad. I'm really sorry. Would you like us to act this way or this way?" I think it

was, it felt important and I feel like it was helpful for Carson to have that space to share and not feel like, again, it was some kind of secret. Maybe if I had been…at that age from when bad things happened, there wasn't a space for a group conversation about it or a way for the group to hold it. It was just private or maybe you were lucky enough to have some friends that you could talk about it with, but, so, I feel really lucky that we have that centering space. (Rebecca)

She explained further:

I felt, like, just that community support and that sense of ritual, and was really grateful that that is already in place – that we sit down together, that we light candles, that we're used to periods of sitting in silence together. So, I felt like we had this group language in place, so that when something hard comes up, we have a way of honoring that moment. And when something good comes up, we honor that too. (Rebecca)

Rose talked about the circle activity she uses called "dialogues," where she and

the children sit in a circle and deeply reflect on a quote by Krishamurti. She said the room

and the relationships are transformed when students share openly and intimately:

The feeling in the room when it's [the dialogue] happening is entirely different from any other time in the day, and yet, it informs and permeates the environment for the rest of the day as well. And it forms a kind of bond, a relationship of love, unconditional love after that. (Rose)

She said it took a while for the bond of trust to develop:

Now, in the beginning of the year…they are very uncertain about what to say when they're in this. But that quickly fades as soon as there are a few brave souls in the room who speak from their heart. Then they begin to see that if their peer can do it, so can they, and the room just opens up. (Rose)

In a similar story that demonstrates what happens when a "few brave souls" open

up, Rose said, "Something shifts. There's a shift in consciousness in some way. So that's

really the essence of what I feel learning and teaching is." Finally, she added:

So it just really kicked up a notch our connectedness, our relationship, to a much more, I'd say, serious and profound level. And then it really took care of everything else, because there was this trust that existed such that, you know, academically speaking, when something was asked of them, they trusted that it was coming from a good place and so they would do it. They saw that when I challenged them, when I pushed them to try harder, to put more care into

something, it was because I loved them. It wasn't because I wanted to check off some box. Anyway, there was just this feeling of trust among all of us. (Rose)

Maya, who has done a lot of work with youth who come from abusive backgrounds, said she has always naturally "created rituals in their days around connection and community so they could feel safer." In her early years of teaching, she intuitively created her practices of connection, and later learned some of the research and best practices from the field. Nowadays, she uses the science and language of restorative practices to explain why circles create safety. She explained that a vital spiritual aspect that is "embedded in our genetics" as human beings is "tribe survival." To make this point, Maya reminded me, "Ever since fire was invented, we've been gathering in circles." Her scientific explanation went on:

> If you're part of a tribe…you're gonna survive. If you're not part of a tribe, you're not. You can't, right? We're still so young as a species that that primitive understanding, like we have to belong to survive. So when students or when humans feel that their place in the tribe is disrupted, even by getting too much positive attention, there's a shame affect that alerts us to this disruption and leverages us to want to restore the equilibrium in the tribe…. So whether it's like, "You're the best student in the class. Like, you're the most amazing person." That causes as much of a shame affect for a human as does "You suck" because both of those threatens your place in the tribe. You don't wanna shine too brightly in a tribe because you could get ejected by someone in competition…. So shame is, you know, really paralyzing. (Maya)

Maya then explained why restorative practices that take place in a circle help to build connection through building belonging:

> The circle allows for you to tell your story. And when you tell your story, and then when you hear other people's stories, the shame loosens its grip from being heard and hearing others say the same kind of stories. Because we all share stories about so many things. At the same time, you're feeling this...you're in an actual circle and you're feeling this sense of connection, and belonging, and safety. So with those two things in place, the shame's power being a little dissolved because you're saying it, and also the sense of belonging, you are able to do what you need to do in life to move forward. (Maya)

Below is a description of what a circle looks like in Maya's classroom in her high

school English class of tech school kids. Maya's story really demonstrates how one child

sharing something vulnerable shifts the whole group and brings them into closer

relational connection.

> I have mostly boys…most of them are dressed in big work boots with mud on them. Some of them smell like cow. And they're, like, they're here because it's hands on, so a lot of them are very hyperactive. So every Monday we do a roses and thorns circle [naming a positive thing and a negative thing]. And this group, I tend to just keep it light...basically the kids will lead you if they wanna share something…. And then we have a talking piece, too. So in this case, we start out with a connection question that's really low risk. So this one was, "What's your favorite cereal?"
> …Everyone gave very, you know, unemotional things. "I got a deer, didn't get a deer. I had to work," you know? Often rose and thorns are like, "I had to work too much. I didn't get a deer." And then it got to this one boy and he said that his favorite cereal was Cocoa Puffs, and it was his mom's favorite, too, and his mom had cancer. And he just started crying, just tears down his face.
> And the room was like, you know, just, shh, the energy, everything just changed so dramatically. It was so still, and he just held onto it and he's trying not to cry. But he didn't say too much, but he just said, "It's really hard." And everybody, you know, if I could describe it, which I kinda don't want to analyze it; It's just his...his authenticity in that moment just kind of alerted that part of every kid in the room to connection. It's like it's magic when one person is willing to be that authentic and vulnerable. I've never seen it not just transform the room. And this true nature that just comes alive, even the kid who might be a little bit of a bully or something, they're alerted. It just wakes up inside them, so they all get to feel that. So there's just this palpable tenderness in the room, you know, even among these really burly macho boys.
> And then he just kinda looked up and all the boys started clapping. And it's like the best they could do, right?...they knew how courageous it was. They just knew that you should cheer for that…and so they did. And then the next person went and I said, "Well, let's just sit. When someone says something that's big then we should just honor that with just a little silence and just let it sit in the room for a little bit, even though it can feel a little awkward. So we're just gonna take some breaths." And you could feel in that space like people just kinda coming back to themselves and then listening to the next person. (Maya)

Vulnerability is not always about exposing one's soul through talking. Several of

the teachers said moments of silence, when experienced by a group, are just as important.

In particular, several talked about an experience that is fairly common in circles, where a

talking piece is being passed from person to person and it comes to a child who chooses

to remain silent and to simply be seen, or who does not know what to say, as in this story

by Rose:

> That's another way of knowing one's self is to see how scary in fact it can feel
> to not know what to say. And it's not just the person holding the talking piece
> who feels that. It's everybody in the room. Because we are each other in that
> moment, right? So I feel that that's valuable, and it's important, of course, that
> they feel ultimately safe in that space. So that's why we don't interrupt each other.
> I mean, that's why I hold, sort of, and have the routines that I do so that they
> really, even though there's discomfort, they are safe. No one is going to make fun
> of them. Ultimately, they've at least heard me say enough times that it's okay not
> to say anything. So, yeah. And sort of to grapple with the different experiences
> that silence brings us. (Rose)

In the phrase "*We are each other in that moment,*" Rose captured the depth of connection

that a spiritual classroom can potentially develop.

Rose's, Maya's, Rebecca's, and others' stories about students sharing deeply

personal aspects of themselves demonstrated how their classrooms develop a strong sense

of safety and trust through empathetic understanding. Indeed, the development of

empathy was a strong theme among the teachers participating in this study. For example,

Maya said:

> They [circles] cultivate, in my classroom, empathy because the safe space
> allows students to say, "I have Asperger's. Let me tell you about that." Kids don't
> do that in other classes. But, holy shit. That is what kids need, and adults need.
> Oh, that person, I don't need to be pissed at them for, like, ignoring me in the
> hallway because they have Asperger's and they didn't get my social cue. Right,
> they just don't get it. (Maya)

Unconditional Love Enhances Relational Learning

> It's all about love. And that's what teaching's about.
> ~Patrick

Love serves an important role in helping both the teacher and students learn. The nurturing feeling creates a willingness to work and learn together. It drops barriers of fear and hate, and with those obstacles out of the way, the classroom can really enter into a learning zone.

All the teachers used the word "love" to describe their relationship with the children. Patrick was probably the most effusive with the word.

> It starts with love and I try to just create an environment of love…. That's what I'm holding in my heart, is love for all these kids, and it's not that hard, because I look at them and then, I love them all. So it's easy. Even when they're being obnoxious, sometimes I love them even more. (Patrick)

Patrick also talked about boldly telling whole classes of children that he loves them, but he shared that love was something that developed over time, and once love started, it became a virtuous circle – the more love he showed his students, the more it was reflected back, and the more learning that took place.

> You know, I realize that making the effort to connect with these kids, however awkward and clunky it might be, was actually profoundly affecting my heart. Like, the attempt to make the connection was actually waking up something in me, right? And then there's kind of a feedback, you know, then they respond, and then it opens up something in me, and then it opens up something in them, and so, yeah, it was really.... It taught me so many things. It taught me patience. Not just with them, but with myself. (Patrick)

Rebecca provided a hermeneutic explanation of why love is central to being human, and therefore to the teacher/learner experience:

> It's something we know instinctively. Like when any animal is born or a human baby is born, you, like, love them and nurture them and mirror them and sort of help them develop their potential. (Rebecca)

Rebecca also called the spiritual manner of teaching a "different mindset.... It's like the difference between operating from your mind, your brain, and more of a heart-centered space."

Charles told a story about expressing love to his students that demonstrates extra-ordinary emotional pull:

> And I remember, at the end of the year [celebration with parents] last year, we had to say a little bit about each of our students. And I actually...for some reason, I don't know why I did it, I ended up getting down on one knee with each child, and I spoke to them the things that I saw in each of them….
>
> Renee: I have to back up and ask you...that was such an image that I just got, when you talked about getting down one knee and talking with each child about what you see in them…. What emotions were you experiencing when you did that?
>
> Charles: Love.… I mean, that's it. That was just complete love. I know I was in it, and someone said it was almost like this inner gesture of marrying my children. I'm married to these students. You know, like, "I'm completely committed to you."

Charles went on to describe the story:

> Charles: Well, I was only focused on the child that I was talking to. So, I started on one end, and I went all the way down the other end…. So I would kneel right in front of them. And they would be standing here, and I would be kneeling. And I would look them right in the eye while I was speaking to them. And I actually think I even took their hand, like you would if you were proposing to your.... So, I would take their hand and I would just, you know, tell them. You know, it's probably a minute or so, and then I would move to the next child.
>
> Renee: What would you see in their face?
>
> Charles: That they were seen. That they were loved. That they felt that I cared. And, of course, a little bit of shyness. Because I mean, I don't think many kids experience someone seeing them and speaking to them in that way.

The understanding these teachers have of love is deep, timeless, mystical – truly unconditional because it does not seem to be attached to a personal ego. In this regard, it is a love that is unattached and endless. Rose explained that so many relationships in life "are so steeped in the personal, and therefore fraught with sort of selfish desires, and needs, and expectations." In contrast, she described the type of relationship that grows at

her school as not personal. She said she and her students have moments in their circle that

feel as if they

> …enter into a form of connectedness that isn't reliant upon words anymore. It has nothing to do with the 'I,' the individual. We suddenly are sharing in an understanding, a warmth; I would go so far as to say love, an unconditional love, or the unconditional love that allows for our souls to connect, such that when each child does speak, everything that's said is understood. It is as if we suddenly become one mind. And in fact, I'll use exactly what a student said to me just the other day. He said, "It's as if we're all one mind, thinking about this together, and everything every person says, makes sense." (Rose)

Albert described a centering activity that is designed to help one understand love:

> Close our eyes, imagine looking into the eyes of someone that you love and who loves you. Often, for a child, it's a parent, imagine that. Imagine being held, supported, totally safe, secure with someone that loves you so much and you love them so much. Imagine looking into their face and seeing their smile. And looking into their eyes and feeling that love between the two of you. And you can really feel it right here, right now.
> And that person's not even here right now, because the love doesn't come from them. The love is already inside of us. All that love. You don't only get love from other things...the things around awaken the love that is inside of us. (Albert)

The point of this visualization is to understand through experience that love is always

there. The love these teachers are referring to goes far beyond sentiment and reaches into

eternal realms. Teachers who are in touch with that love can cultivate it in their

relationships.

Maya explained that unconditional love is an intentional spiritual capacity she

personally focuses on:

> The greater spiritual teachers in my students are the ones I have the most difficult time relating to on the surface…. In particular, entitled students – this is my judgment, my bias – entitled students who don't work hard, but have all the advantages and privileges and don't realize it… I have a hard time liking them. So there is this, you can have unconditional love and not like your students, but the practice is in connecting below the masks that we have and our biases, and being warm and tender to ourselves as we are in the moment judging them.
> So the circle allows me that really focused time as they are speaking to just feel into their presence, their life force, versus their words, and their posture, and

their posturing, and their attitudes. Whether they are sexist or racist, I get to feel...I kind of have a practice where I imagine them, the most difficult students, as babies, as infants. I just imagine them as infants and just feel this tenderness towards their life force and their true nature.

So it is actually the more difficult students that further me along on the path. And the structure and the process of the circle gives me that time to not just react and respond to my biases, but to really just sit with that and apply that "compassionate curiosity," I call it. (Maya)

Finally, regarding love, it is important to note what Maya alluded to, which is that

unconditional love is replenished by loving oneself.

Unconditional love for children, of course, but also for yourself when you can admit mistakes in a loving way with unconditional love. Maybe you can reflect a little more deeply and more authentically, instead of just glossing over mistakes. So yeah, that unconditional love and vulnerability really helps me be a better teacher I think, for the kids and for myself. (Albert)

Teachers and Students Share Mutual Respect as Co-Learners – Equals in the Spiritual Realm

I mean, we are their teachers and they are the students, but we're also like both humans. I think they see that from us.... Like it's not like we are the ultimate authorities who have finished our hero's quest. We are their mentors and we're also on our own journey.

~Rebecca

The respect these teachers are showing is not mere cordial respect. Their respect

is fundamentally from a deeper source. The deep, authentic respect of the teacher for the

students is a factor in the quality of relationships. Everyone made reference to learning

from their students, and some spoke in awe of the wisdom the children possess. As

Charles said, "In many ways, the children are wiser than adults because of their

simplicity."

Rose often spoke about the phenomenon that seemed to occur in her dialogue

activities, where the children would transform into wise beings:

I literally feel like I'm speaking to a group of wise people…. Typically, what happens is I'm just literally blown away by what they say…. They say things that are so universally true that you wouldn't think a fifth grader could articulate, but they do. (Rose)

All the teachers spoke about sharing the learning journey with their students. They see their role as mentors, facilitators, protectors, role models, guides, and so on, but not as "the teacher who is over here giving wisdom to the kid who has none" (Charles), or "Not just like this wall up here as a teacher and down there is the pupil" (Albert).

Certainly, the teachers are experts in their academic areas, but in the spiritual world they are fellow human souls. When Rose described the change in her class after she started implementing spiritual pedagogy, she said, "I really began to feel like a co-learner with them. It was just this equality that pervaded." Patrick described wisdom as a "big, flowing, two-way street" that flowed between student and teachers.

A language of respect. As one might imagine, seeing the children as spiritual equals creates a culture of respect, and many of the teachers provided examples of how their daily language is one of respect, rather than authority – language that helps students to be their best rather than condemn them. The teachers' language was rich with soft words. One example is the use of the word "invite," as in "I invite the children to close their eyes," rather than the command "Close your eyes." A dialogic example:

Like 'I see that you're challenged by this activity. You're usually really good at...you know, you're really good at trying hard. Today, you're not. What's going on for you?' Instead of, "Why aren't you paying attention?" (Maya)

Albert gave an example of how he uses language to guide students toward what they can be doing to be more successful rather than criticizing them:

I had a new student this year that didn't quite know how to behave in the group setting, wasn't aware about her actions that affected others. Instead of saying that that way is wrong, just showing another way, because everyone wants to connect.

I never once said she was doing anything wrong. I just had to show her another way, because what she was doing was obviously not really working that well. (Albert)

Some specifically commented on how important it is not to use shaming as a behavior management tool, which isolates and separates people. Instead, the connection practices in the classroom are designed to heal because "shame dissolves under the force of belonging and love" (Maya).

Furthermore, some teachers commented on how this level of respect helps the children to have more confidence and to be more productive by "Trusting them to do more than what they thought they could do" (Albert). Edmond called it "shooting for their higher selves," and he said that "the children can sense your opinion and level of respect for them, so you need to give them a nod, so to speak, that says 'You got this.'"

A core belief in human goodness contributes to the sense of equality.

> All human beings are good and wise in their true nature, and we all have something to contribute.
>
> ~Maya

Whether stated explicitly or implied, all the teachers indicated a belief that humans, and therefore the children, were inherently good. This belief hermeneutically explains how these teachers maintained a high level of respect for their students. Albert gave a logical, philosophical explanation of how there is no such a thing as a "bad" child:

> The idea of oneness and not duality, but oneness: Like with Star Wars, they had the Force, right? And they have the Force that…is the dark side. The light side and a dark side.
> But really, that's not the way that light and dark work. It's not like you turn off the light and darkness rushes into the room. It's turn on the light and the light's not there anymore. Then there's darkness. Darkness is not a force like light is. Darkness is just kinda the way stuff is. Then the light is the power and the presence. It's the light. They don't talk about the speed of dark, you know? You turn off the light, or you turn on the light.

And life is like that. Life is a force that wants to grow. It'll grow anywhere. It'll grow in a crack of sidewalk, up in the gutters, on the roof. You know, microbes grow on their…in the spaceships and shit, in space. Life wants to grow…. So, life can't really be against itself. Life's not against life. When life consumes other life, it's life growing. The idea of evil being, like, this force versus good, no. It's like everybody is life trying to progress and move on. Everybody's trying to meet some need in some way. But it gets distorted sometimes. Right? Oh, everybody brings up Hitler, evil. He's playing on, from experiencing himself, people's need for security.

…Life can't be against itself. Darkness is not a force. Evil is not a force. It's a kind of an absence of light and remembering. An absence of a way of attaining goals positively, in a way that's beneficial. That's why when preschool says, "There's no good guys and bad guys; it's just good choices or a choice that is helpful for our community and not"; it's not just talk and play. It's for real. Like that book *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. I mean, that stuff is true. That's why they say it. Someone must be as a child, you know, to enter the kingdom of heaven. You know, because it's like the basic stuff. But I like to think of it like that. Like, kids aren't bad kids. (Albert)

The essential self. The teachers used a variety of phrases to describe something that I mostly refer to as the "essential self" in this dissertation. I heard reference to: original self, immutable being, unencumbered self, Buddha nature, true potential, Christ self, true self, and true nature.

I noticed that Maya often used the term *true nature*, but never *true self* (a term some of the other teachers used), and her explanation of the difference explained what the concept of "essential self" means. In her explanation, she referenced a boy I will call Mark. Maya's coworkers described Mark as a sociopath, but Maya was able to work with him:

I specifically use "true nature" versus "true self," because self is a construct, in my mind. Self is what we develop – what Mark, this boy, developed to survive. So it's our vehicle.

So there is no true self, because true self is always evolving. There's no one self. With every experience, condition in our life, it's malleable. We adapt and change. So, that's a Buddhist thought, right? Like...there is no self. When they say, "No self," you've heard of that…in Buddhism? It doesn't mean there's no self. It means there's no self that you can identify, because it's not...because the only way that would happen is if all causes and conditions ceased.

Renee: Okay. I like how you were kinda grabbing the air there, and you can't grab it.

Maya: No…. How can you do that? One moment…The next moment. [grabbing air] Isn't that something?

…You can't argue it. Do your experiences and conditions and causes change you?

Yes.

…Do conditions and causes change with every moment?

Yes.

…So therefore, how can self stay the same?

…So therefore, how can it be identified?

…So, I don't like that word, "true self." I think it doesn't exist. True nature, however, I feel does exist. And it's a spiritual concept, for sure… (Maya)

Maya went on to explain that her job is to "help kids realize they aren't their behaviors." Their behaviors are merely a tool to help protect their "ego self," and she is trying to help them uncover their true nature. She explained that our true nature is always oriented toward life, toward growth.

The "true nature" or "essential being" concept explains why these teachers put their students on equal footing with themselves and why they all made references to equating the children as spiritual beings, or "…seeing God in every child" (Albert).

Patrick put it this way, when speaking to a hypothetical student:

"You're an enlightened being, you just don't know it yet. And because of karma, or because of your habitual patterns, because of your culture, because of whatever...there's an obstacle. It's obscured to you. That genuine, pure, completely full, loving nature is obscured." Perfect beings, slightly obscured. And my job is to help reduce the obscurations a little bit. (Patrick)

In the next chapter, we talk about the teachers' own spiritual practices that help them build their capacity to love so deeply. Patrick explained that it started with recognizing the true nature of one's own self:

You know, this meditation that we did is a sense that eventually what you discover through practice is actually, "I'm okay the way I am." Like, there's nothing fundamentally wrong with me. In fact, you know, I'm endowed with all of these wonderful qualities as a human being. What originally you would call

your birthright, right?… But then once you have that appreciation for yourself and you see it in others, then it's easier. (Patrick)

Summary and Conclusion

The theme of Connection could have had many other names. For example, I might have called it Loving Kindness, Harmony, or Belonging. But "connection" was a word the teachers used very often, and it seems to capture the wide-ranging, all-pervasive aspect of this first essential theme. Learning, in the case of these teachers and their students, is an interconnected activity. Learning – or at least spiritual learning – happens in relation, not in isolation.

The point is that the most basic needs of the human spirit – to love and to be loved, and to belong – must be met before anything else. However, Connection is more than the beginning. Rose described it as "permeating" everything. That is why Connection is not the first "step" on The Path, per se, but is represented as a *field* of connection." "Field" is an apt metaphor for connection in many ways. Connection is like a force field (as Rebecca described it) – an energy that enfolds all the students and the teacher together and also creates a protective field, making risk-taking safe. Connection could be seen as a playing field – the context and conditions that need to be set before "the game," or the rest of The Path, can be played. Connection could also be seen as an agricultural field – the fertile ground from which the rest of the themes on The Path can grow and come to fruition.

In this chapter, the teachers described how intentionally they prepare and cultivate the field of connection for their classrooms. They also explained that they did not just do this for the children, but also for their own spiritual learning. The next chapter describes

the eidetic themes that I place as steps on The Path of Spiritual Learning. While reading

the data for these themes, it is important to continue keeping in mind the general

guideline introduced at the beginning of this chapter: "As the student, so the teacher."

Both the students and the teachers are learning, together. Without the field of connection

that learning would not be possible. The reader will notice connection is woven

throughout the rest of The Path and evident in the stories the teachers tell in the next

chapters. It is the basis of all spiritual learning. Learning to be kind to oneself and others

is a great start.

Chapter VI

THE THREE THEMES WITHIN THE PATH OF SPIRITUAL LEARNING:

ALIVENESS, MINDFULNESS, AND OPENESS

Connection is the foundation, or the field, for The Path of Spiritual Learning. Once connection has established emotional safety, love, and respect in the teacher's mind and heart and among students, the other aspects of The Path can flourish. There are three themes along The Path: Aliveness, Mindfulness, and Openness (Figure 7). They are presented in that order because they build on one another, yet they are also iterative and can influence and enliven one another in any sequence, and simultaneously.

Figure 7. The three steps on The Path: Aliveness, Mindfulness, and Openness

many as any other theme. Defining aliveness is almost like trying to describe "spirit." They are almost one and the same. At its simplest, sensing aliveness means resonating with all of life – the life inside you and the life all around you. A question that taps into the essence of this theme is *"What is alive in you?"*

The teachers in this study expressed a wonderment for life that they share with their students. Some either explicitly or implicitly referred to spirituality as being in touch with life. They spoke of marveling at the miracle of life, including seeing each child as a miracle.

> You know, we get inspired when we're on the top of a cliff or something, and we see a vast landscape. We get inspired. A spiritual feeling of God's creation…. But you can see that in a child, too, of course. Just that wonder in their eyes and the awe in their eyes. It's kinda cliché, but it's true. Seeing the beauty. (Albert)

They spoke of aliveness as being "energy" – for example, sounds, ideas, and especially emotions. They talked about the positive emotions they try to cultivate, such as joy and gratitude, and they talked about other, less happy emotions too.

> There's a real gift in cultivating that place in us if we…really let us feel…. Instead of like, "Oh, sadness bad. Anger bad," you know? Those big emotions, if we just let them sit then they can really animate us in other parts of our lives. And yeah, you might feel more sadness, but you'll also feel more joy. It all comes together…there's this gift in it, this spiritual gift of being a fuller human because of it. (Maya)

There are eight subthemes for aliveness (Table 3): Awakening the senses, oneness, integration with the natural world, unlimited learning, eternal beings, intuition and imagination, experiential, timelessness.

Table 3

The Theme of Aliveness and Its Subthemes

Aliveness *Spirituality is recognized as a felt aliveness – a force.*	Awakening the senses	Teachers engage in *awakening the senses* to the wonder of life
	Oneness	This felt aliveness can be sensed by anyone, anywhere, because of an interconnection of all beings – *a oneness*.
	Interconnectivity with the natural world	*The natural world* can animate the sense of aliveness and interconnectivity.
	Infinite learning	This living "force" is perceived as eternal, endless, and infinite, making *learning unlimited*.
	Eternal beings	Children, as part of this interconnected, alive force are perceived as *eternal beings*.
	Intuition and imagination	Felt aliveness can be tapped into through *intuition and imagination*.
	Experiential	Aliveness can be felt and shared, but it cannot adequately be articulated, *only experienced*.
	Timeless	Felt aliveness eludes time by arriving at unplanned moments when *time disappears or expands*.

Teachers Engage in Awakening the Senses to the Wonder of Life

> And then [we] do exercises where they walk around the room and we will place one person, blindfolded, in front of a human, without touching, and then we will also place them in front of like a wall and see if they can feel human energy versus wall energy. And they can! And they can't believe that. So to me that is the first step. It's like, "Life force is inside you. Here, you can actually feel it! These are the practices that we can do to keep becoming more embodied, because we are so far off of that. And we become disembodied in an instant with our stress response. So that is huge and spirituality cannot blossom outside of an embodied self.
>
> ~Maya

All the teachers talked about various activities they do with students to sense

aliveness. Charles described "beholding" exercises to help kids develop an awe and a

wonder for nature. Edmond talked about the importance of rhythm and rhythmic exercises, such as passing beanbags in time to develop more "embodied selves." Albert described activities to "awaken the senses":

> So awakening the senses to the wonder of life, yeah, a lot of stuff with the eyes closed. That's kind of fun. Like…the sound map, where you sit and you make a map of the sounds that you hear around you, just awareness of sounds, sensory stuff like that. We do a lot of closing our eyes. Sometimes when we line up to get attention, close our eyes and point towards different things, just like awareness of where we are in time and space right now, that feeling of aliveness. (Albert)

There were multiple references to awakening in other ways too, such as awakening to a person's full potential, or essential self. Albert spoke of trying to create a magical atmosphere "where anything is possible, believing in unseen things, or not, and honoring people's beliefs." He described one activity for honoring people's beliefs, where students can declare a belief they have, and the rest of the class can simply say that they honor that child's beliefs:

> And we would have the witness chair…where a kid would get up there, "I believe in fairies." "*And we honor your belief.*" Or, "I don't believe in fairies." "*We honor your belief.*" "I don't know if I believe in fairies or not." "*We honor your belief.*" (Albert)

Edmond spoke about how children are naturally "alive" and very "cosmic." He considers it a spiritual act of empathy for teachers to meet the children where they are developmentally:

> All children from birth to six and a half, seven, are on the same brain wave frequencies that we are when we're dreaming. All of them. Right? So…it's okay for them not to know about like molecules, neutrinos and things. Sure, we can tell them about like the water fairies went up in the sky, way up in the sky. And they were just teeny, tiny little fairies, and it got so cold up there that they all held hands. And they got closer and closer and closer, and they became a giant cloud. And there's so many of them. They got so heavy that they just rained down upon the earth. You can do that and call them fairies. Sure, you might be talking about water molecules and convection currents, but it can be alive like their whole world is when they're dreaming. (Edmond)

Patrick talked about some of the more intimate activities he does with older kids around the fire when he is on a camping trip that helps them connect with aliveness:

> I'll explain to them, "One way of looking at the world, which is, it's alive, you know. And some traditions said there are spirits in the trees, and the rocks, and the water, and it doesn't really matter if you believe that or not, but, you know, here we are. Let's see if we can feel something. Let's see if we can feel something in the fire, you know. And can we feel something in the trees? Can we feel something in each other, since we're all here together?" (Patrick)

This Felt Aliveness Can Be Sensed by Anyone, Anywhere, Because of an Interconnection of All Beings – A Oneness

> More so than higher power. And I don't think that higher power is something outside of you. But for me, to think of it as more of an inner power or something that's always there. And then, just sometimes we, like, sometimes we just forget about it. But not because we're not connecting to it. It's just because we're not aware of it.
>
> ~Rebecca

All the teachers talked in some way about a connection that goes beyond the personal – a relational connection to a deeply interconnected world. Whether articulated explicitly, as in Rebecca's quote above, or implied, it seemed like most of the teachers in this study believed, through their personal experience, that there is something greater than them, whether they called it God, or energy, or a higher power, or a force that was always alive. It is larger than they are, and yet they are also a part of it, immersed in it. Therefore, "God" is both greater, yet not outside of oneself.

This helps to explain the profound empathy these teachers expressed in their work – because all these teachers seemed to believe that their students' happiness was as important as their own. When teachers view all living beings as connected, they logically view everyone's pain and pleasure tied up together.

The teachers used descriptions such as "knowing we are not alone…or connected to this greater reality" (Charles). This concept of oneness affects how they view their work and their relationships with children:

> It was always a habit of mine to try to think and see…like trying to see God in everybody, trying to see that, to have that spiritual attitude in all of my interactions and experiences and things. I mean, not like walking around like a saint, but just try to remember that, keep that in mind that there's a bigger picture going on here. And, you know, "Hey, don't get too attached to this because it could…you know, the situation is gonna change." (Albert)

Some of the teachers described activities to help connect the children with a sense of oneness. About these practices, Charles said:

> Many children will come into school some days and there's all this fragmentation, and these little practices like this also helps the child to remember that they are connected to something much bigger than they are. (Charles)

Being connected to something so huge brings a sense of self-worth to an individual. The teachers in this study had a sense of spiritual agency that can be explained with the following hermeneutic, articulated by Albert:

> We're part of that oneness, that one consciousness. We're a conscious part of that. So, with my consciousness, my thoughts affect the greater consciousness of what's going on, and I can affect what's going on in my life with my thoughts and how I approach things. And so I know that I can meet whatever the goal is. (Albert)

Life matters. Remember Maya explaining "true nature" (versus "true self") in the previous section on connection? In my interview with her, I followed her explanation with this question for her: "I'm just curious if you see each person's true nature as being unique, or as being the same life force?" She responded, "I think, when you distill it down, it is the same. Yeah, and that's what connects us." Where Albert used the word "consciousness," Maya thinks of everyone's true nature as a shared connection to

oneness; but at the deepest level, these all seem to be different ways of explaining the same felt spiritual force of aliveness.

The Natural World Animates a Sense of Aliveness and Interconnectivity

> I remember a couple of years ago, there was a young boy. He was in my class, and he was out picking...just picking flowers, and I felt that he had...that he was getting to this point of picking too many flowers. So I said, "Why don't you do this?" And I said, "Why don't you kneel down and softly say to the flower, 'May I pick you?'" And it was wonderful. And he kneeled down and I watched him whisper to the flower, and he waited. And he said, "Sir Charles, it told me no."
>
> ~Charles

A relationship with the natural world was frequently referenced as essential. The natural world provides experiences of spiritual connection, a sense of wonderment and oneness, and time in the natural world provides personal renewal. More than one teacher I interviewed made reference to the fact that "humans *are* nature" (Maya); "So we can "never separate ourselves from it" (Charles). As Maya added:

> I think there's no better teacher than nature to teach us that we're so insignificant on one hand, but we're so much just a part of this web of life. I think that's the most reassuring sensation of all, is to just know that we're just held in this web of life. We're part of this huge ecosystem where we're insignificant and significant at the same time. At least, for me, that's the biggest thing that sustains me is I'm just an ordinary organism. You know? So that also comes out in my work. Like, you guys need to know no one really cares, in the best possible way, what you wear, who you like. It just really, just doesn't matter. You're part of...you're an organism that's trying to survive. (Maya)

All of the elementary and middle school teachers (except for Edmond) talked about activities in nature cultivating awareness. In particular, all of their students have personal relationships with trees, where they sit with "their" tree, draw it, talk to it – sometimes for many years through every season.

Rebecca expressed gratitude for being on a campus where it is easy to take the children outside: "There's something about just leaving the classroom, in general. I think that always changes the perspective."

Patrick provided an interesting hermeneutic for why changing to an outdoor setting changes perspective:

> If you get people out of this world... Like, if you look around this room, literally everything you see is manufactured by some other human being's mind, and so it has a profound influence on your mind. Like, everything you are surrounded by is just another mind.... A conceptual mind, you know, that maybe has had some insights, but nonetheless is still making things in squares, and using language and logic, and whatever, you know, and it's kinda brilliant. And look at all this cool stuff, you've got the turntable, and you've got the light, and the computer. It's all cool, but when you take people out of that, into nature, where almost nothing you see is created by the human mind, it actually has that...equally has an effect on the mind. You start to realize, oh, wait a minute, I mean, how did this tree get here? It just grew there, you know. Look at these mountains, and the clouds, and the weather, you know all these things, they're just happening all the time, like...and nobody's in control. (Patrick)

Though he is typically indoors for his Math classes, Patrick feels extremely privileged to engage with students during the afterschool horse program and for wilderness pack trips through his school. He explained the importance of experiences in nature for not only changing perspective, but also changing lives.

> I think that what happens in nature is people start to get a sense of, whoa, wait. You know, like, I, and the world, and everything is much more alive and vivid and bigger than I thought it was…. The first time they have that experience is often in relation to nature. They have a moment like "Oh," you know. And whatever you call it, an epiphany, or an opening, an aha moment or whatever, but they just have this sudden intuitive sense like, oh, wait a minute, there's something else going on I didn't realize, you know. And a lot of that...a lot of times it manifests as either something that's very kind of amazing. You know, and people have these sort of amazing spiritual experiences.
> …But anyway, once you had that experience, then you suddenly...you can't say it didn't happen anymore. You know, like the experience of having birth. You know, you can't unexperience it. You know, suddenly it informs your life in a different way. And so I think that a lot of people have that experience in the

natural world, it's kind of easier out there, and then they might try to figure out how to cultivate that. (Patrick)

Beyond the existential benefits of time in the natural world, the teachers talked about the practical spiritual experience of finding peace and renewal in nature:

> I feel like being in nature automatically moves you more into your body, more into your senses, your breath. I have the experience of just breathing more deeply and it's more fresh, the air is more fresh. The grounding element for me, that's a really important one. It's just when your mind is spinning, just to feel your feet on the ground or to put your hand on a tree, for example. (Rebecca)

This Living "Force" Is Perceived as Eternal, Endless, and Infinite, Making Learning Unlimited

> [Learning] is this thing that has no beginning and no end. So there's no goal. There's nobody who graduates from it. You don't have more than another.
>
> ~Rose

Most of the teachers touched on experiences they have and concepts they hold about spirituality being timeless, formless, and about the power or mystery behind form.

> That's the mystery to it. Like, for me, that mystery is present. It's present and connected to it all, but I'm with it. It's everywhere…because, in many ways, it's become more real to me than anything else. Because you see it. And you see the presence of God in the plants, and the animals, and the human beings around you, in the sky. And you begin to see it everywhere, and especially in the children. Like, when you see the joy and you hear their laughter, it's...to me, I mean, it's like, "There's the laughter of God right there." So, it's really hard to say what it looks like. I mean, to me, that's what it is. That's what it is. It's ever-changing, it's forever unfolding. (Charles)

In many ways, learning was synonymous with living (and loving) for these teachers. Learning is a lifelong process that cannot be contained. There were many references to the difference between merely accumulating knowledge, compared to learning as a "living process" that is immutable. When the quality of relationships has

been developed in her classroom, Rose described how the "living process" of learning

can take hold:

> So it's as if all of us are sharing in an inquiry that doesn't really have a right or wrong, a knowing versus a knowing more than, or knowing less than. It's as if we're all looking together at something that really is unnamable, that really is endless, in terms of what it offers if we continue to look at it together. (Rose)

She further explained that this type of living-learning "doesn't reap the same rewards that

we're so attached to in maybe the form of something physical, something measurable,

something we can brag about…" (Rose), but it is fresh every time.

In the same vein, learning is infinite. There were references to everything being in

flux and everything being temporary, not in a way that makes nothing matter but that

makes every moment precious, therefore making each life valuable.

Although it was not easy for anyone interviewed to articulate fully, just as there

are different types of love, there are different types of learning. For these teachers, the

learning and the loving they were referring to have a fullness that exists in a different

plane than transactional learning or transactional love. The type of learning these teachers

were referring to in their interviews cannot happen in an atmosphere of fear, only in a

field of love – something that can flow naturally if we allow it to.

> The world that we live in, it is a spiritual world, right? From the point of view of, like, it's already this kind of miraculous thing, and all we can do is kind of avoid the magic. Like, it's already there. You know, and a lot of people call that "God" – which I am okay with. It's like, since there's something else happening besides our version of it, it's *unlimited*. You know, it's unlimited. Spirituality, from my point of view, is tapping into that unlimited quality. Opening yourself to it. Allowing that to be something that is part of your life. (Patrick)

Along the way, we will return to the concept of allowing. Simply allowing one's

heart to be open, allowing for spirit to be recognized, and allowing for the present

moment to unfold is a returning theme.

**Children, as Part of This Interconnected, Living Force,
Are Perceived as Eternal Beings**

> And we're never just, like, frozen as who we are at that age and
> our physical selves. We're always changing, and moving, and
> changing, and moving. We never stop. So this might be this kid
> right now, but, like I said before, he used to be a baby, and is going
> to, and everything keeps going, going to be an adult…. The parent
> used to be a child also. It's not just a parent and that's who they
> are. No, that's a role that they're doing now. It's the game they're
> playing now. But before, they were a child. This child, it's just
> what they're doing right now. They're just, like, "childing" right
> now. You know? It's like more of a verb than a noun.
>
> ~Albert

Entelechy is a spiritual term describing how the eternal life force, embedded in a single person or organism, creates a telescoping effect, where their past and future exist at all times and can be sensed. Several of the teachers referred to thinking about the children from the perspective of them as babies or grown-ups, or even past or future lives. Applying this same concept to himself, Albert shared, "You know, I'm not necessarily like a man in my mid-40s. I'm a timeless being who happens to be in this situation right now."

When the teachers see their students as timeless beings, they say they are less likely to react in unfavorable ways to difficult behavior. It builds empathy and patience when they keep the larger picture in their heart. There were other references to imagining the children later in their life, or in the case of Edmond, even in other lives. Charles said, "I think there's always the mystery that remains, but you start getting a sense of who this child can potentially become."

Several of the teachers talked about how they do not expect their students to necessarily remember all they learned in their class, or to necessarily receive direct, measurable benefits from their spiritual education, but they knew that sometime in the

future, as the child grew internally and developed, each student would have access to

what they learned and their spiritual learning would come to fruition. Rebecca referred to

the learning in her class as "the seed-planting phase." It is easy for teachers, considering

the love they have for their students, to get attached to them personally and attached to an

outcome in their lives, but part of the teachers' spiritual task is to know that they have

done their work during one small, yet timeless blip in their students' lives, and to be

unattached, allowing that love to expand in endlessness:

> I still have those students come back to me and say, "Fifth grade was my best year." Now, I'm sure many teachers hear that, and I'm not saying that that's an uncommon thing, but I can tell when one in particular comes in the room, she looks around, and I can see that she's remembering that feeling she had. And there is a bit of sadness, because she hasn't had that since. There hasn't been that since. But I don't worry about that, because I feel like this, when you've seen the truth, or when you've felt this, it stays with you forever, and it becomes like a guiding light. So she will, I feel, seek it out in her life again, and create it for others, or for herself, you know. (Rose)

Felt Aliveness Can Be Tapped Into Through Intuition and Imagination

> You know, as teachers, we have to think. We must think. But also there is this realm of feeling. There is these impressions that I think happen throughout the day with children. And for example, I could...if I'm observing children playing, if I'm observing something happening between two or three students – it may be a social issue – but if there's something that I feel very deeply as I'm observing, I know that's something that I need to attend to, and at the time I'm observing it, I can't attend to it.… Because...if there's some sort of conflict, I have to go and help resolve the conflict, but I still need to remember that, hey, there was a lot of energy in this feeling. So, to take that home with me, to...and then to sit with that and to say, "Hey, what was this?" There's some way for me to help change this dynamic with the children, and to begin to meditate on each child. The method, I don't wanna say there is a method, it's really almost this leading of some inner intelligence, of some inner guide, and to begin to really trust that.
>
> ~Charles

Sometimes described as an inner guide or as their true voice, sometimes as a recognition, and sometimes described as a divine force such as God, this "intuition" was often spoken of with awe and mystery. Even though it is not understood, it is highly valued. All the teachers spoke of it as something they are learning to trust to help them teach, and as something they want their students to trust.

There were many references to things like learning to "tune in more intuitively to the needs" (Patrick) of other people. Rose spoke about intentionally waiting until the morning before a dialogue to choose the passage she would read because she wanted it to feel that it was "alive in the room." She said she would take her book of passages and "flip through them…and suddenly when it grabbed me, I would say, 'Yes, this is it.'"

For many of these teachers, the development of their trusting relationship with intuition seemed to start with moments when intuition "showed up." They went along with it, and a breakthrough happened with a student, such as this moment Maya experienced with a high school student. The student was considered highly dangerous to work with, but she was able to connect with him because she trusted her intuition:

> Attachment disorder is so tricky because they crave connection. But...they want to kill the person who's connected to them, so it's very tricky. But, so he would yell at me a lot. And I had to do that often, and just breathe and breathe. But what came out of it was always really fun. Like, there was this one time, we got to this point with great progress, and we're making lunch for the school together, because I had a culinary program. I taught culinary.
> He just felt the tension, and I was telling him to do stuff. It was just more intense than usual, and he just comes up to me and he's this close to my face, and he's yelling at me. He's a big boy and he's screaming that he's gonna cut my head off, and chop it in pieces, and shove it down my throat. All these details, just really, really intense. And I say...and so I take a couple breaths, and then, out of my mouth comes [using a cartoonish cowboy drawl], "Well, I don't know about that, young man, because around sundown, I'm gonna..." I just realized in that moment I needed to help him off-script…And I had this really creative response of being a cowboy and saying, "I'm gonna hogtie you up to a tree if you talk to me like that, young man. I'm gonna pour honey over you and the ants are gonna

crawl all over you. It's gonna tickle you, and it's gonna make you crazy." And he stopped! He's like, "Can you teach me how to do that?!" (Maya)

That moment ended up being one of the important breakthroughs with this boy.

Another, gentler example of intuition suddenly showing up is from the story Charles told in the last section about getting on his knees to speak his love for each child at the end-of-year ceremony:

> Renee: What thoughts were going through your head?
> Charles: At the time I did it, it was just something that I felt. It was one of those things that happened in the moment…
> Renee: How did your body feel when you were doing that? What sensations did you have?
> Charles: Warmth.... Very warm, and very alive, and almost like a quickening. Actually, what it is, when I first hit my knee, I couldn't believe it. I was like, "What just...?" So, there was, sort of, like, this, "What is this?" Like, "What am I doing?" And then I just trusted it, and I began to speak to each child.

In some cases, teachers would get an intuition or inspiration to spontaneously change a lesson and allow an idea the space and time to work its magic:

> Especially with centering, I feel like, always willing to throw out that plan or to change that plan…sometimes it's because something comes up for me. Like, sometimes centerings are just inspired by something I think about on the way to work or like something I read, a quote I read. And…sometimes, I led a centering, it was what I had planned, but I wasn't really feeling it…just feels a little more flat.... Like sometimes it's like okay we centered and glad we did it and "yup, pretty good." And *other* times it has more of a special feeling of there's that sort of kind of like energetic or magical piece. It was like, "Wow, that really felt more transcendent." (Rebecca)

Again, trusting their intuition enough to follow it was something that most of these people had to develop. Teachers are typically under much pressure to perform to particular standards, follow a specific curriculum, and meet exact achievement goals.

> I know, for example, a lot of times there's this fear, right? There's this fear of trusting yourself because we feel like...a lot of times, I don't even think we recognize that that is the deeper wisdom. Or, our rational brain comes in and says, "Don't do that. You could get in trouble for that." Or, "What will the parents say?" (Charles)

But just as love cannot flourish with fear, neither can intuition. So trusting it requires a lot of courage and experience.

> I feel that I'm just now beginning to really be in touch with that. Not so much just to be in touch, but to trust it, to trust that voice. I know I've heard it in the past, but I didn't wanna listen to it. (Charles)

It was extremely difficult for teachers to describe what intuition was, where it came from, or what it felt like. Charles gave the most detail regarding intuition and was the only participant who actually described a physical sensation: "I get all these kind of rises down here in my belly. Kind rises up, and it comes as a feeling. It's like, a feeling of you just knowing what to do."

The term *living* was used frequently as an adjective. I came to understand this term as an attribute of aliveness, in a spiritual sense. Often, it meant connecting with a source of knowing or guidance that comes from somewhere non-material and non-rational.

Charles spoke of something he called a living curriculum, or an "inner curriculum" that would come through when he was willing to set aside a prescribed curriculum. He said he would sit in silence and notice "what's living inside of me that's wanting to come into existence, that wants to be birthed."

Edmond and Charles, both Waldorf-trained, learned partly through their training to connect with the curriculum by "digesting" it and making it their own, and to connect with the spiritual world for guidance:

> I can't just drop the same worksheet I did for the last twenty years. Where's the worksheet? Here! I have to *learn* it because it's a new year. I might not have ever studied such and such thing before. And I have to make it my own and share it with them and live into it with them for a while. (Edmond)

Edmond also spoke passionately about the importance in his spiritual pedagogy of

connecting with the spirit world to help with particular situations or to provide guidance

for students:

>And also similarly if I'm having an issue with Renee, I'll be like, "Oh man. I need a moment with Renee. I need to have some time with Renee. Like please, Renee's higher self, Renee's angel, please help me to find time so that we can talk together. I'd really like to work this thing out." And that is a thing that in my life is a moment where spirituality really comes in. It's like, "Wow." I ask for that for like a night or two, and then there's just this moment where it's like all of a sudden, like something is cancelled or even I'm walking down the hall, and that person's just there. I'm like, "Oh good! I get to talk to you," and then we get to go through the thing. And I find that that is really helpful. (Edmond)

Later in the interview, Edmond added:

>The cool thing is you don't have to know anything about spiritual things or even be meditating about their angels or anything like that. I'm sure that there are people that connect with all those stuff better than other Waldorf teachers too, just because they're real people and they honestly love the children, and they're working really hard to be awesome. So it doesn't necessarily need to be like an outwardly working on spiritual things spirituality. But I do think it helps. I do think whenever you give a nod to the spiritual world, the spiritual world's like, "Right on, man." They give you that nod right back. (Edmond)

Edmond even talked about imagining his students being with him while he does his

lesson planning in the evening, so that it is already alive in them the next day.

All the teachers, except Rose, spoke on some level about the importance of

imagination in their own spiritual learning and also for the children.

>We sit, and doing sitting practices, and you imagine this…imaginative visualization and stuff. I tell the kids, "We're using the most powerful tool in the universe, your brain. If you can control this tool, you can control, you can do anything…. Look around. Everything here, right? Everything that was made by people was in their imagination first. Everything comes in the mind first, right, before you can manifest it here." Yeah. (Albert)

Albert and Charles both described exercises of imaginative visualization and

storytelling they do with their students to help them further cultivate their imagination,

something that Charles, in particular, feared children were losing because of too much

exposure to screens, which portray so many images that children are not creating those

images on their own anymore. In general, creativity was appreciated as something that is

alive in the human spirit and needs to be cultivated.

Aliveness Can Be Felt and Shared, But It Cannot
Adequately Be Articulated, Only Experienced

> The spiritual path is a very personal path…. It's not a belief
> path, it's an experience path, right? So no one can give you their
> experience.
>
> ~Patrick

Over and over, the participants in this study made comments such as "Can't really

explain it, but I know it when I see it, and that's a true thing" (Rebecca). Rose talked

about moments with her class that were so "profound the mind doesn't register it as a

complete memory." In referencing the quality of relationships that exist in a spiritual

classroom, she said:

> It's beyond thoughts. It's beyond what I can even understand perhaps as a
> human being. But that doesn't take away from the fact that it's present, and that
> it's felt, and that it's so clear. (Rose)

There were "complaints" about how the limits of language cannot possibly

capture the essence of the spiritual experience, and how one would not even want to use

rational logic and linguistics too much because they would materialize something that has

no boundaries.

> I was on a retreat…and I had been meditating for a couple of weeks probably
> at that point. I was by myself and just practicing all day long, and one day I
> walked out on the front porch at night and just was looking out at the stars, and
> this one star in front of me was, like, just going off. It was just flashing rainbow
> colors and it was, like, red, green, blue, white, red, green, blue, white. It was just,
> boom. It was so vivid…. And then my conceptual mind got involved, and I started
> looking around. And I spend a lot of time in the mountains so I know the names

of all the constellations and all that stuff, and I'm looking around, I'm like…"Oh, I know the name of that star – it's Sirius." As soon as I named that star, it became dull, it became just a star. You know, just lost all of its magic. And that, for me, kind of illustrates what concepts do. They put things in a box and limit them. (Patrick)

Because of the non-rational nature of spiritual learning, teachers used words like "experiential" and "discovery" in their interviews to explain the teaching methods they use. They said things like "I could talk all day, but you aren't going to get it until you experience it yourself." Patrick used having a baby as an example: "Could you write a book and tell me what it's like giving birth in a way that I would actually get it? That was...a completely experiential thing on so many levels." Again, because spirituality can really only be felt, it is all the more important that these teachers' pedagogical methods are experiential, allowing the student a path of discovery. Maya explained her approach as such:

So spiritual pedagogy, to me, is really flipping content delivery on its head, where you're not teaching spirituality. [Instead] you're trying to create the conditions under which they will come in contact with it themselves. (Maya)

Teachers talked about techniques – rituals and practices – to help them and their students to move from operating with their brain to "more of a heart-centered space," such as visualizing someone they love or engaging in creative activities. They talked about using metaphor, poetry, drawing, story, music, and acting as forms of expression and spiritual discovery.

The point of exercises such as these, besides awaking the senses, is to help students move into a "heartspace." It is not easy for humans to give up the control of the rational mind and surrender to the heart or the unknown, but "If you try to control everything with your logical mind, then you only get logical answers" (Patrick).

Moreover, repeatedly, these teachers talked about the "creative intelligence" that would arise when they released rational control.

Releasing rational control allows other forces, such as the heart, to guide the classroom; it also means the teacher is not predetermining what each child needs to think (or what the teachers themselves need to think). All the teachers were clear that they saw their teaching as being the opposite of indoctrination of any kind. As Patrick's quote at the beginning of this section implied, the teachers were not trying to teach any particular belief system, but they wanted to create a sacred and safe space so they can "invite" students and themselves to get out of their comfort zones enough to discover who they are and what life means to them.

Felt Aliveness Eludes Time by Arriving at
Unplanned Moments When Time Disappears or Expands

> Learning as not something that's in time. It's not something that
> you add to or that you take away from. It's ever-present, just as
> one might think love is.
>
> ~Rose

Every teacher was asked about his or her sense of time during a special moment when spirituality could be felt in the classroom. Without pause, each replied that those moments were timeless in some way. Rebecca recounted a centering experience that described sensing aliveness. It arrived completely unplanned, and in the end felt timeless:

> It happened outside in this area. It was for a morning centering. And it was a morning in early October, one of the first, sort of, crisp mornings. And there was this low fog in the air, this low fog around, just sort of like misty fog that you get, that just had like a tangible quality, just soft, and it had a sound of, like the sound was just of silence. Like it just created kind of like snow does sometimes…. And it just transformed this field and this hill that we see every morning into just like another world. So, it felt really just magical outside.
> And we went out as a group, so myself, and Jacob, and the students, for a centering, just with minimal instructions just to…I think the instructions were to

find a spot and to connect with your senses. But then once we were out there, nobody really found a spot because it just was too irresistible to explore. So we all scattered around outside. And sometimes, if I'm leading the centering, I kind of just hover around the periphery and keep an eye on the time and make sure nobody's goofing off. But this time, I didn't do that. I just was also sort of drawn into the fog.

The specific magical moment I remember is that I was along the edge of that field back there and Kaylee and a couple other students beckoned to me to come, like back behind the tree line. There's a little ditch and some brush, and she wanted to show me something. So she brought me back there. And there was just a huge spider web that had dew drops on it because there was so much moisture in the air, so just like these beautiful little, like, crystals of dew drops. We just were like, "Whoa, isn't that beautiful," just beholding that. So like for me, that was sort of the peak moment of that experience. Just like, "Whoa." I would never just sorta go into the brush if I hadn't been led there by Kaylee and the students that were in there looking and just to stop and notice that was beautiful.

And then for me, the piece of it that made it sweeter, for me personally, was that it was one of the mornings where I was kind of rushed and a little crabby, feeling a little overwhelmed by the day. I had planned a different centering. But it was for, you know, just a series of circumstances, I had to change my plans. And so…I was kind of, I wasn't accepting. I wasn't in that space. And then just as soon as we stepped outside and just seeing the beauty, I didn't even know it was foggy outside even though I drove twenty minutes to school. I came into school, and I had no idea. I hadn't seen any of it. So it's a sweet feeling. It was like such a relief in my body just to see how beautiful it was outside, to see how little I need to do sometimes to provide a centering experience that's really meaningful for the kids. All I needed to do was just invite them outside. And if I had continued with what I had planned, we wouldn't have been outside. We would have missed that really rare and beautiful morning. So it's like giving me goose bumps just to think about it.…

And then, we all came back inside and sat back in our circles and just did a share around the circle of one thing, just one sensory detail, so either something we saw or something we smelled or heard or felt. I don't remember the specifics of that except for me, it was that spider web. But I do remember just the feeling of everyone, like, coming back from an adventure and everyone had something to share that they had seen necessarily.

Renee: So if I hear you right, they came back from an adventure. But since I'm familiar with centering, I know that this was only twenty minutes, fifteen minutes.

Rebecca: Yeah, it was quick, but it felt like...there was something about it that felt like time just expanded in those moments that we were outside. It felt like we all went off on neat little adventures. (Rebecca)

Rebecca's story is one illustration of a moment that a teacher identified as a

spiritual moment, where time opened up. Similar to Rebecca's story, every teacher in the

study talked about losing herself or himself, wondering where the time went, and the joy

of forgetting about other responsibilities. In Charles's story below, he recounted one such

moment when he started to worry about the time, and then remembered how important

those timeless moments are to the children's learning:

> I have found times where it's, oh my gosh, it's nine-thirty, we have to...we still have a lesson to do so, you know, it's like... "You need to hurry up a little bit." But then later on after I say this, oops, that's not what I wanna do. So it's always a learning for the teacher, like where am I not being present? Where am I feeling rushed? And why am I feeling rushed? Because I think a lot of times if we feel rushed, we're actually missing out on moments in which the children can really open up and share. Like, my students, they love to share, and so to create moments where they can do that...and because I think in those moments they discover who they are, also. (Charles)

In many cases, teachers talked about how they might end up missing math or

taking up part of social studies, but they would allow that to happen anyway so they

could reap the learning benefits of those special moments.

Albert, who loves to sing with his class, talked about how important singing is for

bringing everyone into the present moment – into timelessness: "It's the only thing that

exists is just singing the song right now." Spirituality is immeasurable. Even time eludes

measurement during spiritual moments.

Theme Three: Mindfulness –
Mindfulness Builds Spiritual Capacities That
Enhance Learning and Loving Action

> If meditation is comfortable, you're not doing it in a way.
> Like...there should be these little islands of great greatness in
> meditation, where you're like, "Mmm." And those motivate you,
> and you use those in times of trouble. Like, "I can rest here." And
> you can feel your groundedness, and you can feel your capacity,
> like, this resilience of, like...like that tree in the wind.
> You can just feel this sense, like, "Okay. Just got a flat tire.
> Whoo." You know, "And I can't find my AAA card. Yeah." You

know, you're just like, "Okay, what's next?" And you just have
this sense like, "All right." And then, the more stressful it gets, and
what's wonderful is, the more you slow down. Like, "Okay, things
are getting really real here," and you just slow down and
you...because you don't want to miss anything.

   Versus the opposite, which is what I used to do, which is, when
things start to get tense, you speed up. You want to get away from
it, right? What mindfulness is, even if it's physical pain, instead of
trying to get away, you're like, "Whoa, that's really..." You get
like, "What is it? Is that hot? Is it spiky pain? Is it...? Interesting."
That's how mindfulness works. It's pretty magical.

   ~Maya

Figure 9. Mindfulness

   Mindfulness is the second step on The Path (see Figure 9). Aliveness can get a

little lively, even unwieldy. Mindfulness is then a tool to bring consciousness to one's

spiritual development and to hone it. Mindfulness can bring the energy of aliveness into a

useful and helpful state or flow. It can regulate emotions to help students and teachers

become engaged and alert, and simultaneously relaxed. Mindfulness is both a technique and a state of being.

Meditation is one vehicle for building mindfulness. As Maya said in her quote above, meditation is not always comfortable. Mindfulness is a discipline and it requires work. All of the teachers in this study talked about practices they relied on to be more mindful, and they discussed the benefits of mindfulness. Instead of providing a textbook definition of mindfulness here, I allow the teachers' quotes to provide the reader with a phenomenological understanding of what mindfulness is to them and why it is so treasured.

Mindfulness has four subthemes (Table 4): awareness, being without judgment, listening and seeing, and practice.

Table 4

The Theme of Mindfulness and Its Subthemes

Mindfulness *Mindfulness builds spiritual capacities that inform learning and loving action.*	**Being present**	*Being present*, or "in the moment" and *aware* is a cherished aspect of mindfulness.
	Non-judgment	Being *without judgment* is an aspect of mindfulness that is essential for unconditional learning.
	Listening and seeing	*Listening and seeing* are aspects of mindfulness that help humans to learn and to heal.
	Practice	Disciplined *practice* and ritual help to develop mindfulness.

Being Present, or "In The Moment" and Aware,
Is a Cherished Aspect of Mindfulness

> Because what I've realized too working with the children is, a lot of times the way we meet children is this place of reaction. Right? They're showing us something, but we're not fully present. There's not that place of inner quiet to where we can really be present and meet them. Because when we're present some creative...I don't wanna say solution, but some creative...some blessing – some blessing can come out of us to meet them. And by no means am I saying I have mastered this, but this...but to me, this is what education is. Education means to draw out, and we cannot draw out those gifts within the children if we are constantly coming from this place of reaction.
>
> ~Charles

Something fundamentally different occurs in a classroom where the teacher is fully present, as opposed to one where she is not. Albert has many indelible childhood school memories, and he remembered clearly noticing when a teacher's mind was fully engaged or when a teacher had her mind on something else, because she might make Freudian-style slips or other small mistakes indicating a lack of focus. He recalled the painful, often dull years with teachers who lacked mindful engagement, and contrasted those with the delightful experiences of his favorite teachers who were truly attentive. The teacher's presence, or lack of it, changes everything.

Edmond provided a metaphoric story to explain this sense of presence:

> Edmond: An image of this is the phone call at home when you're a mom, right? Child is playing in the other room. You're doing your thing. Everything's cool. You get a phone call. What does the child do?
> Renee: Wants your attention.
> Edmond: All of a sudden wants your attention, right? Because you were here all the way. Your consciousness was with them; they could feel your presence.
> Renee: Even though you were doing something else, you were present with them.
> Edmond: You were present with them. But then you're in through this little portal on your ear, you know, and you're stretching out there. You're gone; you're not out there anymore. You're not in the room even, and they get a little startled because they're still connected on that level unconsciously, but right

there. And they go, "Oh, what's...Mommy, hey," you know? So literally they feel you leave the room to go work with this other person, and so they're brought in, right? And so that is like working with that consciously in the kindergarten and consciously in a different way in the grades so that I'm showing, like, this is what a developed, full, rounded human being can be, and this is how we act.

Rebecca used the experience of working with horses to explain the importance of holding presence with children in the classroom:

> I think, on a personal level, my presence, like my sort of inner presence, is something that's a personal spiritual practice.... I guess to like cultivate a presence that is regulated. Like, I just went to Horse Sense [an equine therapy program] last week.... It was really profound, like, that was very tangible, your inner energy and your presence. The horses respond accordingly, and it's the same thing with kids. So, it's just a matter of regulating my energy and presence. So that I'm calm, but engaged and alert, and, like, really how you see them and hear them and listen to them. So, that's an inner practice that I feel like that modeling, or whatever they're sensing from me, is a spiritual exchange. (Rebecca)

When teachers were present, they found they were far better teachers – more empathetic, more creative, better able to guide each moment to a place of deep learning. In particular, they all spoke about being less reactionary. Part of the reason mindfulness helps teachers be less reactive is because of the emotional intelligence it builds.

> And not to feel like I have to get rid of all of these emotions, or not to feel like I need...like I need to overcome them or transcend them, but they are actually invitations into this deeper place of who I am as a human being. And I think our culture, we are constantly trying to get rid of stuff, or trying to transcend something, or trying to flee from something. (Charles)

According to the teachers who described the benefits of their mindfulness techniques by learning to "watch" emotions, one gains more regulation over them, which certainly helps teachers working with children.

Rebecca referenced brain science to explain how she finds mindfulness and being present make her a better teacher:

> I think spiritual pedagogy, a lot of it is about an inner stillness and mindfulness so that you're not always just plowing ahead with your agenda, but you have the

inner strength or inner capacity to just listen and be present in the moment…then you're able to see more clearly what is needed in any given situation. And if you're anxious or you're stressed, or you're just, like..."Science fair's on Friday, kids. I gotta get this done." You just don't...I mean, that's another brain science thing, whatever that part of your brain that you need to be really effective shuts down a little bit and you're just more in survival mode, and I feel like the best tools to develop that capacity are spiritual practices. (Rebecca)

Being Without Judgment Is an Aspect of Mindfulness
That Is Essential for Unconditional Learning

> There's really no destination, which doesn't mean that you lay back and sort of watch it without any sort of activity in you. But at the same time, you recognize that you're not necessarily in control of it either. Your main purpose is to just remain aware, and that awareness is learning, especially if it's done without too much judgment or the mind analyzing.
>
> ~Rose

Three aspects of non-judgment seemed to be in play with these teachers. One was mindful awareness without judgment – just watching, whether it be a phenomenon, thoughts, or an experience – such as Rose referred to in the quote above. The teachers also talked about their personal practice of refraining from judgment of people, including oneself, but particularly students, in order to better love them and serve them. The third aspect of non-judgment was the creation of a class culture of non-judgment.

The first type of non-judgment, typically associated with mindfulness, can be understood through the following excerpt from some of Rose's writings, where she described the questions she placed on the board for one of her class's morning quiet reflection times:

> For instance, one morning I posed the reflection question: What is the difference between observation and judgment? This question came to me as a result of a previous discussion my students had during one of our "mindfulness sessions" about how a particular food item we were "mindfully eating" actually tasted. Many of the children were at first attaching their past experiences with the present experience and were placing pre-judgments on it as a result so that few of

them were accurately observing and describing how the food actually *tasted* but rather merely expressed their like or dislike for it. But with a little reflection they were able to see clearly what was taking place that was robbing them of the experience of the food as it is. (Rose)

The second type of non-judgment – refraining from the judgment of people – is demonstrated by the story below. Patrick talked about the relief experienced by a student when she was not judged by her teacher, allowing her to release her own self-judgment and fear.

> This was a girl who was so much of a perfectionist and had so much anxiety about performance that she would literally throw up before every test. I mean, just would have a complete breakdown. So in the fall term of calculus she didn't do very well, because she was...she had so much anxiety and she wouldn't do well on the test, even though she was very bright and she...would get herself so wound up that she couldn't actually go do a test.
> …So part of the process of being a teacher, of course, is you grade the student, which is not my favorite thing to do. And then you write a comment to send home to parents.
> And so, I did my best to try to explain what I had experienced and what I'd seen in Nancy's experience in my class. And then, I said, "You know, I think it would be really good if we met when she came back, so we could discuss a few things." So she kind of knew this was coming…I made an appointment with her.
> We were sitting over in the office... And she came in looking really nervous, right, because she was pretty sure that I was going to be really disappointed in her and I was going to give her a hard time, tell her how she screwed up and that's why she got a B-minus which, in this day and age, is like failing...but that wasn't my intention at all. I was like...I wanted to help discover with her a way to work with these intense emotions that she was dealing with. And so, I started off... "Well, I've witnessed you a few times, coming in from class or coming in for a test, where you looked visibly worn out." And this is when she revealed to me that she basically throws up before every test.
> And I just said, "I'm really concerned that something's happening in your mind that is undermining your goals and that you're suffering in a way that is preventing you from actually achieving anything that you want to achieve." And I said, "I don't really care about the calculus" – it was really not my most important thing – "but I care about you and I want to help you with this. And so, I would like to invite you to come to our meditation classes and start working with your mind in a new way. Because really, what meditation's about is working with mind and understanding and experiencing that these thoughts that you have aren't necessarily solid or real or true. And I could talk to you about it all day long, but I can't help you with it. It's something that you have to do yourself and I can teach you to do that through meditation."

I don't remember how long this conversation took, but the relief on her face was so enormous, because she was ready for yet one more person to come and judge her, you know...even harsher than she judges herself, which was so intense. And the visible relief on her body: she just relaxed and she was like, "Oh, I would love to do that." Right? And then, she started meditating with me and I think it really helped her, you know? (Patrick)

Edmond shared a self-reflection on his judgment of a student and the importance of learning to release those judgments:

You know, you do learn to love them through their challenges, which is a really cool thing. I got this new guy and I'm like, "Man, what planet are you on?" Just completely no idea what's happening most of the time, yet if it's recess or something like that you can see him just tie right in and be like, "Guys, you go over there and do this, and I'll be over there!" And you're like, "Why can't you do that when I'm talking," you know?
And so it's like to just let go of that kind of judgment, and just learn to just love this person, discover who they are; try and not be clouded by judgments. So you kind of learn to just almost be like a research scientist on, like, "What is going on in here?" without the judgment. Or really almost forcing yourself to hold a positive judgment. (Edmond)

The third aspect of non-judgment these teachers talked about was creating a classroom culture of non-judgment, which is partly what creates connection in their rooms rather than competition. By creating a culture of non-judgment in her class, Rose was able to use that culture as a tool when her students were embroiled in conflict:

I wasn't, you know, the superhero who was going to come save the day or, you know, basically tell someone they had to stop doing something so that the other can then be happy. And that perhaps is what love feels like. And so that love really dissolved the hate or the fear that was in all of us at that point.
And did it happen again? Of course. But there was this willingness to look at it together, not in a let's fix this kind of way, or let's study this, or let's analyze this, or let's make it stop…but just let's *see* it. Let's see what's actually going on here. (Rose)

During our interview, I asked Rebecca what would be different if she were not using spiritual pedagogy, and her answer helped explain the culture of trusting connection in her room that is not based around material expectations or judgment:

Oh gosh, that idea just breaks my heart. I feel like that is the heart of what we do…. We wouldn't develop those deep relationships and deep trust with each other.... It would be all about what they were producing academically and how well they were doing, or not doing. And what they were doing right. What they were doing wrong. It would be, we would just miss that, like joy, not just joy, but essential aspect of trusting – like knowing each other as like humans, or just as people first. And then I feel like once you have that trust, it becomes so much, I don't know if "easier" is the right word? But then, you can naturally start to work together like work towards improving something together. (Rebecca)

Rebecca's response indicated the paradigm shift – the different underlying

assumptions – of a classroom run with spiritual pedagogy. Compared to an education that

is based on achieving material benchmarks or competing, a mindful classroom is based

on connection.

Listening and Seeing Are Aspects of Mindfulness
That Help Humans to Learn and to Heal

> I think when you're present, another space opens up, and in that
> space, you can begin to meet a child and begin to see a child for
> who they are, but you can also help them step into that. And it may
> be something as simple, Renee, as a smile. It may be something as
> simple as a few words... That's what children are longing for,
> they're longing to be seen. They're longing to be held in a place of
> safety, of...but also of incredible presence.
>
> ~Charles

A topic many teachers spoke passionately about was how important mindfulness

is to really see and truly listen to others, and the learning and growth that come from that.

> So that message came through in every single thing I did with those guys, the
> really, really troubled kids: "I see you." So that came from my circle work stuff,
> just putting aside my lesson plan at the beginning of class. You know, most
> teachers would be like, "You know, these kids, they need structure because if you
> just relax with them they're gonna run all over you." To me it was the exact
> opposite. It was you walk into that little room with a student and you just sink into
> presence and really feel where they are, kind of, energetically.
> And then how many different ways can you show them that you see them, you
> know? Including when they're screaming, "Eff you, you stupid bitch." "Wow, I
> see your anger, and your anger...the fact that you're screaming at me and you
> don't even know me, that really shows me how angry you are in a big way. And I

respect that. That means that you've been through some things that I can't even imagine, right? Because I really haven't done anything, right?... So I get it. So if you...you know, I'm not saying it's nice to be yelled at, but I'm saying I respect that power that you're holding inside you. Because why else would you scream at me? Because I'm not really doing anything except for sitting here." (Maya)

Maya's story demonstrates how the ability to listen without becoming angry or reactionary allowed her to work through some very tough circumstances with students, and by giving them the respect shown through listening, they could begin to learn.

Listening and seeing, again, without judgment, was sometimes seen as an act of healing. Some teachers stressed that students often do not want or need adults to offer solutions. In fact, that can take away their own ability to see and solve their own problems. They simply need someone to listen.

Patrick told a story about a time that a friend who was having many problems needed someone to talk to. He said that in these situations, his meditation skills help him be a good listener:

It's really is a body practice…. Like, I basically meditate. I basically just sit there. You know, and one of the main things you practice in this meditation technique is not being judgmental about whatever arises. Not being judgmental about what the person is saying or what the person's not saying, not being judgmental about what you're doing or what you're not doing, you know, and just let that non-judgmental space of love be the environment in which whatever is gonna unfold, unfolds, you know. And then maybe try to shape it a little bit, you know, but intuitively. (Patrick)

Charles, like all the teachers, shared how deeply listening to his students freed them up to be more deeply engaged:

When you're truly listening with your whole being, the child, they actually... you know what happens? They end up sharing more. And a lot of times they share it more passionately. (Charles)

Rose considered the simple act of seeing an act of learning. In particular, she referred to dialogues with her students where they were "seeing" a human phenomenon in a non-judgmental manner together.

> The point is that learning is seeing that, just seeing that and staying with that awareness that we are caught, that we are attached, that we are not actually as keen to open our minds, to question what we think we know as we might even believe we are. So an answer, then, if one can see that and remain without awareness without the judgments that come in that say "Oh, you should" or "You shouldn't," then that seems just of its own volition to change something, to alter something. That's a different way of living. (Rose)

Disciplined Practice and Ritual Help Develop Mindfulness

> Yeah, practice. And so, there's a very similar quality in mindfulness, which has become quite a joke with a lot of my students, where you...something happens that's hard, and instead of freaking out you're like, "Oh, good news! I get some more practice here." Someone cuts you off in traffic, "Good news!" You get sick for four days, "Good news. You get to, like, watch yourself be anxious."
>
> ~Maya

This quote speaks to an attitude of mindfulness toward life as being "practice," because mindfulness is developed through intentional practice. All the teachers in this study, except for Edmond, talked about personal practices at home and at work that build mindfulness for them – typically meditation, but also reading sacred passages or philosophy, writing or reading poetry, practicing Qi Gong, doing simple chores with intentionality, and carrying out various rituals.

Rose explained how important her personal practice is for maintaining her presence in the classroom:

> I do actually feel that when I don't protect space for that to happen in my own life, the rest of my life and how I interact with the students gets very clouded and sort of, I'm not as present, or open. Or I'm not as much of a conductor of this energy, or whatever you want to call it. (Rose)

Albert, and several others, mentioned quick "in the moment" tools for gaining

mindfulness in the middle of class.

> Albert: Yeah, I get really stressed where it's hard to be focused. I'll be in class with the kids and I'm thinking about something else. Like, no, no, no. Take a breath. Right here. Right here…
> Renee: So that's something you literally do, is when you notice it, you take a breath sometimes?
> Albert: Oh, many times a day!

Maya used an experience she had during a serious bike accident to explain what

goes on in the mind when personal practices develop mindfulness. Essentially, the

practitioner learns to watch her thoughts, so she gains more equanimity over them:

> So the bike crash and the head injury was so awesome and amazing because the moment I woke up on the concrete I thought of...what's that woman? "Stroke of Insight" lady on Ted Talks…I woke up and I was like, "Stroke of Insight!" I have a brain injury, instead of a stroke. She was like, "I'm having a stroke." So I woke up and I was like, "I have a brain injury." And then I had one channel and it was really fascinating. At this point, you know, in mindfulness, the idea is you're in the present moment and the thoughts come and go and distract you. And the more you practice, the less power those thoughts have to pull you out of this present moment. You're not trying to make the thoughts go away, but it's just like any kind of capacity, builds over time, where you can actually stay focused on the present moment for a really long time.
>
> So the brain injury gave me one channel, like the present moment was *it,* and it was the coolest thing. Like, monks practice for years to get this experience, and here I had it on this cold...it was really cold, it was like today. And I'm like, "Whoa, this is great, this is great." But it did make teaching really, really hard. I couldn't teach. I had really bad symptoms. But I found out that if I meditated every day the symptoms would go away for a little while. (Maya)

It is tempting to say that mindfulness gives us "control" over our thoughts and

feelings, but these interviews revealed "control" is not the perfect description because

"control" could imply a willful act, or a trick of the mind, and the point of mindfulness,

ironically, is to move away from relying on our rational, ego mind to control things and

move more into the heart. Rose talked about the mind using its will to "capture" things,

and how mindfulness does not try to capture, but simply allows:

Rose: What the mind wants to do is capture things so that it can turn it into something lasting, right?

Renee: That's it. Okay. "Capture" is a mind word?

Rose: I think so. It's a doing word. It's a willful word. It's a strategic move.

Renee: So if it's not captured, what happens to it?

Rose: It's just there. It's just there, and you're in touch with it.

In addition to working on their own mindfulness practices, these teachers intentionally engaged their students in mindful practices. Albert has a poster in his room with one, two, three stars on it:

Number one. Number one thing, you gotta be aware. Then you can be in control, and then you can be your best…. There's kinda like the progression of it. Before you can do your best, you have to be aware. If you wanna bring a change to anything, first there's that awareness of it, right? Yeah. So be aware of what you're doing. Be aware of what's going inside and outside, what's the expectations. (Albert)

Notice how Albert used the word *control* with students. He did not say that awareness helps to *control* thoughts and feelings (instead, it helps one *notice* thoughts and feelings), but it does help provide control over one's behavior. Albert uses his morning centering activity with students as a way of instilling mindful practices, and those practices can be relied on any time.

Patrick teaches a once-a-week meditation class, but he pointed out that it takes courage for students to participate:

It's uncomfortable. Spiritual practice in general is uncomfortable, because usually it's pushing boundaries in some way. Spiritual practice is always asking you to go beyond your sort of conventional habitual pattern. (Patrick)

(The next section in this chapter on openness and reflection is about working through breaking those patterns, and it is not easy.)

As a practice, the participants described simply being in silence as important. Charles spoke passionately on this topic:

I have really cultivated this very deep relationship with silence. And for example, in the evenings, when I'm preparing for the next day, I sit in silence. And silence is not so much as this absence of noise; it's more of this inner stillness. And it's this place of stillness, where I'm open to what may want to come through. For example, if I'm meditating on a child and there's some issue – he may be having a hard time following directions – so I bring this into my heart, into this place of silence, into this temple. You know, we bring this into our bodies, into this spiritual place, and we began to listen. We begin to listen and wait for another voice that wants to speak, and to get to that place of where that is my guidance. (Charles)

The experience of silence in a group has a different quality than being alone.

Some of the teachers talked about circle practices where students pass a talking stick, and

everyone is expected to hold the stick as it goes around the circle, but no one is required

to speak "because silence is just as valuable" (Rose). Sometimes, as Maya shared, a child

simply holds onto the talking stick: "Just hold it for a little while. And you can close your

eyes, but, like, experience being seen. And it's amazing how much they take advantage of

that" (Maya). When a group experiences silence, it can have a sense of tension, as people

are typically compelled to break the silence, but when a teacher helps the students hold

that space of silence, they learn to appreciate it.

Theme Four: Openness –
An Open Ego and Self-Reflection Turn Uncomfortable Experiences
Into Opportunities for Spiritual Learning

There may be something happening in my life that is stressful....
And so much of the time, I want to figure stuff out. How much I
want to solve it, you know? I'm in this place now where I feel like
in many ways, it's so pointless to try to solve it, because many
times through trying to analyze things and come up with solutions, I
just create more problems. And just to give it to the silence.
~Charles

The Path of Spiritual Learning

Figure 10. Openness

I placed Openness as the third step on The Path (see Figure 10). As I listened to the teachers describe mindfulness and the qualities that mindfulness imbued, it became clear that one cannot be open – meaning open to seeing oneself in an objective manner, open to self-reflecting on one's flaws – without first developing enough mindfulness to truly *see*. To develop an open ego requires some spiritual maturity. Thus, Openness is the last step on The Path. It is the threshold to Authenticity.

It turns out that teaching provides endless opportunity for self-reflection for two main reasons. One, it is a messy job that is impossible to do flawlessly, and two, because children give excellent feedback! Sometimes their feedback is directly in the form of articulated criticism; other times, it is more subtle and may only be noticed and understood by the mindful teacher who is aware.

Teaching is challenging work. Teachers have to perform with creativity and dynamism under tremendous stress. They have to be loving and empathetic even when triggered, or without getting triggered. They have to make hundreds of split-second decisions daily under the weight of knowing that everything they decide and everything they do matters in the lives of the children they serve. At the same time, they cannot do it all.

All the teachers interviewed spoke of struggles, times of self-doubt, or times they felt persecuted and misunderstood. It was often these moments, in particular, where they relied on their spiritual capacities to learn about themselves and to become better teachers and "fuller humans" (Maya). They found that when they approached life with openness and reflection, they learned more and could give more.

The four subthemes of Openness are discussed in this section (Table 5): openness and flexibility, self-reflection, not-knowing and questioning, and unlearning societal conditioning.

Table 5

The Theme of Openness and Its Subthemes

Openness *An open ego and reflection turn uncomfortable experiences into opportunities for spiritual learning.*	Flexibility	General *openness, along with flexibility*, is a trait that lubricates learning.
	Self-reflection	Teaching, as with life, inherently involves suffering and struggle, and *self-reflection* creates learning out of suffering.
	Not-knowing and questioning	*Not-knowing and questioning* can be an uncomfortable state that is necessary for true learning.
	Unlearning societal conditioning	Learning also involves *"unlearning" societal conditioning* and shedding attachment to one's identity.

General Openness, Along with Flexibility,
Is a Trait That Lubricates Learning

> This, to me, is education. Because you're developing these
> different capacities within the children to be present, and it brings
> them into this space where they can learn, and it opens them up.
> ~Charles

Teachers referred to the importance of being open in primarily two ways: first, being open to a spiritual life, and second, being flexible. The first definition relates directly to being awake and sensing aliveness.

> And these qualities I was telling you about, you know, like spacious, and open, and connected, and intelligent, and warm, and responsive and all that. Those qualities are always available to us if we choose to, you know, channel them, so to speak. So spirituality, from sort of a path point of view – like, how do we human beings engage spirituality? It's engaging in activity and philosophy in such a way that it tends towards awakening that potential, as opposed to doing things that close you off from it. (Patrick)

This subtheme section mostly describes the second meaning of openness. This is openness as an ability to be flexible, including seeing other perspectives, other ways of doing things, or giving up physical or egoic control. "Surrender" was a word used more than once, as were phrases such as "letting go" and "acceptance." Teachers spoke of moments when they either realized or were divinely inspired to let go of something inside them, or simply let go of a lesson plan, and the moment opened up into something delightfully unexpected.

Earlier in this chapter, Rebecca described a beautiful centering experience that took place outside, but that was not the centering she had originally planned. I asked her how she was feeling in that moment when she changed her plans.

> Relief, yeah…just love for the kids and just for the beauty that's around us. I think, sort of, I'm not sure if "amusement" is the right word, but kind of like it made me…. I was able to laugh at myself, at just how sort of like tightly I was

holding on to this idea of like what we're doing for centering and like what needed to get done during the day. (Rebecca)

Most commonly, teachers said that after they were further along in their personal growth and their experience as teachers, they learned to be more flexible, especially in terms of their expectations around how the children "should" respond to their lessons.

Well, you know, you expect a lesson to go one way and then it can go another way. And I would kinda, "What's wrong with you kids?" I would still kinda take it personal. (Albert)

In Albert's second interview, he added:

I can definitely get caught up in my way or the highway and...yeah. I just see different ways. So that's inspiring, to see that there are different ways, recognize that. And I'm free to try different things, too. (Albert)

More generally, all the teachers spoke about how much they learn from teaching and from the children reflecting honestly back at them. "It's really interesting how much you have to change yourself to meet the children where they're at" (Edmond). When I asked him to explain that further, Edmond said:

You have to be questioning. You have to really observe and look at them and watch their wide little eyes and kinda test the waters as you go. You have to be truthful and honest. You have to have it inside of you. You have to believe what you're saying. They know if you're really there or not. Especially you can't lie to the little ones. They're hip. You think it's easier to lie to them, but it's not. They see right through it in their soul. (Edmond)

Teaching, as With Life, Inherently Involves Suffering and Struggle, and Self-Reflection Creates Learning Out of Suffering

This opening into something new. This insight, this revelation into who I am as a human being…. I know at one time I had this idealistic attitude...that, oh, I'm just gonna have this experience where this ecstatic, euphoric, blissful experience in which all of my problems and all of my issues are dissolved in this divine presence. And for me that was...that began to change probably in my late twenties, and really beginning to understand that what is really spiritual is learning to encounter the world in a way that you do not

> flee from those experiences but you encounter it as a way in which,
> hey, this is...what is happening to me, these emotions that I'm
> feeling, these are actually indications that I need to enter into this
> quiet, meditative place.
>
> ~Charles

Doesn't everyone dream of a time when life will be easy? Even with spiritual development, life does not become easier. As Rose put it, "You don't rest on your laurels at any point. So it's continuous…." Teachers referred to moments of "really suffering, moments of hurt" (Rebecca) and made a point to say "that's all part of it too."

Part of these teachers' spirituality is an acceptance of the idea that failure and difficult experiences are a part of life. By moving *toward* struggles with mindfulness and openness, they find they are more effective teachers and learn more about themselves. They also make sure their students learn how to experience frustrations and uncomfortable emotions, and they use love and mindfulness to help them. For example, Albert tells his students when embarking on something challenging:

> We're taking a big risk here…. This might not work. We might not succeed.
> We're gonna try this out. And trying stuff, and maybe failing, and coming back to
> it, and trying again. (Albert)

There was some acknowledgement, especially with Maya and Patrick who tend to pull from a lot from Buddhist terminology, that suffering is part of what connects people. It is something all humans have in common. Patrick named some of the different types of suffering – the most profound being "fundamental suffering, which is the suffering of not being in touch with your true nature," something all these teachers hope to help their students avoid or prepare for.

The suffering these teachers most commonly talked about was feeling that they have failed as a teacher. Realizing they made a mistake doing a job that is so important to

them is painful, and it can feel hard to go on. Charles said, "Yeah, it's really humbling

and it's like, 'Oh my gosh, and do I really wanna do this for my whole life?'"

They do manage to go on, and they try to do it with an open ego, meaning they

self-reflect and use their spiritual capacities, such as connection and mindfulness, to

change or to move with grace. In this regard, their spiritual capacities build resilience.

Charles explained further:

> Teaching is humbling, because… there are moments when you realize, oh.
> Like, sometimes my students will correct me...or I will find myself being like,
> "Oh no, I forgot to do that," or...and it's like "Oh." So, there is this constant self-
> reflection, and sometimes it doesn't feel good, and it's like, "Oh, I gotta make
> some shifts here or some changes here, or there." So teaching, in and of itself, is a
> spiritual path, so to speak. I mean, I know as a teacher I learn something new
> about myself every day, and sometimes it's things I didn't really want to know,
> and it's like "Oh, there's this too." (Charles)

Complaints from parents can be one of the most challenging teacher experiences.

Albert said he welcomes them:

> So a parent comes to me about a concern, "Oh, I hear you. Yeah. Thank you."
> Don't get defensive, you know? I don't get defensive, just be like, "Oh yeah. I
> wanna learn more. Tell me more." (Albert)

I asked him how he maintains the ability to see other perspectives with such openness,

and he referred to his spirituality: "A lot of it is just also looking at the bigger picture, not

taking things personally…. Hey, let's put it in a different context." Then he tries to help

them see a larger perspective:

> And that's what I tell the parents. "Oh my goodness." I get an email or
> something, "Somebody said this to my kid. I can't believe it!" I'm like, "Well, if
> we could prevent all harmful words from coming to your child, we certainly
> would…. We can't prevent every harm from coming, but now that it's come, what
> can you do with it? What opportunity can we do, you know?" (Albert)

Maya talked about a "real powerful piece of mindfulness" that has helped her to

be reflective:

Trying to create space between this true nature and this unencumbered spot, and our mechanisms, our Self, with a capital "S," our identity. So we can say, "Oh, there's Maya doing that thing she does. Not fun, because I bet she's nervous if she's doing that." So kind of a third person sense of separation that happens, so that was really powerful. (Maya)

She said that after learning this skill, she could more clearly see "all those ego identity mechanisms." Now she has developed her mindfulness to a level that she can recognize feelings in her body that are "like a taskmaster" that help to keep her humble and reflective:

But if I can feel it in my jaw, I get really tense in my...right here, if I'm not coming from that place…like if I'm unprepared, if I haven't prepared a good lesson and it's kinda going awry, I'll try to cover it up. I'll do some song and dance to try to make it good. And then I feel this real tension because I'm not just saying, "You guys, I screwed up. Like, I didn't prepare well." And as soon as I do that, my jaw relaxes, and then this whole flood of ideas on how to recover the wrecked lesson come to mind. (Maya)

Patrick talked about how the kids reflect everything back at him.

They're always watching you. And they keep you honest and they expose you all the time. I get exposed...on a regular basis. When I feel my emotions and I'm feeling tight and maybe a little frustrated and angry and I lash out with a little sarcasm, it's reflected back at me immediately. I see it in the kids' faces. I know that suddenly, I've harmed them a little bit through my sort of selfish crankiness, you know? (Patrick)

Patrick recalled one of his most painful teacher moments:

The kids have anonymous evaluations, and this one kid says, "Mr. Rich humiliates me."… It hit me so deep. Because certainly I'm not trying to do that, you know, but some kid feels like I'm humiliating them, then I am screwing up. And that sent me into a tailspin. You know, I was, like, trying to figure out who the kid was, like, so I could remedy it, but I…didn't know who the person was. But it made me just be way more sensitive to what I'm doing. Maybe it was, like, one of those sort of sarcastic moments when I hadn't slept well and I was just feeling a little snarky, and the kid was in their own state of mind. Maybe they were particularly sensitive because of something that happened in their life, and then we just met in this place, where that kid was harmed by something I did. And, you know, it felt horrible.
Renee: How did you get through that?

Patrick: Well, you know, I rationalized it a little bit, denied it a little bit, but it kept coming back, and then I just realized that's gonna happen sometimes. You know, you can't be perfect all the time. And, you know, that became sort of the way through it. It's like, I felt the regret – you know, don't need to belabor that. And now we'll be more vigilant, see what happens, and hopefully I'll catch it next time…. I suffer from my own perfectionism just like anybody, and I had to let go of that. Like, okay, you got this great spiritual personality trip thing going on. Like, you think you're so frickin' great. And guess what? Boom, you fuck up like everybody else! So, you know, be humble. (Patrick)

Patrick said that his meditation practice has immensely helped his ability to reflect on his mistakes without shame and perfectionism:

It taught me patience. Not just with them, but with myself. You know, if you're in a classroom enough times you realize that some days you do a good job, some days you do a bad job. Like, are you gonna, like, jump around for joy when you do a great thing and then give yourself a hard time when you do a terrible thing? Or, you know, is there some more equanimity that you can find in there? (Patrick)

The ability to reflect on oneself is a capacity these teachers want to build in their students. There was some mention of how developing the ego is an important part of individuating for children and especially teens, so these teachers are largely laying the foundation for later years in the children's lives. Implementing circles and other activities that cultivate gratitude, for example, were identified as means to help kids to see beyond their own perspective…and once in while, there would be a big breakthrough.

Rose told a story of a 5th grade boy, Jonathon, who was gifted with all the charms, good looks, and athletic skills that are highly valued in material culture. He was a very competitive boy who relished in his superiority, often "running over" others, so to speak – until he participated in a running contest to raise money for some cause, and it brought him to a new perspective. He began to see how he was previously competing simply for the sake of winning, and how that sometimes negatively affected others – a self-reflection he humbly shared in the safety of a class dialogue. Rose described:

I mean, just the admission of that student who said, "This is the first time I'm actually seeing sort of the other side of the coin when it comes to competition. I was always very defensive before!" Because our school has this reputation of being non-competitive, which is hilarious. But it seems that in this space, this year, he was able to see fully his competitiveness, or more fully than he had before. And it didn't come from a defensive place of having to justify it or convince others that it really is necessary, but he was able to see other sides of it, and therefore it gave it less power in his life. And he places less value on it as a result because he wasn't protecting it anymore. So that safety allowed him to see it. (Rose)

Rose's story demonstrates why she equates "seeing" with "learning." In this case, when Jonathon was able to see his behavior, he learned more about himself and his behavior. As Rose continued:

Learning could even be synonymous with seeing. So learning is happening when seeing is happening, and seeing happens when there's clarity and there isn't fear the sort of clouds our ability to see what is. (Rose)

Again, we harken back to the safety of relational connection that Rose created with her class. Jonathon probably would have needed to hold on to his competitive stance had he not felt the security and ability of his peers to support his newfound humility with safety.

Rose explained that "the mirror that's reflected in relationship, especially if people are willing to look and not just impose imagery on each other," helps us to see ourselves and find a place of humble self-reflection, as it did for her student, Jonathon. But, regarding the importance of relationship, Rose reminded us, "The relationship that is had is qualitatively different from one where, let's say the egos and the identities are alive and well." So not just any relationship helps us reflect, but those relationships where we do not have to protect our egos.

Maya spoke with tears of joy in her eyes about her students learning to reflect critically without becoming defensive:

Well, I had a very special moment last week. I had an observation, a supervisory up to a year…. I had an assignment…students were reading an article about a particular type of professional email and writing…finding five tips about that email. So there was this long list of different types: resignation letter, blah, blah, blah.

And then, they had to…follow the tips and write their own sample email. And they went up and taught the tips, and then they had their email up on the SmartBoard, and they stood up there, and then I asked the rest of the class, "Well, how'd they do? How did they follow their own tips?" And these students – all from different programs, this is tech, again, right, so these are not kids who know each other, and they're very different types of kids; you know, auto mechanics with computer kids – and they were fine up there.

And I didn't even really notice it, but [the supervisor] was blown away, especially one student. She said, in the post-interview, the post-observation interview, she said, "I just can't get over those kids taking that feedback, that criticism so...like, so joyfully. Like, everyone was just ripping apart their emails and at the same time, the kid was up there feeling great." She said, "That doesn't happen in the other classrooms. I know that kid. I've seen him in Professional Foods, and he's very defensive about his work." And she said, "That's amazing."

And I just started crying because that's my number one goal, is that sense that "I'm okay." You know, in here, "I'm okay, and these things I do aren't me." Whether it's a bad behavior, or a bad email, or a poorly constructed sentence. "That's just something I'm working on. That's just a behavior I have. And who I am is immutable." (Maya)

After telling this story, Maya explained that she believes that teaching through spiritual

pedagogy is "almost 75% modeling, of me just being extremely transparent about my

fallibilities." She gives the kids extra credit every time they notice her making a mistake.

She explained, "And for me, one of the most motivating aspects of life is wanting to

learn. I think it's a real innate drive…is my humility; I'm motivated to learn."

**Not-Knowing, or Questioning, Can Be an
Uncomfortable State That Is Necessary for True Learning**

The ability to hang out in ambiguity, not knowing, not being right, not being wrong, not saying yes, not saying no is one of the most important skills we could have in every situation in life, whether it's business...

Like, so much…we so want to avoid not knowing and being seen as not knowing that we'll just make a decision just to get out of that ambiguity. That is such a huge part of our failure, and my

particular failure, and failures in life was I could not...oh, I couldn't stand ambiguity. Break up, not break up…. Make a business decision, don't. But don't hang out in not knowing. So, I just feel that that...there's a capacity that we build for that, either ambiguity or I love the term liminal space…. Limin is a doorway or a threshold. So, it's the space...we're not in or out, we're just hanging out in space. We don't know if we're in or out…. It's one of the most best outcomes of mindfulness, is the ability to just stay within that space of not knowing…especially about other human beings, instead of rushing. We're primitively wired to rush towards conclusion. Friend or foe, right?

So, if I can at least insert some awareness for those kids in that, like, that's the greatest strength of all, is to not know, and to hang out there. That's courage. And that's where you're gonna really learn. That's where you're really gonna see the opportunities. Instead of like, "Oh, that job's for me, because I'm so afraid of not having a job," or whatever. It's in every aspect of your life. If you can maintain clarity within ambiguity, and just be patient until the dust settles, you are gonna have success.

~Maya

The teachers in this study all seemed to flip education on its head. Instead of teaching children answers, they wanted children to learn how to ask questions, something they practiced and valued in their own learning path.

Rebecca talked about how she thinks it is healthy for children to question authority respectfully. Charles talked about "learning to ask questions, but beautiful questions…questions that don't always have answers…"

Rose shared an activity she engages her students in before each dialogue in order to open them up:

I began to incorporate what is called quiet reflection…. I would come in the morning Wednesday and write two questions on the board…. So one of the questions might have been "What does fear do to me? And is it possible to learn when I'm fearful?"

Two very open-ended questions… [Speaking to the children]: "Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. The more challenging the question, the more valuable it is to reflect on. This question may bring up even more questions. Trust your intelligence to stay with the reflection for as long as possible."… So at no point does anyone read these journals, unless the children want to share them, so

it's a very private and personal experience. Really what it is, is a kind of a meditation that I'm trying to allow them to have with themselves. (Rose)

Rose explained that this is a frightening task for many 5th graders because "we're so conditioned to believe that we need to know." By 5th grade, most children think school is about having right answers. She further described how she feels as she talks to them while they engage in this unfamiliar act of not knowing:

> So when they're writing in their journals, I suppose the feeling in my body is there is a kind of excitement, because it's as if I'm helping a scared child cross a scary bridge, or something. I'm guiding them along, and the rest of the group is there with us, but they're fine as I've described. But it's exciting because if I say the right things, I speak to something in them, and they're no longer afraid.
> Renee: How do you know that?
> Rose: How does that feel? How do I know that? I don't know. I really don't know. I just feel it, strongly. It feels like the most important thing in that moment is to talk to those fears. To speak to those fears, because in that moment, that space that has been set aside for those children is invaluable. If they don't cross that bridge then they'll just continue to never see what the other side is like. And so I really feel it's my responsibility in that moment to almost carry them over so that they can just catch a glimpse of it, and then they'll be there, and they won't need me anymore. (Rose)

In the end, the children became comfortable with this ambiguous space: "So that did take, I'd say, a few months for them to really open up to themselves, you might say, and I feel that this was an exploration worth taking" (Rose).

Rose added that letting go of control is not always easy in her own life, and in fact it is tempting to become formulaic about her spiritual pedagogy, since teachers typically look for organized lesson plans and methods:

> I think the greatest challenge throughout has been not to allow my brain to take it and turn it into a mechanical process.... Because I'm very prone to that, right, and in fact was taught as a, you know, teacher to do that precise thing. You see something that works; you make it mechanical so that you can apply it to any given situation. And it's no longer a struggle, and I don't know that it ever was a struggle, but it certainly is...it's like a waking up sort of thing like, "Oh, no, that's not the frame of mind that I use to pick a passage."... So it's kind of like the removal of the known from this that continues to disorient me at times. (Rose)

It is remarkable how many of the participants said something like "there's no formula" to teaching with spiritual pedagogy, or "no method," or that it is more about creating conditions. Therefore, when problems arise, they would lean on their own spiritual practices for guidance and sheer survival.

Learning Also Involves "Unlearning" Societal Conditioning
and Shedding Attachment to One's Identity

> I really had to relinquish my identity as I knew myself here in
> the United States when I lived there [India], and explore almost, for
> quite some time, an identity-less existence. Which was terrifying,
> but wonderful, clarifying, and kind of like in a way, a death of
> something that needed to die and be reborn in its own way.
> ~Rose

Interestingly, four of the teachers used death to describe a process they had to go through to detach from their ego, or their identities, in order to be open to spiritual learning. Charles used an analogy of death to describe how his mindfulness practice has been important in personal transformation:

> But there are certain things that happen, I think, within our psyche, our
> emotions, or even in our thinking that are transformed through just simply being
> silent. Because there's parts of us that I think die from silence. There's little
> deaths that happen when we're just simply quiet, when we're still. Because, I
> mean, there's no argument there. You can't argue with the silence. There's no
> argument, it's just...you're just simply there. And so, I think, through that, you
> begin to see your experience differently. Because we need to have...before you
> enter into silence, you're in a reactive place, and you're trying to figure it out.
> And I think when you come out the other side you see it differently. (Charles)

Why did these teachers need to lose their identity? One way to look at it is that after experiencing "death," they were more alive to seeing life from a larger perspective than their own. When they were not protecting their ego, they could better connect with other people, especially their students. They could experience the unconditional love

Rose spoke of that "isn't personal." Rose explained why losing her identity was

necessary for her path:

> I do feel that relinquishing your identity or at least seeing the falseness of it is
> essential to giving, in a way, yourself up to sort of being perhaps a vessel through
> which spiritual teachings can come, right? So the ego really – not to say I don't
> have one at all, it is there – but even just to acknowledge it, and then it sort of
> seems you put it in its place when you see it. So I would say that I don't know that
> it needs to be, by any means, through sort of an experience like I had in India. But
> it does seem to be important to truly understand sort of the falseness of what we
> build up about ourselves and be able to set that aside so that whatever else is there
> for the seeing can be seen and not blocked by all of the nonsense. (Rose)

All of these teachers spoke passionately about wanting their students to discover

their own path, to find out who they are. They pointed out that society conditions people,

and while all schools engage in social conditioning of some sort, the type of learning they

want their students to engage in is a process that allows their students to be conscious of

that conditioning and think for themselves, and not to be comfortable settling for

anything less or easier. Rose's original inspiration to become a teacher was from a

reading by Krishnamurti in which he talked about learning as "more of a revolutionary

process than a traditional, fitting into society process."

Charles referenced the concept of "living" (or aliveness) when talking about the

type of learning he wants his students to have:

> You know, it could be years down the road, but...you're giving them
> something that helps them come back to who they are. Because there's all that
> noise in our heads, and, you know, how can we think from a creative...how can
> our thinking be a living thinking when there's all that noise in our head? Like,
> this thinking that comes from a different place, as opposed to just conditional
> thinking, you know? (Charles)

Patrick pointed out that high school students are developmentally expected to

become socialized to society's norms, but he hoped that he provides them with enough

experience in learning about their inner lives and relinquishing their egoic processes, that later in life they will find the power of their own path:

> What I hope is that they will find themselves in a situation where they are sort of confronted with themselves, and they'll be able to reflect on some experience that they've had and realize that they have choices. You know, that they're actually...they're empowered to do what they think is right, or they're empowered to step out of what might be called conventional point of view and feel good about that. And, you know, I don't know how it's going to manifest, but if anything, you know, I think of it as empowerment. (Patrick)

Summary, Conclusion, and Reflection

The triad of themes that I placed as steps on The Path – Aliveness, Mindfulness, and Openness – were presented in this chapter in an intentional order. As stated, the steps build on one another.

Aliveness is a continuation of connection. *Everything* is a continuation of connection, but Aliveness expands relational, interpersonal connection to all of life and all of time. The later subthemes listed under Aliveness expand even further to begin talking about connecting with creativity (intuition and imagination) and non-rational ways to experience aliveness.

Whereas Aliveness can almost be seen as wild – raw energy and spirit – the next theme, Mindfulness, tempers and shapes that energy. Mindfulness is such a buzzword nowadays that I was tempted to give this theme another name so the reader would be less likely to equate mindfulness with her personal, possibly reified conception of mindfulness. "Presence" and "awareness" were two titles I considered for this theme, but eventually I decided "mindfulness" was a broader term that better captured the variety of experiences within the phenomena these teachers were describing. I hope the teachers'

stories were engaging enough that the reader was able to disengage from any personal previous conceptions of mindfulness and become immersed, or completely present, with the teachers' rich descriptions. Indeed, that was my own personal experience. In fact, I was so influenced by these teachers' experiences of mindfulness that I took up a regular personal mindfulness meditation practice as a result of this research.

Openness was the most difficult theme to name. "Reflection" was a strong candidate, as were "open ego" and "acceptance." Again, the name I chose for the theme – in this case, Openness – was the only word that seemed expansive enough to include the rich descriptions the teachers described, which ranged widely from self-reflection, to being able to tolerate ambiguity, to questioning society.

As the themes on The Path progress, they are in some ways becoming more complex in that they encompass wider concepts. The final "step," Authenticity, is an integration of all the themes. I describe it as a "culmination" of the steps on The Path.

Chapter VII

THEME FIVE: AUTHENTICITY

I think if I have a deepest longing, it's to be authentic. I want to be authentic. I don't want to say things just to please another person. I don't want to act in ways that are not true to who I am. And to discover, you know, what is real to me? When am I in touch with the real?

~Charles

Figure 11. Authenticity

Authenticity as the Culmination of The Path of Spiritual Learning

I can recall the yearning and the reverence in Charles's voice as he dreamed of being completely authentic – of walking through the world in harmony with his deepest, truest self. Some teachers called it "authenticity," some "true nature." Rebecca called it "wanting integrity," and Albert talked of "wholeness." Most teachers in this study used slightly different language, but they all spoke passionately about a process of becoming more authentic. To be authentic was conveyed as the goal for themselves and their students, as in Charles's quote above, where he expressed being authentic as his deepest longing. Not only was authenticity a goal, but it became clear from the evidence the teachers provided that much intentional spiritual work was required to attain a mature state of authenticity, i.e., the previous steps on The Path. Therefore, Authenticity is the culmination of the path.

Authenticity, as all things spiritual, is very difficult to define or describe. It is akin to describing enlightenment. The teachers in this study, however, provided stories and descriptions from their experiences of authenticity that shed light on the meaning they give to authenticity, why it is the culmination of this spiritual developmental path for teachers, and how authenticity remains an ongoing process of transformation.

I placed Authenticity in the center of the circle within The Path. It radiates outward, sharing light with all other aspects of The Path. While there is no "end" to the path of spiritual development, it became clear that authenticity is the intention. I am reluctant to call authenticity a "target," or even the "goal," because that kind of materialist language implies something to be gained or achieved, when the teachers who

attended the focus group made it clear that authenticity is something we were all

endowed with upon birth. The journey is merely to uncover it:

> I don't think of "authenticity" as something we find. I think it as something we reveal, because it is innate to us. It is really our innate self. And so, that is really key to me in my teaching as well as my own transformation. (Maya)

What I heard from Maya is that "finding" authenticity is more a process of

"remembering." It is an unveiling. I found myself wondering if this is what mystics refer

to as "returning to the source."

What is it inside of us that is so important – so alluring – that these teachers have

spent their lives and careers trying to uncover it for themselves and for the people they

serve? A dialogue I had with Charles was revealing:

> There's some grace, there's some presence that we begin to connect with. And I think what happens is you get to this place where you want to connect and relate to that because what you recognize is this is an authentic communion with something that is much greater than I am. I mean, I guess you could call it God. (Charles)

I found myself wondering what Charles meant by God in this statement. Then, in

a conversation with him about intuition, he referenced how at peace he feels when he

trusts what he calls his "inner guide," or "inner voice." When I probed Charles to explain

to me what he means by "inner voice," he said this:

> Charles: I guess people in the past…they would call it the voice of God. I will call it my deepest truest self…or my original self.
> Renee: So who does that make you, when you are listening to your deepest and truest self, or when you *are* your deepest and truest self?
> Charles: I think if that makes me anything, it makes me an authentic human, an authentic person.

This is a profound statement. Charles said that when he is listening to his inner

voice – or listening to God – he is authentic. My interpretation of Charles's language,

based on all of the conversation I had with him during interviews and the focus group, is

that he uses the term *God* synonymously with "oneness" or the living force of life of which he is a part. So rather than God being something higher beyond him, it is something greater than him but also a part of him – thus, something of which he is a part. In this excerpt, Charles equates his truest self, his inner voice, or his original self, with God. For Charles, the quest to reveal authenticity is a quest to be one with God.

Authenticity has five subthemes (Table 6): a combination of unique individual creativity and universal true nature, wholeness, a developmental process that integrates all aspects of The Path, inner freedom, and transformational journey.

Table 6

The Theme of Authenticity and Its Subthemes

Authenticity *Authenticity is a gateway to internal freedom.*	Individuality and universality	Authenticity is a combination of expressing one's *unique individual creativity and one's universal true nature.*
	Healing and wholeness	*Healing and recognizing wholeness* are aspects of uncovering authenticity.
	Developmental process integrating multiple aspects	Building authenticity is a *developmental process* that integrates all aspects of The Path – Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, and Openness
	Inner freedom	Authenticity is a gateway to *inner freedom*
	Transformative journey	The path to authenticity is a *transformational journey* that is ever-unfolding

Authenticity Is a Combination of Expressing One's Unique Individual Creativity and One's Universal True Nature

What is authenticity?…spaciousness, open connectiveness, qualities of sharp, precise, creative intelligence, and qualities of compassion. Deep responsiveness to the world, whatever it presents. And so, authenticity is allowing those sort of intrinsic qualities to manifest.

~Patrick

Patrick provided a beautiful definition of authenticity, and he also talked about the opposite of authenticity. Sometimes it is easier to explain what something *is not:*

> As human beings, we have this tendency to try to create this reality, both internally and externally. And yeah, at least in my experience, we also know it's false. And it's painful to be not a hundred percent authentic and be exactly who you are and to continually edit your experience and continually try to curate how you show up in a situation.
> And this, in many ways, was the inspiration for me on the spiritual path, because I felt that. I felt that sort of, like, "I feel fake." I'm doing everything right, I'm getting good grades and I've got friends and whatever. I'm doing all the things that I was told I was supposed to do and yet, I feel like I'm faking it. (Patrick)

In this second quote by Patrick, he talked about being "fake" as the opposite of authenticity. Falseness is the opposite of truth. Authenticity, then, has something to do with truth and being true to oneself. This was echoed by Charles in the opening quote to this chapter when he asked, "When am I in touch with the real?"

In his first quote, Patrick listed many intrinsic qualities that authenticity allows one to manifest. Like the other teachers in this study, he inferred that authenticity has to do with something intrinsic to us.

Since authenticity is something we naturally have, then there must be some truth within us. Moreover, if that truth already exists when we are born, without any effort, then it seems to be all-pervasive. Therefore, this truth is evidently a shared truth – the "oneness" teachers talked about in Chapter VI. This is our universal true nature.

At the same time, however, teachers talked about the importance of honoring the voice of each person and each person's own unique creativity. What may seem like a contradiction – the existence of two truths, one that is universally shared and one that is unique to each individual – is actually resolved with authenticity. We can be both at one time. To help explain this, Patrick described different levels of authenticity:

I want them [students] to find out who they really are, on the deepest possible level. And there's lots of levels there. One level is, "I'm a creative artist person, I want to go do this" or "I'm a scientist, I want them to discover that." But then, there's a whole other level, like, who am I, really? Why am I here? And how am I going to respond to the world and how am I going to respond to my people? How am I going to show up as a person? Not now, necessarily, but forever? (Patrick)

There is the "forever" truth Patrick wants each student to discover, and he also wants

students to discover things about themselves that may be fleeting, but still true in the

moment, such as wanting to be a scientist.

Maya, back in Chapter V, explained her distinction between one's "true nature"

and "true self." True nature is our essential being, something that is always there and

shared with other humans. In fact, it is shared with all of life. She said our "true nature is

oriented toward growth...toward that which is life-giving." True nature is unlimited,

eternal. "True self," on the other hand, is something she said she does not believe exists

because the "self" is ever-changing – as each moment changes, so does the self. It is hard

to conceive of something that constantly changes as being "true," making "true self"

an apparent oxymoron. Interestingly, however, the "self," if ever-changing, is also

eternal…if eternally changing. So perhaps "true self" is not such an oxymoron after all. It

is only the other side of the coin from true nature.

The Path is about learning – in this case, learning spiritual development within the

context of teaching. In Chapter VI, learning was expressed as something eternal,

immeasurable, and unlimited. That would make learning a creative force that is always in

motion. As I reflect on each teacher's story, it does seem that each individual's own

unique learning path helps her move toward expressing her true nature. One's unique

nature and one's true nature exist side by side. Therefore, authenticity is never about

suppressing one's true self or personality, even if it is neurotic! It is all-inclusive. As

Patrick put it, "Be who you are, don't apologize…Show your stripes, and if you get the

feedback, well, just listen to the feedback, and maybe it'll be helpful." That is how we

learn!

All that considered, the definition of authenticity for the purposes of this

dissertation and for The Path is "a combination of expressing one's unique individual

creativity *and* one's universal true nature." You cannot have one without the other. In the

end, it is about connecting with the living force.

Healing and Recognizing Wholeness Are Aspects of Uncovering Authenticity

> We are all already whole. It's realizing and recognizing our
> wholeness. All the pieces are there already. We are all whole and
> complete. We have everything we need, but we don't always
> remember.
> ~Albert

Synonyms for authenticity in the context of spiritual development are healing,

wholeness, integrated self, holism, and being in balance. All these terms have slightly

different nuances, but they capture the essence of authenticity. For example, the teachers

made reference to finding balance and incorporating all aspects of their spiritual lives and

their work lives together into wholeness.

> It can be challenging at times, but I don't feel the sense of separation between
> my job and my life like you might sometimes feel. And for me, that's really
> important. Like I need to feel like the thing that I do for many hours a day is like,
> is my life, not that my life happened, like, outside of work. (Rebecca)

Rebecca, like most of these teachers in this study, previously worked in public

school, or a school that did not allow spiritual pedagogy as a recognized practice. These

teachers made a practical choice to find a position that enhanced their ability to live in

authenticity by integrating their work lives and their spiritual lives. Integrity, or integral

living, was talked about as aligning one's beliefs with one's life, and also as integrating all the "parts" of oneself. "It's like the physical and the spiritual, the practical, all of it to me is...it's hard to separate them" (Charles).

Albert talked about "The Rainbow Seven Domains" at his school, a holistic pedagogical philosophy that recognizes all aspects of the child within seven integrated domains: physical, natural, creative, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual. He believes that if the school does not feed all aspects of the human through a healthy, healing education, then children may find their own means to address these parts of themselves, healthy or otherwise:

> We have our seven domains. They're [the students] gonna be doing social stuff, creative stuff; if we're not addressing it in the classroom, they're still doing all that stuff. Maybe it's on the playground, you know. Like, when we were growing up, they didn't address that stuff so much in school, but we were learning it in the hallway between classes. We'll give them an outlet for that. (Albert)

Authenticity and psychological well-being seem to go hand in hand, making the opposite of wholeness something akin to pathology:

> And in our culture...there's just this rampant perfectionism, you know, which doesn't allow for all of the beautiful, crazy sort of quirkiness of human beings. Right? And then it also sets up a tension for people who feel like they're not living up to this particular thing that they decided they were supposed to live up to, and then they act out in all sorts of different ways. You know, psychologically unhealthy ways a lot of times. And so authenticity is like...it starts with just being honest with yourself. (Patrick)

Several of the teachers referred to healing as an aspect of authenticity and an aspect of spiritual work. Edmond, in particular, talked about teaching as a healing path, and sometimes referred to spiritual pedagogical methods as "medicinal." Edmond has a mystical take on healing as something that happens over generations, or even lifetimes.

He intentionally works on healing children and families through his work as a teacher.

Here is a story from when he first started teaching:

> I really value sniffing out these really deep soul challenges of people.… I mean, just fighting the generational shit dragon. One time, it was like my first year teaching, I was actually in a Montessori school as a kindergarten assistant. And this little guy hit this other little guy, and he just would not apologize or even admit that he had done it. And so he ended up sitting in another classroom, which is the worst thing that could happen…
>
> And his dad came, and I was like, "Well, Calvin punched Nathan, and he really hit him hard too. And I saw it. Nathan really didn't do anything to him. That happens. But he wouldn't say sorry. He even would insist that he hadn't done anything." And I'm kinda telling him about it, and the dad, what was his reaction? "Well, Nathan always provokes him. Of course, Nathan provoked him!" And I was like, "Oh my god. The dad can't admit his son did anything." And I really like saw myself just like with a sword slashing at the generational dragon. Just like...I'm fighting at this thing that has like crawled through the souls of your people for so long.
>
> And in that situation, I did not have much power to call this guy out and move on for the whole family, for generations to come. But in the situation I'm in now, I can heal. And that's huge. It's just huge. I find so much value in that.

Healing is not all about "slashing" at ugliness and fighting what is not healthy, however. The gentler side of healing is building up the whole person and weaving it into a complete "tapestry" (Charles) – into a whole, healthy, and balanced person. The simple notion of living in balance was brought up by almost every teacher, and balance went hand in hand with wholeness and authenticity. In the case of teachers who could labor 24/7 and never feel as if they have completed their work, teachers of spiritual pedagogy said they consciously work toward finding a balance in their life so they can sustain their authentic, best selves.

> My life revolves around teaching, and at the same time, I've learned also to be true to myself. You know, like, to find a balance. I will not survive if I give all of my time to teaching. I have to find balance. I have to have other...that's one reason why I started doing it, boxing. And I've always had a deep longing to write poetry and...just to write, and journal, and, you know, paint sometimes, and do

some other things that I know nourish me. And you know, it's like, I do them not because I care about getting published. I do them just out of the sheer love for them, or the curiosity. You know, because they nourish me, and they actually help me with teaching. (Charles)

Building Authenticity Is a Developmental Process That Integrates All Aspects of The Path of Spiritual Learning – Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, Openness

It is one thing to set the intention to see what you cannot see and to reveal an authentic self, but without an equanimity and a stability of presence, it can be pretty harmful. You become a raw person in the world, in a world that is not set up to hold that. So I think it is really important for me… that I am thinking about as a teacher, "What am I building?" Not just within this classroom around connection and safety, but in their own being, a sense of safety that they have personally built out of building capacity for openness and for transformation slowly.

That it does take this stability to handle what might be revealed, because we all say it. We are like, "I want to find my true self. Who am I? I want to really be me. I want to be authentic." Well, that can be really hard. You can lose friends. People like you with your masks on! So the equanimity piece is super important to me to try to teach them.

~Maya

In this quote from Maya, she referred to the process of revealing authenticity as a developmental process. It is a process inherent with challenges and risks ("*You lose friends!"*). It is a process that takes courage and care. In two short paragraphs, she touched on every theme in the path, showing how each step along the way is vital to the safe transformation of becoming a whole, authentic human. Connection, aliveness, mindfulness (equanimity), and openness are all necessary for authenticity and vice versa, and they all work together as an integrated whole. To elucidate, this subtheme section touches on the parts of the path previously discussed, but through the lens of authenticity.

Table 7

Authenticity Paired With Steps on The Path

Connection and authenticity.

> Life is being in relationship.
> ~Rose

Learning occurs when we make connections, when we express our own true nature in relationship with others. However, it takes courage to reveal one's authenticity, because it is a process of peeling away one's ego and built-up identities, or "masks," as Maya phrased it above. That is why practices that build safety through connection are vital for spiritual growth. Children, in particular, must feel secure that no one is going to mock them or hurt them when they take vulnerable emotional risks, and they need to feel a sense of oneness, as opposed to separateness, with their classmates and teacher. This is why our teachers work so intentionally to build a field of connection in their classrooms. Rose talked about the purpose of connection that is built through the dialogues, or circles, she holds. True connection, for her, means that her students can see one another without judgment or prejudice.

> It seems to me like it loosens some of the image making that would otherwise further divide them even further, isolate them, or cause them to feel that that's [their ego's] all that they were. So, yeah, it seems that it gives them each a chance to hear each other and see each other in a different light. (Rose)

Aliveness and authenticity.

> No one told me how easy it was to just completely lose yourself,
> like how quickly life would just swallow you up with what you're
> supposed to do and what people expect of you. Like, I'm always
> like [to the students], "It's not all about you, but if you can't be true
> to yourself and what you love, and what is your true nature, then it's
> gonna be hard to have a life that feels like a match, right? You're
> gonna have a wife that you attracted based on this kind of false
> identity. You're gonna have a job that's based on this false identity.
> And so then when you're forty," I was like, "That's what a midlife
> crisis is about. You wake up and you're like, 'How the hell did I get
> here,' you know? I wanna avoid that for you guys, and so, 'What
> animates you?'"
> And I use that word because, you know, spirit is to breathe, is
> the root word. You know, the etymology of spirit is to breathe. So
> what breathes life into you? What animates you? Don't forget that.
> Put up reminders. I have them create, you know, vision boards
> around what animates them, love of nature, you know? Because we
> need those aids. The world is so set up to make us forget that we
> have to create them.
>
> ~Maya

Maya spoke in this excerpt about helping her students discover what brings life to them. What is the reason to be alive? She makes sure her students can discover and tap into whatever animates them. The quest for authenticity is not going to happen without a reason to live. Rose called it "learning that meets life!"

Mindfulness and authenticity.

> Like, you can feel that with people that you speak with. You can
> tell there's a real, living presence there, and then you can tell when
> you're speaking with someone that's just not quite there yet….
> Like, they're more focused on getting things accomplished, right?
> They want to meet their goals. And that's what most of our culture
> is about, right?
>
> ~Charles

Over and over, the teachers in this study talked about "seeing" and "hearing" and "being present" for students. When we are present, we can tap into our compassion for others, our creative intuition comes alive, and we can sense what others need. In

Charles's quote, he reminded us that people and students can sense when someone is not present, when someone is either focused on herself or un-enlivened. Therefore, teachers need to be fully present, or mindful, in order to truly "see" students.

The disciplined practice of meditation is a mindfulness tool that many of these teachers use to improve their capacity to be present: "It comes from a lot of practice…. Coming back over and over again to basic experience, and getting out of the way conceptually" (Patrick).

Charles talked about how teaching improved his capacity for mindful presence, because that is what the children require:

> My professors said when I was in my graduate program…that I was too cerebral…. In other words, my challenge has been to move out of my head…. So what it's [teaching with spiritual pedagogy] taught me, and it's helped me so much, is I am in this place now where every day is an opportunity for me to be a real, living presence to the children. And that has grounded me more. I think teaching has grounded me more than anything else has. I mean, being with the kids, and then tuning in to their needs, being present to them, has helped me become more of an embodied human being.... You know, of course, I still have moments where I like to go off on my philosophical musings…. But when I'm with the kids, now, I'm learning, now, just to be present to them and to listen. And what's happening there is, I'm beginning to get more in touch with my true self and my original voice. Because as I'm listening, at the same time I'm also noticing when I'm outside of teaching, I'm still in touch with that. I'm still in tune with that. (Charles)

Note how teaching helped Charles discover his authentic presence with children, and that authenticity extends beyond the classroom into "real" life. The authentic integration these teachers are seeking is about their whole selves, not just their teacher selves.

Openness and authenticity.

> The opposite of authenticity is the ego game of trying to create a
> persona and hold it up as the truth.
> ~Patrick

The teachers said that qualities of openness, such as having an open ego, help them notice when they are not being authentic. In the previous chapter on openness, teachers talked about how painful and humbling honest self-reflection can be because it bruises one's ego, so to speak.

On their path toward authenticity, teachers constantly notice if their thoughts and behavior match their true nature and their beliefs. The teachers shared several examples of how they would notice when something about how they were acting or teaching was not authentic. Charles said that he has learned to tell when something calls "to that deeper place" inside of him. Likewise, he said he can feel when something is an "artificial substitute." Most of the teachers said that the children are their most accurate litmus test for authenticity.

> They [the kids] connect with what is real. And I know, and I've begun to learn when I'm not being real with those kids because of the way they respond; they're just, like, all droopy. And now, like, "Okay, I need to change this." And a lot of times, they start acting up. Like, if I'm not being real, they start acting up. And like I said, this is something I need to pay attention to. (Charles)

Teachers' reflective practices keep teachers constantly re-aligning with authenticity due to the children reflecting back at them:

> It's like, kids are really...they're smart in an intelligence way, but they're really perceptive. They know when you're pulling their chain. They know when you're condescending. They know when you don't really believe what you're saying and sometimes they know it on a conscious level. A lot of times, they kind of feel it and that closes the door.
> So for me, being authentic is the teaching method, trying to be authentic in every situation. And I know that I fail at it a lot, because there's also those kids where I thought this thing was happening. And we were actually making some progress and we were going to...you know, this was going to be the leaping-off point for the next stage and then, it's cold. (Patrick)

All of these examples demonstrate how teaching with openness helps teachers evolve their spiritual learning and be more authentic. When I asked Albert if teaching

helps him to "be his best" (a motto of his), he simply replied, "Well…I don't wanna be a hypocrite."

Teachers intentionally help students discover their authenticity through secular spiritual pedagogy.

> The spiritual stuff, we don't actually have to do that. We don't have to cultivate that; we just have to work on the human part. You know, and once we work through that, then the spiritual being is there.
>
> ~Patrick

This section provides the reader with some examples of the classroom experiences teachers cultivate to help them and their students express authenticity. As Patrick quipped, what is most important is to work on "the human part." The purpose of this section is partly to demonstrate that teachers are not engaging in esoteric magic. Much of what they are doing is simply keeping spiritual development in the forefront of their minds and hearts, so they can guide students toward wholeness. Much of their classroom pedagogy is simply best practices in social and emotional learning, mindfulness, and restorative practices – "normal" stuff.

Maya said she intentionally feeds students' "unencumbered spot" and allows it to grow through her English curriculum. She shared an example:

> Supporting that in my curriculum is a series of topics that is hoping to create those conditions, like I said before, in which they can come in contact with something more true about themselves than this identity they've built, right? As teenagers, too, that's huge, right? They worked really hard on it.
> So my pedagogy is around kind of naming what is happening for them, which is "Good job. You've created this amazing system of defenses and, like, trying to be socially acceptable, building social capital." I said, "All the while, you know, you have this part of you that's alive and whole, and is gonna keep kind of communicating to you, hopefully, and it's there, you know? It might be hard to hear it because there's so many pressures to be different. But I want you to start now practicing to kinda listen for it."

And so the mindfulness comes in play, you know, where "Think of a time."... I'll just ask questions like, "Think of a time when you felt really proud. You felt really proud relative to being who you are, like standing up for yourself in a way that just felt really in alignment with who you are and what you stand for." Trying to get them to basically re-experience moments in their lives where they felt, especially, like, a nine- and ten-year-old felt where you're kind of freer.

…So I use the English writing as a way for them to develop a memory of a self that was less encumbered and a little more true. And the spirit of that, like, what does that feel like? Well, there's freedom, and, you know...so again, I'm trying to help them experientially understand this sensation of, "That feels true to me." (Maya)

Rose encourages her 5th grade students to discover activities they truly enjoy, not because they are necessarily good at them (which she says may merely feed the ego) but because they enjoy them:

They're in a position to really grapple with the push that they get in many different directions to be something or to do something versus that discovery of this pure bliss that you get when you're loving what you're doing. (Rose)

Rose uses a writing activity called "quiet reflection time" to help students grapple with the trait of openness – of "not-knowing," so they can learn to understand societal conditioning and question it. She talked about student-led conferences, where her students present their learning to their parents, and several of her students talked about the openness they gain from quiet reflection:

And what came up for many students [at student-led conferences] when they talked about quiet reflection was how "Rose really wants us to look deeper. She doesn't want the textbook answer. And I don't have to write what even you've told me, mom, or what you've said, dad. I really just asked myself."

Anyway, so that came up multiple times, and I don't know what they're gonna say at these conferences. So that was an interesting thing. And I think it appeals to their age, too, because they like this notion of being independent, right? They're moving into that space where they're excited about the notion of that. So that appeals to them.

But also, in an actual dialogue, a student read from his journals and said, "What I realized today was that I had written all the textbook answers down, and...I did that on purpose so that I could see them all written out. And then at the end, I reversed it all where I ended up with the fact that I just don't know."

And then another student, two kids after him said, "Yeah, I also discovered that I don't know. And that's okay. But you keep asking the question, something like that." So, yeah. That happened.

Oh, and he also, that student who was talking about the textbook answer is just, like, "I realized how much we really think we know, like, how much we take for granted, and how much we just assume." Like, he was really intrigued. It was as if he was speaking from a place of, like, having been programmed all his life, and suddenly he's realizing his programming or something like that. It was pretty interesting to reflect on. (Rose)

Albert talked about authenticity in curricular materials and activities. He finds many children's books and manufactured bulletin board graphics to be "cheesy stuff" and "fake." He wants "real stuff" for the children and real experiences, such as actually riding a bus, over a worksheet about the bus. He stressed that kids connect to real things and real people better.

Maya uses restorative practices to give students the opportunity and safety to reflect on their own personal flaws, so they can learn through articulating self-reflections in a circle. She told a story about a revelation that stirred in one particular student.

Because I am thinking about spiritual pedagogy and the act of learning that requires reflection, so making explicit what is happening. I think that is the trickiest part of a spiritual pedagogy.

So much happens with connection and safety that allows students to grow, but so much of my greatest lessons spiritually have come from being asked to reflect or having something become explicit. So for example, when a student, through safety and connection, has expressed something really authentically, like one kid talking about what an impulse talker he is: "That's just who I am right now. I talk impulsively, you guys."

We talked later about, "How did that feel to be really authentic with where you're at with your process around being with people?" And he's like, "It just was so freeing! It was so freeing. No one ran away and no one yelled at me." And I just thought, "Yeah. That's the piece," of being able to see that happen with students and then somehow responding in a way that allows them to see, "Oh. Being authentic is strengthening, is powerful" versus "Being authentic makes me vulnerable to kids making fun of me." I just love those opportunities where you can leverage their own growth and empower them even more. (Maya)

Authenticity Is a Gateway to Inner Freedom

> Will there ever be a time where I'm free?
> ~Charles

The ultimate goal of all this arduous, often uncomfortable, spiritual learning is to find freedom. Without authenticity, we are bound to our identities, our egos, and we are held within the constraints of societal conventions and expectations. Patrick described this experience his students are going through and compared it to being in prison:

> One of the reasons I can sympathize or empathize with these kids so profoundly is because I see it in all of them…. They're striving so hard to become this thing that they think they're supposed to be. And at this point, it's about getting into college, which is kind of a torture chamber, as far as I can tell. But it's because of this lack of authenticity…and just doing everything that we think is right starts to feel like a prison very quickly. That's why kids act out in various ways because...it doesn't feel right. (Patrick)

Some of the teachers spoke explicitly about inner freedom and liberation. They also spoke about experiencing harmony and peace once they, or their students, open themselves to authenticity:

> So that reflection time, it feels to me, especially once children move into a space of trusting themselves, that it's okay, for instance, not to know the answer or perhaps not even to know what to write. Once that is established and believed intrinsically, there's a real sort of peace that pervades the room. (Rose)

All the teachers talked about how fortunate they were to be in a fairly "free" teaching situation where they could be authentic and bring their "whole selves" into the classroom, as Maya described:

> It makes teaching sustainable because I can bring my whole self to the table and I can be vulnerable. So I'm just, I'm with them in that I benefit from not having to have the teacher face, and it's just a joy. It's a joy! And it's a positive feedback, with the safer I feel, the more I can be myself, the more they can be themselves, the more trust. You know, it just grows from that.
> But I'm human, and if it's an unsafe space, then I get that I have to put on my teacher face, and tuck myself in, and then it's tiring. It's tiring because you're

constantly deciding, "What do I share, what do I not share? How do I...?" I don't know. You're guarded. It's exhausting. So being guarded is exhausting. (Maya)

Maya went on to explain why her mindfulness practice is essential to allowing her to bring her authentic self forward:

> I mean, because you could argue, well, the whole self [in the classroom] could be really inappropriate. Not if you practice mindfulness and you recognize what's appropriate and not appropriate for a classroom. You know what I mean?
>
> Instead, really, this is what mindfulness has taught me so much about, is if I'm really with myself in the present moment, what I need will arise very clearly for me…being fully present with myself and my experience in every moment. (Maya)

Maya's statement is the crux of what these teachers mean when they talk about a goal of freedom. The pain Patrick referred to of constantly curating who he is becomes healed, and the exhaustion Maya talked about when she has to always check what she is saying is alleviated for these teachers when their spiritual capacities, such as mindfulness and openness, have provided them with such rich spiritual maturity that they can allow their path to unroll in front of them. They can trust themselves – their integrity – to be their whole selves. They can allow their true nature to shine because their practice has brought them into a state of grace where they can simply be themselves, and they believe in themselves.

> I would say there is a time when we're free. And I would say the freedom lies in being able to see or being able to perceive where you need to make the adjustments. As opposed to seeing them as "Oh, I'm failing" or "Oh, I'm slowing down the development of these children." The freedom is being able...is to be honest with yourself. And the freedom is recognizing that you're going to make mistakes in the future. To me, that's the freedom. It's like, "I'm going to make mistakes." But perceiving that something begins to happen within you, because then you begin to become more present.
>
> And it's not so much that…there's some sort of formula for it. What happens is, it begins to unfold in the moment. Like, things begin to...you're free because you're so present, and you're so present to what's happening around you and within you that things begin just to unfold in a more creative and original way. (Charles)

Note that Charles did not talk about being free as being perfect because, again, any expectations of perfection would then limit the experience. Even by being able to be reasonable – or having equanimity about the mistakes and failures that a teacher is bound to experience – it frees the teacher up to be more fluid, open, creative, and whole.

Is life easier after that? Not necessarily, but for the teachers who find they can shed their identity enough to experience their true nature, it can be very liberating:

> Rose: I'm not a rebel. I'm not a citizen. I'm not a martyr. I'm a nobody…
> Renee: You gotta explain that. You just blew my mind.
> Rose: I don't take any identity. If I did, then that would just be a reaction to something that then lives in me. So, yeah, I'm a nobody. And not in the woe-is-me aspect, but in the liberating aspect.

Inner freedom – liberation – is the final frontier of authenticity. Enlightenment? Perhaps. But enlightenment has an other-worldly sound to it. Interestingly, the teachers in this study did not use the word "enlightenment." Teachers are practical people, working to accomplish real-world goals with real people. They are not trying to be lofty. They are grounded in real-life work. Inner freedom provides these teachers with the capacities they need to get the work done. When one is not expending energy protecting the ego and identities, much energy is freed up to do the important work, and to do it with joy.

The Path to Authenticity Is a Transformational Journey That Is Ever-Unfolding

> I remember the moment in my life when I realized this is not
> about finding something outside myself, finding, seeking, like a
> seeker's journey, seeking. It is more about allowing and revealing,
> maybe a bit of excavation with some dynamite sometimes!
> ~Maya

When referring to their path toward authenticity, teachers talked about a lifetime journey. Edmond called it a "cyclical experience" and a process of "constantly becoming." Rose called it a "living process"; she said, "It isn't this final process, or one

might even say, dead process that ends. It's this ongoing process." Patrick said that

spiritual development never ends:

> How are we going to be fully authentic human beings in teaching? You know, and how are we going to fully serve our students, our colleagues, the world through our own internal development? See, one of the things that you learn on a spiritual path is that the development, like, it never stops. Like, the human being is evolving as the human being is acting. (Patrick)

Patrick pointed out that, like any human journey of development, humans have to evolve

at a pace that is appropriate for them. While the teachers and students are ultimately

sharing the same "hero's journey mono-myth," as Rebecca called it, the children and the

adults are at different points, or different levels, along that journey.

> Because as teenagers they're in this process of actually trying to develop some kind of an ego. And that's actually an important part of the process, and you can't sort of short-circuit that. So they have to experiment and try to decide who they think they are and they need to come up with some sort of healthy self-structure so that they can then, maybe later, find that to be transparent and expand, and then, you know, to evolve. (Patrick)

Albert had an intriguing memory from a conversation about his first year of

teaching with his mentor teacher – the woman from whom he learned to teach with a

child's spiritual development in mind:

> We had a labyrinth. The "Labyrinth" was a big theme there for a couple of years, just because my co-teacher Joan was into it, and like with spirals. She asked me…. "Does that spiral in or spiral out for you?"… It just stuck with me. Sometimes, we go in inside, or sometimes we're receiving and taking things in. And sometimes we're expressing, letting things out. For her to say that's all that's going on, that's all that we do, is we're either receiving, taking stuff in, or letting it out and sharing it out. Yeah, but that's really the only thing going on. (Albert)

It is no coincidence that I used a spiral to represent The Path. Does the spiral go in

or out? Does it keep spiraling with different levels of complexity? There is no clear

answer. Teachers in this study have implied that reaching their spiritual potential, or

revealing authenticity, is a matter of transforming, and as they transform, they find their

true nature, which sounds like returning to the center, or going inward. At the same time, as they become more mature, one would expect that they reach a higher level of complexity. In the introduction to Chapter V, I explained there is little differentiation between what is beneficial in terms of spiritual development for the students or the teachers. They are both learning along the same, basic path. Indeed, part of the beauty of teaching is working with the children and learning from their simplicity and humble wisdom. So these questions about children and adult spiritual complexity remain unanswered.

What we know, and as the teachers in this study have shared, is that teaching with the spiritual development of the child in mind shines a light on the teacher's own spiritual development, making these teachers become more aware and inspired to do the hard work that spiritual growth requires. While there are no concrete answers, teaching with spiritual pedagogy certainly seems to put teachers who are spiritual seekers on The Path of Spiritual Learning:

Teachers of spiritual pedagogy consciously build a field of *connection* in their classrooms and in their lives, so they and their students experience warm relationships of safety and joy. These teachers are in touch with a sense of *aliveness* and oneness in their very existence and they seek to enhance that in themselves and others. They are aware of the importance of their presence with children, and they have *mindfulness* practices to improve their power of presence and their ability to truly see and hear others with non-judgment. The daily challenges of working with children with *openness* provides extensive opportunities to experience failure and reflective opportunities for these

teachers to actively work on their spiritual development and personal qualities with the

goal of expressing *authenticity*.

All of these rich challenges and practices along The Path keep teachers of

spiritual pedagogy developing in a manner that many of them named transformative.

From Patrick's biographical sketch:

> This is sort of a trite thing to say, but I'm continually learning from my students. Over and over again, they're teaching me how I can be more open, how I can be more flexible, how I can be more compassionate, how I can be more skillful, how I can choose when to say less, choose when to say more. They're constantly giving me feedback. It's completely transformed my life and this is the greatest practice for me right now. Continually, it encourages me to keep growing. I'm growing more than they are in some ways. (Patrick)

Finally, I leave you with a long, touching narrative of Charles, in which he talked

about teaching as a path of spiritual learning and becoming more authentic. It is not an

easy path, but it is rewarding:

> Well, honestly, I feel a lot of times the path that I'm on...a lot of times I've felt alone. I mean, I did. And yeah, I feel very much alone a lot of the time. A deep sense of aloneness. Which I am realizing for myself, and our culture tends to belittle that, I think. You know, "Why is that person alone?" Or, "Why..." But what I'm finding is, I'm having to let go of so much of what I thought was real and so much of what I thought the world is and the world should be, and I'm entering into this place where it feels like I am enveloped by the darkness, by the dark, by this not-knowing…
> So, you're entering into this place of complete trust. So, there is this feeling of aloneness, but there's also this other feeling that I'm held. That I'm held within this great, infinite network of being, being held and being loved. And at the same time, I feel very rich. I feel very rich and nourished.
> ...For me, like, this spiritual path that I'm on, it has...like, the world that we live in, I recognize that so much of it is just...I mean, it's absurd, some of the things you look at. It's just absurd, and you're like, "Is this really happening in our world?" And it's like, yes, it's happening, and it's continuing to happen, and in many ways, it appears that it's getting worse. Starting to think, if you look on the news, there's always something…is disturbing.…
> And over the past few years, I've unplugged. I mean, a couple weeks ago, for our spring break, I went and I spent four or five days in complete solitude. A little bitty cabin with no Wi-Fi, no cell service, nothing except for the woods and animals. There were cows, and goats, and dogs, and it was wonderful.

And to be there, and to have the sense of...well, to have this experience of my true self. Of "Oh, this is real to me. Being in this place, being in this silence, being here away from all that distracts us, and overwhelms us, and consumes so much of our thought and our energy. This is what's real." And yes, I mean, this other stuff is an actuality. We have to live in it every day. But, "How can I take this back with me? How can I take this experience, this silence, this knowing, this...anyway, this love, this presence, into my daily experience? You know, with my human encounters, or whatever life brings me?"

So, it's in those moments of solitude where you begin to feel this deep aloneness. And yet, at the same time, there's this recognition, again, that you're not alone, but you begin to feel these deep stirrings within, or these feelings that you never have felt before, like you're almost being stripped away of this shell that you thought you were. And it feels like a death at times. I mean, I've woke up in the middle of the night sometimes and have felt, like, this stripping away of this outer shell. And it's just...so there's, like, "What happens when this is stripped away? What's on the other...what else is there? Who am..." Or, the minus question is "Who am I without this?" You know, "Who am I without this person that I've spent thirty-six, thirty-seven years building up?"

So, for me, it's been a very slow stripping of these layers of self. And a lot of times, you know, we want to perpetuate these selves that we think we are, and we don't want to face them. So, what happens, I think, is we begin to disengage from that. And so there is this sense of aloneness that begins to happen because you're entering into a whole 'nother place that you've not experienced. So it becomes new. You're stepping into this territory, this new territory that you have no idea where you are, and it feels like, "What is this? Where am...? What..."

I mean, it's just been interesting. Even the way I relate to people now, it's just like, oh my gosh, I just feel so...like, when I relate, talk to people, I feel more genuine. I feel more authentic. And I remember, a couple weeks ago when I was at Starbucks and this young girl behind the counter, she said, "You know, you're a weird conversationalist." And I thought...I just smiled at her and I said, "You know, you're not the first person who's said that." And I thought, "Yes." You know, I was like, "Thank you." Because it was like, At least I'm... There's this authentic person.

Summary, Conclusion, and Reflection

At the beginning of this chapter, authenticity was referenced as a "goal," but as the teachers' stories were told, a more nuanced understanding of authenticity as something we already naturally have, but we need to recover, recognize, or remember, came to light. Personally, this was one of the most important spiritual lessons from this

research within my own life. I learned that authenticity is the beginning and the end. I learned that I am what I always was and forever will be. I am.

By the end of this chapter, the reader may feel a sense of taking a journey with these teachers. In Chapters IV and V, we were getting to know the teachers – their life stories, their teaching styles, their linguistic mannerisms, and their values. By the end of this chapter, we have vicariously lived through challenges, death and dying, and ambiguity, and a transformation unfolded. We saw authenticity emerge.

As the interviewer, I experienced the authenticity of these teachers in person, which was striking. They all seemed comfortable in their own skin, yet vulnerable; confident, yet tender; full of conviction, yet humble. For each interview, each teacher seemed to be her highest self, and simply…herself.

For this, I greatly admire these teachers. I am grateful for their openness and willingness to take me on this journey with them – on this path of spiritual learning.

I see why so many of them referred to teaching as a spiritual path. It is a path that never ends, or as Rose said, "one never arrives." So Authenticity is not the end. There is one more theme to The Path of Spiritual Learning: the theme of Meaning and Purpose.

Chapter VIII

THEME SIX: MEANING AND PURPOSE

I could have placed the theme of Meaning and Purpose either at the beginning or the end of The Path, but decided to include it at the end for two reasons: (a) to emphasize Connection as the foundation of the path at the beginning, and (b) to use the theme as a meaningful wrap-up. On the graphic, Meaning and Purpose is represented as a frame around the whole map. Metaphorically, when creating a piece of artwork, one has the end purpose of the art in mind, but not until it is finished is the masterpiece actually framed. The frame completes it.

Figure 12. Meaning and Purpose

Lest we forget why these teachers are teaching with spiritually pedagogy in the first place, the theme of Meaning and Purpose reminds us of the whole reason The Path of Spiritual Learning exists at all. Essentially, as the teachers in the study expressed, it is to make a difference in the world. Our teachers' intentions are to bring hope, balance, justice, and healing to individuals, to society, and to the ecosystem.

This section also completes the findings by bringing us full circle to some of the same themes at the beginning of this dissertation. It harkens back to Chapters I and II, which outlined the intention of studying secular spiritual pedagogy, and its value in education today. The quotations within this chapter mostly resulted from asking the participant teachers directly what their work means to them and asking about their thoughts on the purpose of education.

Theme Six: Meaning and Purpose –
Imbedded in Teaching With Spiritual Pedagogy Is Deep Meaning and Purpose

> My real goal is not to teach computer science or math, my real goal is to open a door for these kids into their own experience in some way. And if I don't get to do that, then I'm not really doing my job.
> ~Patrick

Teaching is inherently a meaningful activity. It is a job that people typically go into because they love children, they love their subject area, or they want to make a difference in the world. It is not a career one chooses for the income or prestige. The people in this study seemed secure in their choice of career (although some were in the midst of a transition away from the classroom and into adult education).

All of the teachers who participated in this study considered teaching with spiritual pedagogy to be their life's purpose. Spirituality is central to their personal lives

and the centerpiece of their teaching practice. They consider developing their students' spiritual life to be the most important thing they do, whether they called it uncovering their students' true nature, fulfilling their full potential, or developing their inner lives.

Thus, this section is not about whether teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy is meaningful, but rather *how* it is meaningful. There are four subthemes in this section (Table 8): most important learning moments, practical purposes, helping individuals, and collective social change.

Table 8

The Theme of Meaning and Purpose and Its Subthemes

| Meaning and Purpose

Imbedded within teaching with spiritual pedagogy is deep meaning and purpose.	Most important learning	The *most important learning moments* are spiritual in nature.
	Practical	Spiritual pedagogy has *practical purposes*, such as helping the classroom run smoothly, enhancing academic potential, and helping students prepare for the rigors of life.
	Individual	Teachers use spiritual pedagogy to *help individuals* learn, develop, and heal.
	Collective	Spiritual pedagogy has a larger purpose to work toward *collective social change.*

The Most Important Learning Moments Are Spiritual in Nature

> Suddenly, nothing else matters. Nothing else is as important as being in that space with them [the students]. So it's those dialogues that have gone on, and on, and on, to the point where we're here for an hour and forty-five minutes, and it doesn't matter to me. I'm a very like organized person who plans things out; I've got the next two weeks planned. Everything goes out the window at that time, because it's suddenly so apparent that this is the most important thing to share, both for me and for them.
> ~Rose

All of the participants talked about carving out the time for their spiritual work with students because it is the most important thing they do. They talked about how they

have to protect their ability to carry out this most important work, and even in their

schools that are supportive of their spiritual pedagogy, vigilance is required to keep the

time and space open for spiritual work. Given the achievement culture in schools and

American society, justifying spiritual work in school is not easy. To a bystander, it can

look like nothing is getting done, when actually spiritual connection and learning are the

most valuable aspects of education to these teachers. Rebecca explained the importance

of spiritual pedagogy by saying that at our core, humans are essentially spiritual beings.

Therefore, learning that nurtures that core is foundational to everything else.

All the teachers explained that even though spiritual development is not listed

among their state standards, their most important responsibility is to make sure students

gain a spiritual understanding of their inner life and spiritual agency through their

education. All of the teachers considered academics as important, but a less significant

and simpler part of what they do.

> We are not just focused on giving the children academic work. To me, that's just a small piece, an important piece, an extremely important piece, but we're also giving the children experiences in which...well, that keeps them connected to that greater reality, to that which is much larger than they are. But it's also to help them understand that they are an integral part of that. And not just to stay connected. We don't wanna just stay connected, but we want to deepen that connection. (Charles)

One way of defining spiritual pedagogy seemed akin to "learning to be human,"

which again was expressed by these teachers as the most important purpose of education:

> But, like, my job as the teacher is not to fill them with information and knowledge. It's to help them develop as human beings so that they can actually go and figure out what they need to figure out, on whatever level they need to figure it out on. (Patrick)

While all of these teachers had spiritual lives when they began teaching, they

evolved their spiritual pedagogy as they gained experience. Most of them indicated that

as they matured as teachers and as humans, the spiritual development of their students became more important to them. When I asked Albert if his view of the purpose of teaching has evolved during his years in education, he said he has become more focused on the children's spiritual development and now spiritual pedagogy has its own purpose, whereas early in his career, he viewed spiritual pedagogy as mostly being in service of academic achievement.

> Albert: Back then, it was more like…all for the academic purpose or something, you know?
> Renee: Oh. Like the reason for holistic education was ultimately for…
> Albert: Yeah, or I can reach every kid. Like, I can teach every kid how to do, like, writing, reading, you know. We can all learn that stuff. That's in my…I think it's probably one of the opening lines in the thesis of my philosophy of education…. I believe all children are capable of learning. They might have to do it different ways. That kind of thing. But now I'm like, "Okay. Yeah, that's important but, there could just be something they can latch onto here about, like, life or something…. Know what they believe, be aware of what they believe."

Spiritual Pedagogy Has Practical Purposes, Such as Helping the Classroom Run Smoothly, Enhancing Academic Potential, and Helping Students Prepare for the Rigors of Life

> So, it broadens your chance for success, and children who start the day, for example, with centering every morning, children who have the opportunity to develop some spiritual routines and some contemplative routines are better learners. I think that there's research to back that up and then, just anecdotally, I do. I think it makes a big difference in their readiness to learn.
>
> It gives you a path back when things get, like, if you just get off-track, the class is kind of wild or it just feels a little chaotic, it gives you...you already have these built-in tools to bring it back to a place of more calm, whereas I think the teachers in the regular school, I think the way to get back on track is more disciplinary. It's crazy. This kid is being wild so they get a detention or whatever the discipline system is and we don't have to resort to that nearly as often, that sort of disciplinary measure. It's more of just recognizing what kids need in the moment and responding.
> ~Rebecca

A resounding theme was how much easier and more joyfully classrooms function when teachers establish relational connection and the other aspects of spirituality in their classrooms. When students feel safe in their classrooms and emotionally connected to the teacher and their classmates, they are more motivated to learn and academics become easier.

> The academic piece begins to come together when, at the same time, you're also seeing the children and being present to the children, and you're perceiving their needs or perceiving what it is their hearts, their being, is asking for. (Charles)

Later in our interviews, Charles explained further:

> I mean, yes, there is information the child needs to know. But memorizing facts and all of those other things, I think, is quite simply easy if these other capacities in the child are being strengthened and established by the teacher. (Charles)

As Rebecca indicated in her quote above, student behavior also becomes easier to navigate. Again, when students feel they are seen and heard by the teacher, and they are accepted, they can let down their guard and ask for what they need instead of being disruptive. Maya said, "Misbehaviors come from feeling like you don't matter." She illustrated with a hypothetical example:

> So a kid gets a piece of paper, they don't know how to do it, they look around, everyone's working hard, they have no clue, they push the paper away. Teacher says, "Why aren't you doing your work?" If, as in my classroom, they have a strong sense of belonging, they'll say, "Because I don't know how to do it.
> But if they don't have a strong sense of belonging, they're gonna say, "This is a stupid assignment. Fuck you. I'm outta here." And, to me, that's the crux pin…It's attending to that sense of "You belong here and I see you"… (Maya)

Maya, and all the teachers, talked about the practical skills that kids learn from spiritual pedagogy – skills that will protect them and help them through life, such as "self efficacy, and advocacy, agency, all those A and E words" (Maya). Much of what Maya

and the other teachers talked about would fall under the category of social and emotional skills, which have recently become identified as the engines of learning and more necessary for success in life than academic learning (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Albert said he thinks the social and emotional skills students learn are possibly what they most remember and benefit from when they leave. He recounted a conversation with a graduate:

> "Hey, you were here. You went to school here for many years. Anything from Rainbow Community School or Rainbow that sticks with you?" She thought for a minute. She's like, "Just being aware of what I'm feeling, and what I'm thinking, and what I'm doing. Being aware of that. And then I can act better." (Albert)

What these teachers seemed to be indicating is that spiritual development is the catalyst that makes social and emotional development authentically occur in the classroom.

Teachers talked about how spiritual pedagogy provided the most important and practical life skills for any situation. Maya explicitly teaches mindfulness as a practical tool for helping her students manage their emotions and to be more successful in school and later in life:

> So, I talk to them about being outside the principal's office and just, like, rest with three breaths, and just feel the breath enter your body, and then, you know, that's gonna help you communicate more clearly, because your neocortex will be fully online. (Maya)

In addition to being able to confront emotions, Charles explained how teaching children mindfulness helps them with one of life's most important skills: decision making:

> I would say that these tools are also practical. Because really, what's happening is they're learning to be present. And I think that so much of it comes back to being present to whatever is confronting us, or to whatever we're confronting. So, children are learning from an early age to be present to these… because there's something that happens even in just being present to the little things in life, to having a real living presence to everything that we encounter….

So these little tools are helping the children…when they're feeling a disturbance or they're feeling anxious. So, they can come to this place that can help to re-center them. So, you know, instead of acting unconsciously, they can come back into this place and be centered and then make a decision. It definitely helps them with their decision making. (Charles)

At the most fundamental practical level, the teachers in this study view spiritual development as basic to survival and building resilience. Maya voiced concern about the lack of spiritual development offered in conventional schools: "I have such strong views about how poorly we're preparing kids to be successful." She expressed a sense of urgency in providing a contemplative classroom experience that prepares kids for a difficult world:

Because you have to have your voice in the world, or the world's gonna have its way with you, and it's not really pretty. Like, it's hard out there! So it's this interesting thing of trying to shore up their sense of this sovereignty, at the same time saying, "You better be prepared. This is no game. Like, get on this." (Maya)

Even Albert, who works with very young children, and certainly not the emotionally disturbed students that Maya works with, sees spiritual pedagogy as necessary for developing qualities in his students that are required for basic survival:

As humans, very complex animals, creatures, beings. So just to be able to get along and survive, on one hand, and to communicate with others, to understand, basically, like, where we are, why we are, and all these complex forces that are going on that affect our lives and that we're a part of. So it's kinda like just for basic survival we need some understanding, so we can read and know what's going on. (Albert)

Finally, perhaps the most important practical trait that spiritual learning builds for students is resiliency:

I think it develops a resilience because there's something that they can keep going back to, this sense of…however they felt it, it's so often in the ordinary. Like, it's in the ordinary. We're sitting together in a circle, someone tells a story; you feel moved; you feel a sense of connection. That's a very ordinary thing that's easy to create, so there's just this sense of it's not something outside of

myself, right? It's something that we have innate in us and I don't have to try hard to get this sense. It's available to me. (Maya)

Teachers Use Spiritual Pedagogy to Help Individuals Learn, Develop, and Heal

> My whole drive – and the kids get kinda annoyed sometimes with me because they're like, "Ah, you care too much." – I'm definitely wanting them to avoid what I went through. I think it's just cruel to not teach students about spirit. I think it's cruel. When you think about all the mistakes you make based on their ego structure and how they're conditioned, to not tell them that there is a part of them that is pure and unencumbered, and connected to everything…. So anyways, I think it's cruel with all their life throws them, and all the ways that their egos are damaged. They're conditioned to be fearful, and distrustful, and anxious ridden, that it's cruel and irresponsible not to teach them that there is this life force in them that is so freaking powerful and pure! Period. It's just stupid.
>
> <div align="right">~Maya</div>

It is the responsibility of the teacher to make sure students develop spiritual awareness – anything less would be negligent and, as Maya put it, "cruel." These teachers saw themselves in a position to help students discover a way to live in the world that is helpful for the students and for others.

Edmond had a unique view on the role of spiritual pedagogy as a tool for healing individuals within a societal model that is damaging them:

> Children are missing a lot of what built them into normal human beings in the past. There are more, as we say, hindrances, right? So for example, you know, if you just grow up a normal child, like, we'll say in the country, right? And you don't have the TV and all this stuff, right? And you just have chores, and you sweep, and you play, and you drag stuff around, you drag boards around outside and build a fort. And you climb this thing, and you roll down the hill, and all these things that are just normal childhood that don't happen anymore, right, for huge amounts of the population. So all of that is actually what is developmentally important. (Edmond)

He went on to explain how he "ensouls" kinesthetic motions, such as sweeping, that are necessary for healthy human development within the students, so they can develop

properly, despite the restriction that society has placed on healthy childhood development

through motion.

Looking back over the themes in the findings of this study, it is not hard to see

how each theme of secular spiritual pedagogy – Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness,

Openness, and Authenticity – were aspects, qualities, or skills the teachers wanted to

imbue within their students to help them live within the world.

Maya gave a powerful example of why developing a sense of connection is so

vitally important for both individuals and society:

> I mean, my thing is always like, how do we prevent developing shooters?
> All my conversations have to come down to, what are we trying to do? Prevent
> kids from being a shooter on the continuum. Like, the worst possible thing is a
> shooter, right? But there's a whole continuum of behaviors that lead up to that in
> terms of from isolation, and a lack of sense of this life force, that there's an
> interconnection. And so how many different ways a day can we combat that
> process of isolation towards this nihilistic, isolationistic, destructive force that
> comes from a lack of connection to this, and a felt sense? Because you can
> cognitively know that we're interconnected but you have to feel it, you know, to
> really transform you. (Maya)

Teachers viewed their ultimate goal as helping each individual to find freedom, or

authenticity:

> It's hard for me to see an education that does not purport a sense of awakening.
> Like, to me, a true education awakens a child, not so much in a sense of some sort
> of nirvana or something, but it awakens a child to who they are.... It doesn't just
> awaken them to who they are, but it also helps them navigate the world around
> them and to see the world from their own original and creative perspective….
> What is education if we don't imbue our students with courage to step out into
> the world and to be fearless, and also to stay in touch with that inner voice, to stay
> in touch with who they are? (Charles)

Teachers who worked with teens talked about the importance of helping those

kids find their own purpose:

> I want to turn them into crazy people who are willing to do all sorts of amazing
> things, instead of being fearful and trying to check all the boxes...and fit into some

kind of idea of what they're supposed to be. I want them to find out who they really are, on the deepest possible level. (Patrick)

Finally, *service* arose as a personal theme among the teachers in this study. As spiritual teachers, some of them expressed the concept of lifelong service at a very deep level, even at an esoteric level, as in the case of Patrick and Maya. Both of them have taken the vow of the Bodhisattva, which means they have dedicated their life to service and to reducing suffering in humankind.

> There are people who throw their whole life into pulling people out of poverty through education…. And, like, talk about a spiritual act, that's like service. Bhakti yoga is one of the highest forms of yoga, you know?… It's literally just helping people is higher than all these other things that people do in yoga, and so that says a lot. And I think that that aspect of the teacher giving themselves to help other people is truly a spiritual act. (Edmond)

Spiritual Pedagogy Has a Larger Purpose to Work Toward Collective Social Change

> So for each student to also develop whatever their gifts are, to the skills of learning and questioning, that will allow them to figure out how they want to be in the world and to give them the best possible chance of realizing that potential, the individual potential. And then, also, helping the world, and I don't think that they're different. I think it's going to look different and how each person would express that or how are they going to help the world, or what are they going to bring, which is that sort of conversion to their skills and passions, and how can they use that to help.
>
> ~Rebecca

In general, teachers are very busy people who have to concentrate on the most immediate work in front of them – the day-to-day work of helping individuals learn and develop. In the case of teachers of spiritual pedagogy, their focus is more on the inner development of each student, as discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. These teachers have witnessed how academics and other necessary skills can better fall into

place as long as they can imbue students with an authentic sense of self, as the

culminating goal of spiritual pedagogy.

However, beyond helping individuals, there was clearly a greater purpose beneath

each of these teachers' intentions. Some, especially teachers in upper grades, were

explicitly motivated to use spiritual pedagogy as a tool for social change, while for

others, social change was more of an undercurrent – a natural outcome of their work that

did not require an explicit, direct push.

In the quote above, Rebecca explained how intrapersonal development and

societal development are tied together, and almost one and the same. Like the other

middle and high school teachers in this study, Rebecca expressed a sense of duty for her

spiritual pedagogy to work toward social change, and in her case, particularly toward

social justice and peace. Below she described the curricular aspects of that goal:

> We study peace activists around the world. And everybody we study, they, almost without exception, have this really strong spiritual practice also, like with the Dalai Lama, obviously, or Gandhi, or Malala, or Wangari Maathai. They all have, in some cases, a formal practice or, in some cases, a really disciplined formal practice, but in all cases, just this spiritual courage, like the spiritual strength and courage, and they all come from a place of love. That's a big theme there. Even if they have some righteous anger, there's this bigger compassion.
>
> And so, I feel like that's, again, a practical...it's just a practical thing. The reason we study these people, part of the purpose, is to learn what attributes do they have that allows them to be so impactful and how can we be more like that. And the spiritual thing seems like, on a practical level...I don't think it's a coincidence that they all have that spiritual strength. And so, it just seems like a really good place to start, which is another message that almost universally you get from those people is that the place to start if you want to make a difference is to start with yourself and to start with your own heart, and being kind to the people around you. Find somewhere at your school that you can do a small thing. So, I feel like that is...yeah, it's just the place to start. (Rebecca)

Finally, Rebecca expressed that she hopes to be educating her students to "heal the world" and to bring about social justice through the sense of spiritual agency they develop in school:

> I feel like teaching within this microcosm is a way to connect with the world, especially in terms of the social justice theme…. But one thing for me that gives me a sense of spiritual hope or spiritual guidance is the idea that if you can educate children to care about the world and feel connected to the world, then we can create a world that is better than the one that we're living in…and also, really trying to guide them in developing compassion and a sense of empowerment that they can change the things in the world that are not just. I mean, that's really what I hope for my students. That's the kind of students I hope that we're creating. That's my goal. (Rebecca)

Patrick sees himself on a mission to reduce individual suffering, but then on a much larger level, to "subvert" oppressive societal systems.

> Well, this is the outlaw part of my role is, as a compassionate person who actually wants to help other people, is to subvert the dominant paradigm that is actually causing so much suffering. (Patrick)

Rose had outright revolutionary notions about becoming a teacher, something that was inspired by Krishnamurti:

> Krishnamurti, he determined that it was really only through education that a revolution, as he would call it, a transformation in mankind, could take place. And it was by way of allowing young people, who are much more open, flexible, naturally curious, less conditioned, you might say, who really could begin to look at the human conditioning – all of the automatic responses we have to things, the routines, the familiarities, all the things we think we know – and question them, and really find out for themselves if it's true. (Rose)

Rose's notion of using spiritual pedagogy to help students learn to question societal conditioning and the underlying systems of oppression that conditioning has created was echoed by Rebecca who thought "there would be a lot more questioning of the structures that govern us if everyone was just in a habit of asking questions."

When I asked Rose about the purpose of spiritual pedagogy, she answered in four succinct, powerful words: "*To stop this madness.*" She qualified her response by adding, "I mean, to see the madness first of all and then to step out of it."

Rose, like most of the elementary teachers in this study, did not talk as much about directly making change so much as taking a mindful approach to life as a way to encourage indirectly a change in collective consciousness. In fact, she clarified that if she thought that she was going to actively save the world, she would be acting counter to her spiritual practice of being non-judgmental and egoless. She recounted an experience where she came upon the realization that change happens through teaching in a more mindful manner:

> And it really upset me, and I had all of these sort of ideals and ideas that really began to separate me from the human beings on this campus. Then I recognized in that moment that that wasn't at all the approach to have. In fact, it was that part of me that I had to let go of. Because it isn't the kind of thing that you tackle in the way that.... Again, the mind wants to be like, "Okay, take you! and you! and you! and you! and you! and we'll all just figure this out together and we'll change the world together!" (Rose)

Instead, simply teaching herself and her students to be able to truly "see" their lives, their behavior, and the world – and to be open to questioning everything – was all that was required. Anything more is likely to cause more problems. She explained:

> And so our role isn't to sit back and say it's impossible. That's not what I'm saying. But it's, like, that active awareness that allows us to respond in a moment that presents itself, as opposed to going after something.
> And to stay present really requires us not to be distracted by the anxieties that arise when we suddenly feel it's impossible. Because it is impossible in the way that we've always tried it, but that doesn't mean that it's not possible in another way, a way that doesn't involve the ego or the doing. It's an allowing.
> And there's no way that people like us, who I think ultimately feel that that's literally, like, the reason to live, it's not wasted. That energy is not wasted if it is shifting things. We may never see it in the way that we think we should see it, but I think that that's the religious nature of it too. There has to be, you know, the Catholics and all the call of faith, but there's got to be also this faith that even

though I can't see in front of me what I want to see as a mode of change doesn't mean that something profound isn't actually happening, like in our consciousness. (Rose)

In conclusion, Rose explained that she has to stay focused on the present moment and help her students to do the same thing, and that doing it together creates an energy shift:

> There's a necessity in talking about these things, because I think just in the very sharing, the thinking together, it does move something perhaps in the universal consciousness of human beings. So it does feel purposeful, and yet there isn't a goal there. There isn't an agenda. I'm not going to go home and just be like, "Ha! I did something for the world today!" (Rose)

Near the end of the second interview, I asked each teacher what might the world look like if every child were to have an education with spiritual pedagogy. Answers were variable. While every teacher had lofty aspects of their response, including notions of peace and harmony, they almost all qualified that work would always need to be done.

> I don't think that a world where all children had this education would be conflict-free. I think there would still be conflicts and disagreements.... I think people would get stuck a lot less in just being locked in one viewpoint or another. I think there would be a lot more creative problem solving and discussion, and trying to come up with creative solutions. (Rebecca)

Patrick said it would be a more compassionate world:

> It would mean that people would see...that other people's happiness is as important as your own. Right? Other people's happiness is as important as your own. Which means that your happiness is important, but so is other people's happiness, and everything we do affects everybody else in some way. You know, the people that we're close to, we affect much deeper, but, you know, we're not alone in this world. It's an interconnected world. Everything we do has an effect, and if we're not aware of those effects or if we're acting out of selfishness and ignorance, then the ripples that we send out, you know, they become other people's problems.
> And so I think that a recognition that we're in this deeply interconnected world.... Even on a small scale, it doesn't have to be global, right? I think it's actually even more important to start, like, with your own community. Like, everything you do, every decision you make, it affects everybody around you. (Patrick)

Summary, Conclusion, and Reflection

As I conclude the findings and the description of The Path of Spiritual Learning, Patrick's final quote, when he said, "Other people's happiness is as important as your own," reminds me how all of the themes on The Path are interrelated. We started with Connection, or being in relation to others, and ended with Meaning and Purpose, or helping others.

Meaning and Purpose were also discussed in the literature review in Chapter II as one aspect of spirituality. Teachers of spiritual pedagogy do not just teach; they have a larger purpose, a transcendent purpose.

One of my surprises was that most of the teachers did not necessarily see themselves as activists or as trailblazers who were going to show the world how to behave. They varied greatly in how much they saw their work as helping individuals to work toward societal change. They were all on a different place within that spectrum. What they had in common was a sense that every moment in the classroom mattered. The Gandhi quote, "Be the change you wish to see in the world," might resonate as a phrase that captures how simply living every moment with intention is the highest purpose of these teachers. The quote could be changed to "Be the classroom you wish to see in the cosmos." While all of these teachers see their work as important both at the individual level and a larger level – starting with the self and expanding out to the edges of the universe – none of them were grandiose, idealistic, or willful. Again, their humility was palpable. As this chapter conveyed, these teachers are simply hard-working people trying to do practical work in the world with good intentions.

This chapter concludes my presentation of the findings, which I organized in six eidetic themes within a conceptual map I called The Path of Spiritual Learning. As explained in Chapter III, I intentionally did not decide on any particular theory or constellation of theories before interviewing the participants in this study. Nor did I organize the findings around theory. I expressed an assumption in Chapter I that these teachers were learning, and I promised in Chapter III that after organizing the findings, I would analyze them in relation to adult learning theory. Just as I could have written far more about the findings, a vast number of theories could apply to the complex learning these teachers conveyed. Chapter IX next describes the theories chosen, and Chapter X synthesizes theory with the findings and with the Path of Spiritual Learning.

Chapter IX

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY AND

HERON'S THEORY OF PERSONHOOD

> Renee: If you had to pull…together…a definition of what you
> do, what I'm interviewing you about [spiritual pedagogy], how
> would you define it? What's the title of this dissertation?
> Rose: Well, the question anyway that comes to mind is "How
> does learning allow us to meet life?"

The research question, *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?* is deceptively simple. In the findings, I attempted to portray both inner and outer lived experiences of the seven teachers interviewed. The outer experience is the "what" of the classroom pedagogy – the activities in which these teachers and students engage. The inner experience is the "why" – the perceptions these teachers hold, the meaning of their work, and their deeply personal path to the present.

What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy? It is an experience of learning – a learning that meets life.

Life, in the context of these teachers, is spirit itself. Like black holes and the universe, respectively, it folds in on itself over and over again, and it expands beyond its perceived boundaries in endless possibility. It is transformation that goes in every direction – inward, outward, and all around.

I promised to analyze the learning of these teachers' lived experience in relation to adult learning theory. No learning theory or theories can adequately capture life itself. But in hearing the stories of these teachers, it occurred to me that they are fortunate, for not everyone is fully living. If life and learning are synonymous, as the findings seemed to indicate, then life – at least a spiritual life – ends when real learning ends. What these teachers teach is how to live life fully. And, as any wise person knows, the best way to teach anything is to model it yourself.

Introducing a Spiritual Evolution of Transformative Learning Theory

Despite the impossibility of giving such spiritual learning – learning about life itself – an accurate, dynamic, material representation, John Heron's work does a fascinating job of describing something he called a "theory of personhood." Heron's theory is practically based on the ground of all being, while also rising to the heights of ecstatic delight. He honors learning as a sacred process.

Before synthesizing the experience of these teachers of spiritual pedagogy in Chapter X, I first focus on several aspects of Heron's holistic learning and developmental theory, mostly from his foundational book *Feeling and Personhood: Psychology in Another Key* (1992).

Yorks and Kasl (2002, 2006) framed Heron's work within the precepts of transformative learning, a theory that was articulated by Jack Mezirow as perspective transformation in 1978 and expanded on by various scholars. Therefore, I explain the concept of transformative learning first, then provide the whole person framework of Heron.

Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's concept of transformative learning has arguably dominated the discourse about adult learning theory since the early 1980s (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). The theory grew out of constructivist paradigmatic thinking, which assumed that "meaning exists within ourselves" (Mezirow, 1991) and humans construct meaning about the world based on their experiences and relationships.

A classic definition of transformative learning is "a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better justified" (Cranton, 2006, p. vi). Transformative learning is a humanistic theory, with an underlying belief that humans have incredible positive potential, especially if provided adequate conditions – something that humanists and critical theorists generally believe every human should have access to in a just society. Transformative learning also has roots in social critical theory, partly because of an interest in the emancipation of the individual and society by being freed from unexamined cultural assumptions, indoctrination, or hegemony. There is an ongoing debate about whether Mezirow was too focused on individual transformation, perhaps with the assumption that individual transformation would collectively translate into social transformation, while neglecting a theory for social change (Collard & Law, 1989; Hart, 1990). While the nature of this debate may seem tangential to my purposes here, resolving the dualistic notion of one or the other (individual or social change) is relevant and will be revisited later in the synthesis.

At its core, transformative learning theory is about how humans use or develop metacognitive skills in order to notice their own thought patterns and frames of reference

(how we see the world) and then change their behavior, role, or identity. The learner is transformed because she has a new way of seeing and thinking. Transformative learning is beyond gaining new knowledge or skills and fitting them into the same mindsets previously assimilated. Once transformed, the learner assimilates new knowledge in a different manner than before, because the underlying structure of how the learner processes knowledge has been rewired. Namely, one's frames of references have permanently changed.

Frames of reference, also called "meaning perspectives" by Mezirow (2012), develop in many ways, mainly through the various aspects of our cultural upbringing, but also through such psychological influences such as the "idiosyncrasies of primary caregivers" (p. 83). When something triggers an individual to notice and question her given frames of reference or points of view, she might launch into a transformative learning cycle, which Mezirow described in 10 steps:

1. A disorienting dilemma,

2. A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame,

3. A critical assessment of assumptions,

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared,

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions,

6. Planning of a course of action,

7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans,

8. Provisional trying of new roles,

9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

While Mezirow acknowledged that the 10 steps are an academic concept and transformation does not literally happen in 10 clean steps, the first step – experiencing a disorienting dilemma – is essential to triggering the type of metacognition involved in transformative learning. After all, if our meaning perspectives are outside of our awareness, something needs to call attention to a need for change. Often it occurs when something we always thought, assumed, or did suddenly is not working anymore, causing one to consider self-examination. Failure can be a fabulous teacher! Also, major life changes and role changes can bring about the "wake-up" call. Sometimes the disorienting dilemma can lead to a swift or dramatic transformation, which Mezirow called "epochal." However, he also recognized that transformative learning might be "incremental," or occur over a period of time through numerous micro-transformations (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformative Learning Takes a Holistic Turn

Many aspects of Mezirow's theory have been brought into question or expanded upon, and there are several alternative and complementary theories of transformation. Some theorists have revised how transformative leaning happens. Others question what transformative learning actually is or what is being transformed. What they all have in common is an aspect of "meta." To experience transformation, the individual needs to gain a new perspective that is not just different, but that can observe the current perspective – what Robert Kegan (2000) called making the subjective, objective. The human rises up, so to speak, in a way that brings her thinking, way of being, or consciousness to a different level, or from "simplistic black-and-white perceptions of the

world to complex relativistic perceptions" (Cranton, 2006, p. 29). Sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit, the new, different level is also usually more complex and takes in a larger perspective, making transformative learning theory developmental in nature.

In the case of Mezirow's original theory, epistemology is primarily what is being transformed, and cognition is the primary tool of transformation. There seems to be an unstated premise that cognition is the most important domain of the human – that cognition is the driving force behind all transformation and is therefore superior.

While Mezirow's own frame of reference has been criticized as overly cognitive (Taylor, 1997, 2001), his transformative learning theory provides a basis from which many of the other forms and nuances of transformative learning have evolved.

A map of the various tracks of transformative learning would be rather complicated, but for the most part, complementary theories tend to include more holistic dimensions. For example, in contrast to Mezirow, an extra-rational approach to transformative learning that drew on Jung's concept of individuation examines the role of the unconscious in transformation. By bringing to light the unconscious aspects of our psyche, we become more integrated and capable of expanding our consciousness (Boyd, 1991; Boyd & Meyers, 1988; Dirkx, 1997; Jung, 1971).

Critical theorists brought aspects of power structures, race, and gender to the table, both at the individual and societal level. Some advocated for a new worldview. In O'Sullivan's case, that new worldview is an ecologically, interconnected consciousness, where people and community (both human and nature) intuit themselves as inseparable (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004).

The social-emancipatory approach, originating with Paulo Freire (1970), was further enriched by Elizabeth Tisdell. Since all transformation involves questioning meaning perspectives that were, in one way or another, absorbed through one's culture, then transformative learning has to be culturally relevant. Tisdell emphasized the spiritual dimension, saying that transformative learning needs to be much deeper than the cognitive. Humans need to plumb the depths of the human spirit and ultimately know themselves better in order to transform (Tisdell, 2003, 2012).

There are yet more types of transformative learning, including developmental and relational. All of these are relevant to the learning of the teachers in this dissertation. They are all broader and more holistic than Mezirow's theory. For the purposes of analyzing the lived experiences of teaching with spiritual pedagogy, I use the framework from Yorks and Kasl's (2006) whole person learning, which defined transformative learning as

> a wholistic change in how a person both affectively experiences and conceptually frames his or her experience of the world when pursuing learning that is personally developmental, socially controversial, or requires personal or social healing. (pp. 45-46)

What is important for the purposes of this dissertation is that I view transformative learning from a broad, holistic, interconnected perspective. I do not see transformation as merely a change in thinking, but a change in being. I also do not see transformation as merely individual, but inherently communal. Tisdell (2012) referred to this communal notion as "The interconnection of the "I" and the "we"" (p. 31). Tisdell called for a transformation of consciousness.

Perhaps *consciousness transformation* would be a more accurate term than transformative learning in the scope of this analysis, since "consciousness" often refers to

one's entire psyche or way of being. However, sometimes "consciousness" refers more specifically to one's epistemology, which can be confusing. Since I intend for transformation to imply one's very spirit, I often use the phrase "spiritual learning."

This perspective might seem beyond the scope of transformative learning or too radical to be practical. However, Heron's framework in his theory of personhood structures holistic learning in a manner that integrates the spirit into transformative learning.

A Theory of Personhood – A Primer of Terms

To understand the lived experience of teachers who practice spiritual pedagogy and their transformative learning through the lens of Heron's work, a primer on the terms he used and some of his foundational concepts is necessary. The primer of terms below is followed by the core concepts of a theory of personhood. These terms build on one another, and I intend for the reader to read them in the order provided.

Psyche

The psyche is "the human mind and its inherent life as a whole" (p. 14). The psyche can be operating from a more individuating manner or from a more participatory manner, or it may be integrating the two.

Participatory versus Individuating

When studying Heron, I found that some of his terminology only made sense in relation to its opposite, or "flip side." Two opposing terms must be looked at together, because they are different sides of the same coin in the spiritual world. That is the case with understanding Heron's meanings of participative and individuating.

Individuating

Individuating is what Heron called the side of the psyche that attends to the individual, the self. (Note that Heron used the word "individuating" differently than the Jungian notion of individuation.)

Participative

Participative is the communal aspect of the psyche that participates with its interconnection with other humans, nature, the divine, all of life.

Egoic

The ego is necessary and natural. It is the individuating aspect of the human psyche. Unfortunately, the ego can become an "alienated part of the psyche that is over-identified with the individuating…at the expense of the participative" (p. 36). When we lose our connection with *our relations*, to borrow a term from indigenous society, we become egoic, separated from participatory life.

Feeling versus Emotion

In Heron's language, feeling is the participatory flipside of emotion.

Emotion is purely individualistic. Emotions are experienced by an individual, often in a manner that drives one to act toward resolving the emotion, especially if it is uncomfortable: I'm bored, so I find something to do. I'm angry, so I scream and yell.

Feeling, on the other hand, is *completely different* from emotion. As Yorks and Kasl (2002) explained, Heron gave feeling a "special usage" (p. 182). Heron (1992) defined feeling as "resonance with being, the capacity by which we participate in and are compresent with our world" (p. 1). He made a comparison to Martin Buber's I-thou

relationship and quoted Buber (1937, as cited in Heron, 1992) in saying "every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou" (p. 35). Heron talked of a *felt* unity with others and with the natural world. Feeling is the ground of all being, a mysterious yet distinct presence.

Feeling cannot be defined adequately because it "cannot be reduced to anything other than itself" (p. 2). Only metaphors can approach a human description of feeling. To explain how feeling is different from perception, Heron likened it to the difference between looking into the eyes of another compared to *gazing*. "I perceive your eyes…but I *feel* the quality of your gaze" (p. 97). The gaze attunes the two souls. The gaze takes in more than the physical presence of the other human, but also their spiritual and physical "gesture," their way of being, their wholeness, their timelessness. Heron called it "divine knowing" (p. 35).

The Individual versus the Person

Just as Heron gave "feeling" a special designation, he also gave "person" and "personhood" special meaning. Typically, we think of a person to be an "individual," but Heron distinguished between the two. He clarified that an individual has not necessarily developed an integration of the individuating psyche and the participative psyche. Personhood is actually an achievement. It is "realized wholeness" (p. 38).

The Subject/Object Split

Heron also called the subject/object split a "subject-object polarity" (p. 9) of the human psyche, which is a result primarily of language. Ordinary language creates an "arbitrary separation of object from subject" (p. 9), whereby the subject (the individual)

views objects (everyone and everything else) as separate from oneself and from one another. Such separateness, according to Heron, is an illusion that a person can replace with distinctness-in-unity, where "subject and object are distinct, interpenetrating and non-separable" (p. 9). One of the reasons I included Heron's definition of the subject/object split is to distinguish it from a related but different concept by Robert Kegan and other developmental psychologists. Kegan's concept is that as people develop, they learn to make object what they are subject to; this means they can look objectively at things about themselves that they previously were not aware of, or were subject to. They learn to reflect on themselves without being subject to their unexamined assumptions, perceptions, and behaviors (Kegan, 2000).

Entelechy

Entelechy is "a dynamic formative potential of the person to be" (Heron, 1992, p. 44). The notion of entelechy is a spiritualized version of humanistic notions of "self-actualizing" (Maslow, 1970), but it is more than human potential. Entelechy is divine potential that is seeded in the human. Each human soul is seeded with entelechical potential – an infinite number of forms the human may take – which become developed in an act of co-creation with all of life. Entelechy is timeless. The baby and her fully realized grown person exist together, at the same time, in all of time, within the divine.

Development, as a Journey Toward Personhood

We are born whole. A baby is born naturally with a felt sense of unity. However, the tensions of being human, including all the discomforts of physical survival, for

example, start to pull the young child toward separation from a felt union, because she must attend to her individual needs. The journey toward personhood is about recovering that felt unity while also integrating one's individuality as one matures. It is a developmental process that requires lifting the illusion of egoic separateness.

It is worth noting that Heron did not have a sentimental vision of an infant's innocent psychological or spiritual state. According to Heron, learning language and rationality is one of the reasons the child digresses from a state of felt unity. The goal of development is not to regress to a pre-rational (Wilber, 2001) or pre-linguistic (Heron, 1992) state. Integration of the primitive, participatory "pure" felt unity with the "tarnished" individual describes what Wilber called trans-rational and Heron called "extra-rational."

A Theory of Personhood – Modes of the Psyche, Ways of Knowing, and the Development of the Person

After understanding what Heron meant in each of the terms above, the structure of Heron's (1992) theory of personhood can be adequately explained. For our purposes, I focus on the modes of the human psyche (or mind, or consciousness), Heron's ways of knowing, and I touch on his developmental theory.

Modes of the Psyche

Heron's modes of the psyche described the structure of the human psyche, or mind, and how the modes of the psyche holistically work together. There are four basic modes of the psyche, which are presented in a particular order that Heron called an "up-hierarchy" because they build on one another from the bottom up. Heron (1992)

illustrated the up-hierarchy with a triangle/pyramidal shape to demonstrate that the base

is the foundation – the fertile ground out of which the other modes grow. Therefore, the

top of the hierarchy is dependent on all below it, rather than the master of all below it.

> In an up-hierarchy it is not a matter of the higher controlling and ruling the lower, as in a down-hierarchy, but of the higher branching and flowering out of, and bearing the fruit of, the lower. (p. 20)

As the reader can see from Figure 13, the four basic modes of the psyche are affective,

imaginal, conceptual, and practical.

Figure 13. The four modes of the psyche in an up-hierarchy

The participatory/individuating poles of each mode. Where Heron's model

becomes complicated is where each of the four modes manifests as two poles, or

functions. A common guide with Heron is that there is a dual, di-polar aspect to many of

his concepts. Each mode of the psyche has two functions that are at opposite poles – an individuating function and a participative function. See Figure 14 for a drawing of the four modes dividing into eight functioning polarities.

Figure 14. The eight functioning polarities

Each of the Four Modes of the Psyche has a participative pole and an individuating pole, making eight functioning polarities.

For the first mode, the affective mode, feeling is the participative functioning polarity, and emotion is the individuating functioning polarity.

The second mode, imaginal, has intuition as the participative functioning polarity and imaging, or imagery (perception and memory), at its individuating pole. Think of

"imaging" and "perceiving" as synonyms to better understand the individuating function of the imaginal mode.

The conceptual mode has reflection at the participatory pole and discrimination at the individuating pole.

For the fourth mode, the practical mode, intention is the participatory pole, and action is the name for the individuating functioning polarity.

The functioning polarities of the individuating modes: Emotion, imaging, discrimination, and action and how they can work in a cycle.

1. *Emotion.* Heron (1992) defined emotion as the "affect that arises from the fulfillment or the frustration of individual needs and interests" (p. 16).

2. *Imagery.* Heron (1992) said imaging is our "window on the world," primarily perception and memory.

3. *Discrimination.* This is the conceptual aspect of perception. We categorize our percepts into definitions and classes and choose what is most important.

4. *Action.* The will performs an act based on the emotion, imaging, and discrimination that led to it. (Heron clarified that this does not include unintended behavior.)

Heron (1992) described a cycle with a simple example:

An individual feels hungry [emotion]; looks around the kitchen to see what there is to eat [imaging]; selectively discriminates among the items to formulate a menu [discrimination] and cooks a meal and eats it [action]. (p. 207)

Figure 15. The individuating functioning polarities of psyche working in a cycle

These four steps can be shown in a circular cycle in Figure 15. The important point is that each functioning polarity is in service to the next. When the cycle completes, the person is left either with emotions fulfilled or frustrated, and the cycle begins again.

Interestingly, Heron (1992) called this a living cycle. He distinguished between living and learning, by saying that the person getting the food, in this example, is not really learning. If the individual's emotions were fulfilled by eating the food, it likely led to her repeating the same cycle again later (thus the circular cycle). Heron did not regard this as learning.

In order to learn, the individual needs to disrupt the cycle by thinking conceptually before imaging, such as in Figure 16, which Heron (1992) called a reversal cycle. Note that this is akin to a shallow version of transformative learning. Something prompts the individual to examine her imaged choices and to choose a different route.

Figure 16. The reversal cycle in the individuating functions

The functioning polarities of the participatory modes: Feeling, intuiting, reflection, and intention, and how they can work in a cycle.

1. *Feeling.* Feeling is the ground out of which every other participatory functioning polarity grows. In metaphorical language, think of it literally as ground – the fertile soil necessary in order to plant anything else. Feeling is an

attunement with the rhythms of life, an empathic resonance. It is an encounter with the mystery of the immaterial qualities of life. It is related to bliss, joy, love – not as sentiments, but as states of being that surpass human understanding.

2. *Intuition.* Heron's (1992) definition of intuition reminds me of Gladwell's (2014) book *Blink*. It is "immediate, comprehensive knowing whereby the mind can grasp" (Heron, 1992, p. 17) a pattern, a system, and connect it to other systems and a larger meaning. Sometimes intuition comes in the form of insight. Imagination is one aspect of intuiting.

3. *Reflection.* When reflecting in the participatory mode, the person is doing more than thinking about past experience; the person is "seeking to formulate a conceptual model that is inclusive and comprehensive" (p. 17).

4. *Intention.* Heron (1992) called this the "domain of plan, design, policy, purpose, and so on" (p. 17). He said it is what the person "has in mind when performing an action" (p. 17). His description seems to have action embedded in it. Perhaps a term such as "response" would have been a more accurate description of this mode? Neither the word "intention" nor his description seem to include the action itself, only the meaning behind it.

Heron offers the following example of a cycle within the participatory modes (Figure 17).

At the grounding level of my awareness of you, I empathize with you, I resonate with your being as you talk to me. In short, I feel your presence [feeling]. On this basis, I grasp in my imagination a total image of how you are presenting

yourself, your posture, gesture, facial expression and stream of vocal sounds [intuiting]. It is out of this total image that I abstract the conceptual content of your speech [reflecting]. Then I make my reply [intention]. (pp. 104-105)

Figure 17. The participatory functioning polarities of psyche working in a cycle

Similar to the egoic/individuating cycle, the above example is what Heron called a cycle of living. To become learning, the cycle needs to become what he called a reversal cycle, and reflection comes before intuition to help the person view the experience from a new perspective and more complex intention (Figure 18).

Figure 18. The reversal cycle in the participatory functions

Integrating the individuating and participative modes. Whether functioning within the individuating modes or the participatory modes, each functional polarity is in service to the next, and effectuated with practical action (individuating) or meaningful intention (participatory), or both.

The functioning polarities in the individuating modes tend to work toward action in service of ego – but the individuating mode is not necessarily egoic "unless developed at the expense of the participatory" (p. 18). The overemphasizing of egoic needs is an aspect of the human condition due to what Heron (1992) called "the dynamics of distress emotions" (p. 128). When an individual encounters emotions that are not resolved, they

can become repressed or distorted, contributing to the individual becoming more egoic and becoming caught in egoic cycles.

While both the individuating and participative modes are equally necessary to personhood, it is the participative functional polarities that typically become buried by our psyche. The participative modes become obscured, or become unconscious, for three main reasons. One is childhood wounding that led to the psyche protecting and therefore emphasizing the individual. A second is the acquisition of language; this is particularly applicable when working with children. Language inherently categorizes and therefore separates things, concepts, and beings by materializing them into sound. A third is what Heron (1992) called the "tensions of the human condition," and while he gave a long list of such tensions, I simplify the list by saying that we all have to deal with being inside a body and tending to its physicality and material needs. Our body seems separate from others, especially once named with language.

Heron (1992) said that "transmutation" is a way to "switch awareness from internal distress to feeling participation in the wider world until the negative energy shifts into neutral or positive effect" (p. 130). By integrating, or bringing into coherent balance all eight modes, one can heal the wounds of egoism. Heron continued: "the whole [trans-egoic] person has all eight functions in a more comprehensive conscious balance" (p. 19).

Therefore, to attain "personhood," one is challenged to integrate the participatory and the individuating functions. This is done from the bottom up. One has to be grounded in the first participatory function, feeling, before gaining ground in the next participatory function, intuition, and so on.

Heron was interested in demonstrating how individuals can develop into whole people. Of the eight functioning polarities of the psyche, it is the lower ones within the up-hierarchy that need understanding and nurturing for someone to surpass an egoic existence. Additionally, he theorized that humans are not demonstrating any difficulty embracing their individuating functions; humans need to cultivate the participating functions to become more whole. Therefore, looking at Table 9, one can see that of the eight functions, it is cultivation of the two in the lower left corner that requires the most attention. Our abilities to feel and to intuit have often gone partially dormant or become obscured. They need to be rediscovered to develop wholeness. Heron introduced the ways of knowing, explained below, to help develop wholeness.

Table 9

The Participatory Functions That Need Emphasis to Develop Wholeness

	Participating Modes	Individuating Modes
Upper rungs of the up-hierarchy	Intention Reflection	Action Discrimination
Lower rungs of the up-hierarchy	Intuition Feeling	Imaging Emotion

Coherence

Integration

The cell highlighted gold in the lower left corner are the participating functions at the bottom of the up-hierarchy that most need to be nourished to develop wholeness.

Ways of Knowing and the Way of Integration

Heron introduced four forms of knowledge, or four ways of knowing, to help the reader focus on what and how one needs to learn in order to become a whole person, or to develop "whole-person knowing" (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Heron's ways of knowing assist in harvesting the fruits of each mode and bringing the person into what Heron called integration and coherence, and what Heron and Reason (1997) called "critical subjectivity" (p. 282). Yorks and Kasl (2002) called acting with these forms of knowledge in balance, as having congruent *"habits of being."*

Each of Heron's four forms of knowledge is associated with a particular world-view that is parented by two modes of the psyche – with one of the parents being more dominant than the other. Figure 19 lists each way of knowing and its parenting modes of the psyche, with the dominant parent on the right. For example, the parenting modes for experiential learning are the affective mode (the dominant parent) and the imaginal mode.

Like the modes with which they correlate, the ways of knowing also work as an up-hierarchy. One needs to cultivate the lower levels first, or with the most intention (but they ultimately work in a cycle). Therefore, experiential knowledge is shown at the bottom of the up-hierarchy in Figure 19 to demonstrate that it is the ground, or source, for the forms of knowledge above it.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that each mode of the psyche has both a participatory and an individuating pole, which are integrated. Heron's ways of knowing emphasize participatory learning because Heron (1992) said when focusing on the participatory, the individuating is "subsumed" automatically (p. 218). So each way of

knowing naturally integrates the participatory and individuating functions of the self by emphasizing the participatory function of each of its parent modes.

Figure 19. The Ways of Knowing in an up-hierarchy (left) and in a cycle (right)

Experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge is parented by the affective mode and the imaginal mode. One learns through intuition and imaging in the imaginal mode, and through emotion and feeling in the dominant affective mode. Heron (1992) emphasized that feeling, as the participatory function of the dominant mode, is the base of experiential knowledge. Feeling is phenomenological, and one can only know what the experience is by having it. Heron again relied on the brilliance of Martin Buber's I-Thou relation to explain experiential knowing. Quoting Buber (1937), experiential knowing is "only known in fullness in a direct mutual relation between two people who are genuinely open and present to each other. The reality is in the relation between them and is interdependent with the wholeness of each" (p. 163). As the bottom of the up-

hierarchy, it is only with this rich, full-bodied experiential learning grounded in feeling

that the next way of knowing, which is presentational knowledge, can flourish.

Presentational knowledge. Presentational knowledge is parented by the imaginal

and conceptual modes, with the imaginal dominating. Yorks and Kasl (2002) used the

term *expressive knowledge* to capture the creative aspect of presentational knowing.

Throughout the rest of this discussion, I use the terms *expressive knowing/knowledge* and

presentational knowing/knowledge interchangeably. With the imaginal function as the

dominant mode, presentational knowing is largely about imagination and images.

Experiencing and expressing the arts, including music, dance, poetry, and the visual arts,

is a signature medium for learning with the imaginal function.

Expressive knowing, when it is attuned with participatory felt union, captures and

symbolically expresses "the rhythmic structure of organic life itself" (Yorks & Kasl,

2002, p. 166). For those familiar with Jung, presentational knowing has an archetypal

quality. Heron (1992) said that presentational knowledge "reveals the underlying pattern

of things" (p. 168).

There is a mystical aspect to this for Heron (1992) who considered the processes

of the mind to have "transcendent functions" (p 143). He explained that the brain cannot

manifest images alone, but only give meaning to them. The images come from a mystical

source. If the tap were opened, and we could access an uninterrupted, unadulterated flow

of all the images our mind produces, it would probably be overwhelming and scary

unless we could voluntarily control it. Again referring to Jung, because of this overwhelm

(and our lack of skill at controlling the images), we tend to push such images into our

subconscious, and our conceptual, conscious mind then tries to control the situation. The

tap is still flowing, but it goes underground. The human conscious mind cannot possibly use language (a much slower process) to put a name on all of these flowing images and therefore control them. These images are our connection to participating in the unity of life – to participatory being. Limiting them with language is the beginning of the subject-object split, the "breaking up [of] the primordial synthesis of the unit and unity" (p 146), and the resulting over-engagement with the ego.

Heron (1992) went so far as to say that disengaging from the subject-object split and the conceptual mind is the "key to liberation of awareness from the preoccupations of the ego"; once accomplished, it results in a "cosmic consciousness" and "archetypal grandeur" (p. 147).

Yorks and Kasl (2006) focused on presentational knowing as the "key" of which Heron spoke. They referred to "expressive knowing," as they called it, as an important "pathway" (p. 60) between experiential knowledge and propositional knowledge. Presentational knowing is able to express human feeling through symbol and images in preparation for "wholistic" propositional knowing (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, 2006).

Propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge is parented by the practical mode and the conceptual mode, as the dominant parent. Propositional knowing is *knowledge about*, expressed in logical statements, facts, and theories. It is knowledge that divides the world into subject and object. Heron gave an account of how propositional knowing, upon dividing the world into smaller and smaller parts, eventually implodes in on itself.

> This is roughly the crisis science passed through earlier this century when it was finally discovered that the electron's properties are, in important respects, a function of how it is observed. Its nature is therefore in part transactional,

involving the interdependence of observer and observed. Its status can only be determined if you close the subject-object gap…for the subatomic particles turned out to be patterns of possible interconnections. (p. 169)

Heron added, "Physics tried going deeper and deeper into the object and simply ended up back with the subject" (p. 170). The moral of the subatomic story? *Everything* is in relation. When all the types of knowing work together – when all the modes of the psyche are integrated – the subject-object split experiences the "logic of the dialectic," and opposites become interdependent and "interpenetrate…without loss of their polar distinctness" (p. 171).

When integrated with the other modes, propositional knowing actually brings coherence to life. At its heights, propositional knowledge can enlighten us to the experience of what Heron called the One-Many. When extra-linguistic, propositional knowing is in congruence with the other ways of knowing. Rather than confining us within an egoic existence, it liberates us to the heights of ecstasy.

Practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is parented by the affective mode and the practical mode, as the dominant parent. Practical knowing is *knowing how* – the ability to do something. One can know how to do something in service to the ego, but remember that Heron's ways of knowing emphasize the participatory pole, meaning any activity would ultimately be in service to a larger whole. Hopefully, the reader has not gotten the impression that propositional and practical knowing are inferior to presentational and experiential learning in Heron's model. Actually, "…practical learning, based on the three other forms and construed as learning how to live from the perspective of the person, is the apotheosis, the consummation, of learning" (Heron,

1992, p. 226). Imagine humans without highly developed practical knowledge: "without its base in language and conceptual thought, human skill would remain on par with that of the apes" (p. 172).

Implications of the ways of knowing. When all the ways of knowing are integrated and working in a cycle of learning, incredible potential exists. Heron (1992) called this "living-as-learning" (p. 225), where all ways of knowing work together to bring about practical results. The person is consciously "learning how to live" (p. 225). As examples, Heron recalled interviews with Einstein and other great mathematicians and creative thinkers who reported accessing images, mental pictures they "divined and received" and could translate into practical knowledge (p. 139).

Unfortunately, "many people just live, as distinct from live-as-learning" (Heron, 1992, p. 225). To engage in *learning that meets life,* a person has to intentionally engage the ways of knowing in coherence from the ground up, with the participatory modes being nurtured and fully integrated with the individuating modes.

Experiential knowing and participatory feeling must be the ground of learning; otherwise, the cycle of learning becomes "stuck" in the upper segments of the individuating modes of the psyche in egoic separation. Figure 20 is an illustration adapted from Heron showing the individuating modes of the psyche split off from the participating modes. The ego concerns itself with its own perceived practical day-to-day individual needs.

Figure 20. The Ego: The individuating modes separated from the participating modes

Without starting with participatory feeling, the egoic cycle of learning is separated. The illusion of separation keeps the individual from accessing the whole self.

Love is the most primal participatory feeling. When one is able to learn love through experiential knowing and express love with presentational knowing, then one is living-as-learning. Then loving becomes learning, and learning meets life.

The Concept of Divinity in Heron's Theory of Personhood: The One-Many

Why does any of this psychological theorizing matter in the spiritual world? One of the many paradoxes of this body of theory is that as a person develops into the integrated person, her psyche becomes healthy enough to access transcendent spiritual realms. Conversely, one's spirituality can assist the individual in developing a healthy,

integrated psyche; namely, by embodying the feeling function, the immanent ground of all being, one can come into whole personhood.

> If persons are an expression of Spirit differentiated as Many, then there are two interdependent and complementary paths for such persons, the path of transcendence – opening to the One – and the path of immanence – creative unfoldment of the divine potential with the Many into ever greater manifest expression. (Heron, 1992, p. 201)

Spirit works from above *and* from below. Spirit is "the infinitely large…and the infinitely small" (p. 181). The seeker ascends and descends; evolves and involves; she seeks the One and senses the Many. In the end, the seeker realizes she is the sought.

Heron's concept of the One-Many – simple language for ancient wisdom – is central to his entire theory. The One and the Many have several renditions, such as the universal and the individual, or the transcendent and immanent. Heron liked to use the phrase diversity-in-unity. The One is the unity of all, while in the Many each person is distinct. He clarified that distinct is *not* separate.

The whole concept is dialectical. The One is made up of the Many, and together they are the divine One…which is also the Many, which together is the divine One...and so on, infinitely.

Heron (1992) captured the dialectical nature of the One-Many in several paradoxical phrases:

> Everything is divine, and the divine transcends everything…
> My individuation is exalted in the divine, and I lose my being in the divine…
> The divine is not a being among other beings, but being-itself. (p. 182)

If God is living, then "God, being-itself, can be described symbolically as living, personal, spirit, love" (p. 182). Heron returned, again, to *feeling*, as the "divine being of

the world and each other. Feeling is the "sweet intoxication of the Many and the One and the One in the Many" (p. 93).

Developmental Personhood

Heron's theory of personhood claims that incredible human potential – divine entelechy – exists within each person. He provided the modes of the psyche and ways of knowing to explain what living-as-learning is, or what Yorks and Kasl (2002) called whole-person knowing.

Heron's theory of personhood includes a developmental model he called "states of personhood," to demonstrate what states an individual may progress through as she becomes more integrated and coherent within the modes of psyche.

Heron's version of human development has eight states, which I do not describe in full here but merely name in the order he lists them, along with Heron's brief descriptions in Table 10, which are to be read from the bottom upward.

Table 10

Heron's Eight States of Personhood

Charismatic person	The psyche is a continuously transfigured, living presence.
Self-transfiguring person	The psyche realizes its psychic and spiritual potentials.
Self-creating person	The psyche is autonomous in healing and actualizing itself.
Creative person	The psyche is autonomous in external behavior.
Conventional person	The socialized psyche adopts cultural roles and rules.
Compulsive person	The wounded psyche has defensive splits and repressions.
Spontaneous person	The uninhibited psyche expresses its innate impulses.
Primal person	Primordial fusion of the psyche and its fetal world.

The spontaneous person is essentially a child, still with some access to the primitive "fusion" of primal felt unity but developing a sense of separateness.

The compulsive and conventional states mark a state of egoic functioning as a result of wounding and an assimilation of cultural expectations and roles as a result of socialization, respectively.

Above the orange line, representing the bridge to integrated personhood, are three states: the creative person, the self-creating person, and the self-transfiguring person, which are only possible with an "open ego," an awareness of the person's compulsive nature and conventional indoctrination, and the ability to integrate, heal, and transcend those aspects. The fourth state above the orange line is the charismatic person which, according to Heron, remains a person of the future.

To understand Heron's general theory of personhood development, three main concepts are necessary to comprehend:

1. Development is in states, not stages. While Heron called his order a "possible progression" (p. 66), states can come in various orders, rather than sequentially.

2. States can exist concurrently, something Heron called "subpersons" (p. 183). For example, someone could be behaving in a compulsive fashion in one domain of her life, while behaving like a creative person in another.

3. While there is continual cross-over, generally, the bottom four states occur before the top four. There is a point where an individual "crosses over" into personhood, between states 4 and 5, making all of the top four states a

description of personhood. This point of crossing over is represented by an orange line in the table.

Conclusion

Doesn't everyone want to be a "person?" Perhaps Heron used that overly common word to emphasize that everyone *is* a person. The discomfort with developmental models is the elitism they inherently, unavoidably smell of. I have heard stories that Jack Mezirow, for several years, denied that transformative learning was developmental for he wanted to avoid "developmentalism" (Marsick, personal communication, January 20, 2019). He eventually gave in to the tide of the developmental enthusiasm of his contemporaries, and even started referring to perspective transformation as the "engine of adult development" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 228). He could not deny that transformative learning is directional. There is undeniably movement – transformative learning is not random, scattered in all directions. Moreover, what is the point of transforming if it does not get you somewhere? But the movement of transformation, while linear, comes back around. A curved and bent line becomes a spiral – a circle and a line that moves inward, outward, up and down…forever. Many developmentalists have "bent" the line of development into a spiral, perhaps, in part, to claim it is not about privilege (Wilber, 2001).

Heron is slightly different. He emphasized the entelechy of the human spirit – born, and forever and timelessly existing with unlimited spiritual potential. Entelechy spiritualizes developmental concepts. Spirit is unpredictable. It cannot be defined or controlled. With spirit, anything is possible.

Researcher Reflection

This dissertation is an offering. I want it to be a blessing for the reader. Reader, I want you to find some value in these pages that is applicable to your own life, your own work.

So I was discouraged when the creativity and joy of this dissertation felt like it was draining from me during the days I wrote this chapter. Reading Heron's work was often exhilarating for me, but it was tedious to write about. Likewise, writing about transformative learning theory – something that has been summarized hundreds of times by scholars and adult education students – felt burdensome.

I wanted to write about my recognitions before the ether either floated the thoughts away and disappeared, as it so often mysteriously does, or before it became weighted down with the world and hardened into dry, lackluster clay. But I needed a little time away from my writing. I prayed for inspiration.

Then I had an interesting dream. I dreamed about taking care of a baby. She was dressed in shabby clothes from a poor family. I wished I had the money to dress her up nicely. Although there was only so much I could do for her, I was completely dedicated to loving and caring for this baby – even the typically not-so-pleasant aspects. I tenderly cleaned her off when she soiled herself. Then, during a moment that I took my attention off her, she had miraculously moved herself to another crib, and she had put on a new outfit that was very flattering to her! I was so glad because I was going to be bringing her out into public, and I wanted others to see how beautiful she is.

When I woke up, I realized that the clothes (writing) I need to dress my baby (dissertation) in are my own reflections and experiences that need to be written in my

like I was sneaking in my own voice? One of them exclaimed that she did not think there

was *enough* of my voice! Now I hear her. Now I hear my own voice.

Chapter X

A SYNTHESIS OF THE PATH OF SPIRITUAL LEARNING WITH

A THEORY OF PERSONHOOD AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

If thou would'st know thy Self,
Look out into the Cosmic Spaces.
If thou would'st fathom the Cosmic Spaces,
Look inwards, into thine own Self.
~Rudolf Steiner (2002, p. 35)

This synthesis is saturated with paradoxes, oxymorons, and opposites. The logic circles back on itself in multiple manners. Throughout my learning process, every time I thought I discovered something for myself – an epiphany, a new understanding about the human spirit – I realized another scholar had already articulated my epiphany. Often I remembered that I myself had said something similar in my own earlier writings! In fact, the reader will find this synthesis, in some ways, is a review of my first few chapters through slightly different lenses and a much richer understanding.

Therefore, I have decided to call myself a "re-searcher." I am certainly searching, in the existential meaning of the word. So far I have found that life is merely remembering. All was seeded as entelechy. To remember is about as good as it gets! In this chapter, I present my re-search.

Answering the Question. Questioning the Answer

In light of Heron's theory of personhood, answering the question *What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy?* takes on greater meaning, and opens up yet more questions.

Evidence from interviews with the seven teachers in this study indicated they are all living life as creative, self-creating, or self-transfiguring persons, according to Heron's developmental model (see Table 10, Heron's Eight States of Personhood, Chapter IX). In Heron's language, they have attained personhood, or "transpersonhood." They are all conscious of transformation within their psyches and spirits, and they continue to experience teaching with spiritual pedagogy as a spiritual gift, one replete with insight, love, joy, and struggle. Their experience is not one of mere doing, but one of *being*. They are aware of ever being and becoming.

When I organized the findings, the themes came together intuitively into what I am calling "The Path of Spiritual Learning" (Figure 21). I organized the essential six themes – Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, Openness, Authenticity, and Meaning and Purpose – in Chapters V through VIII, and I took the reader through "The Path of Spiritual Learning" one theme at a time, in respective order.

I placed "Authenticity," in Chapter VII as the complex theme that belongs at the end of the steps on The Path, as the culmination of The Path of Spiritual Learning. This synthesis of the findings primarily focused on Authenticity and its relationship to adult learning theory. Along the way, some of the writings of Patricia Cranton on transformative learning and authenticity were relevant, as was the work of Elizabeth

Tisdell, who gave particularly important insight into the exchange between authenticity and spirituality in relation to transformative learning.

Since analyzing the findings in relation to adult learning theory, I now view the foundation and the steps listed along The Path – Connection, Aliveness, Mindfulness, and Openness – as conditions, skills, and traits that build on one another to help uncover one's authentic personhood. This is an extremely simplified way of viewing The Path, but the simplification provides a construct through which I can make some salient points about each step of The Path before discussing the theme of Authenticity more fully.

Therefore, before discussing Authenticity, what directly follow are a few notes about each step of The Path, with some comparison to Heron's theory of personhood. The Path of Spiritual Learning has much similarity to Heron's modes of the psyche and ways of knowing. There is not an exact one-to-one relationship between Heron's up-hierarchies (i.e., Connection = experiential knowing; Aliveness = presentational knowing, and so on), but his theory certainly provides more understanding and analysis about these teachers' lived experiences. After brief comments about each step of The Path, this synthesis focuses on Authenticity, including each of Authenticity's subthemes as listed in Chapter VII.

Following the discussion on Authenticity, I discuss the final theme of Meaning and Purpose briefly, pointing out that it is a theme that is not *on* the path so much as it is a condition of The Path.

Finally, I return to transformative learning theory in light of Heron's theory of personhood and the findings from teachers who practice spiritual pedagogy.

Note that as one reads the ensuing descriptions of each theme on The Path of Spiritual Learning and its relationship to theory, it is important to be conscious of the general rule I expressed in the findings, which is "as the student, so the teacher." Any experience or activity the students are having is also relevant to the teachers' learning experiences.

Connection: Creating the Conditions for Spiritual Learning With a Participatory Foundation

In the lived experience of the teachers in this study, creating a classroom culture of relational connection is central to their teaching and learning. In the interviews, teachers who practice spiritual pedagogy provided descriptions of the activities they do and the attitudes they embody that create empathic understanding, unconditional love, and a sense of deep respect among co-learners.

For example, Albert and Rebecca described the group "centerings" they engage in with their students daily. Rose described the dialogue circles, during which she and her fifth graders

> enter into a form of connectedness that isn't reliant upon words anymore. It has nothing to do with the 'I,' the individual. We suddenly are sharing in an understanding, a warmth. I would go so far as to say love, an unconditional love, or the unconditional love that allows for our souls to connect. (Rose)

Rereading this excerpt from Chapter V, I am struck by how beautifully Rose described *feeling* and *experiential knowing*, as Heron (1992) termed it. This is "experience" as a verb, such as Yorks and Kasl (2002) defined experiential learning – empathic learning that is felt.

Heron (1992) described this type of inter-personal group experience as

"entrainment," also known

> as mutual phase-locking, in which people share rhythms, vibrate in harmony. When two persons are having a good conversation their brain waves will suddenly oscillate in unison. The same occurs between a lecturer and his or her students… they move along together in a state of continuous simultaneous resonance. (p. 100)

Albert talked about the feeling that comes over the class when they sing together,

how singing is both an internal and an external shared felt experience, where each person

is uniquely himself or herself while also in entrainment with the group:

> There's only two things going on. We're like, either expressing out or we're listening. I found that when you're singing with a group of people…both of that is going on at the same time, you know? You're listening to the group *and* you're adding at the same time, simultaneously. So it's kind of a magical thing for me. (Albert)

This type of experience builds an empathic resonance between and among the

students and teacher. As Rose added, "it informs and permeates the environment for the

rest of the day as well. And it forms a kind of bond...." This statement described why

creating a foundation based on the participatory functions is so important. Love

permeates, creating the conditions for whole-person learning. These are classrooms

where the "I" becomes "we" (Tisdell, 2012, p. 31). These are classrooms where the

teachers and students are learning-within-relationship, which Yorks and Kasl (2002)

described as "a process in which persons strive to become engaged with both their own

whole-person knowing and the whole-person knowing of their fellow learners" (p. 185).

These are classrooms where every person is consciously connected to one another to the

degree that "It is as if we suddenly become one mind," as Rose continued to say.

According to Heron's theory of personhood, it is exactly this deep experience of felt unity humans require in order to be liberated from an egoic cycle and to learn fully.

Connection establishes the spiritual classroom within the participatory realm – something that is incredibly unique within American classrooms – something that explains why these classrooms and the learning that takes place in them is so different from conventional education. What these teachers are doing that is so unusual is grounding *all* learning in the participatory mode.

Heron's theory is that one has to focus on the participatory in order to experience ways of learning that build a whole, integrated, person. Thus, just as *feeling* is the bottom of the up-hierarchy, *Connection* is the foundation of The Path of Spiritual Learning. Once a field of connection is established, whole person learning on The Path of Spiritual Learning can proceed.

Aliveness: Developing a Wider Foundation of Feeling and Developing Expressive Knowing

Many adult learning theories talk about the importance of establishing emotional safety and other positive conditions among learners, sometimes called a "holding environment" (Drago-Severson, 2004). Creating a holding environment is important, but within these adult learning theories, something akin to "aliveness" is often left out, as if once emotional safety is established, the learner is ready to dive into highly conceptual work.

Aliveness, as described by these teachers, literally brings learning alive. Similar to the theme of Connection, it emphasizes the participatory functioning modes of Heron's model. Of the eight subthemes under Aliveness, the first ones listed in Chapter VI, such

as "Awakening the Senses," "Oneness," and "Interconnectivity with the Natural World," involve experiential knowing – deepening and widening a sense of felt union with life.

While Connection was about establishing a learning culture of person-to-person, I-thou relationality with and among fellow learners, Aliveness goes further and establishes a connection with all of life and all of time. It is the domain of transcendent knowing, where children are viewed as timeless beings with infinite entelechical potential. Rebecca referred to it as "the seed-planting phase." Aliveness also includes immanent knowing, where students and teachers remember their indigenous selves. As Jasilyn Charger, a Cheyenne youth, expressed, "We are all indigenous to this planet. We are all related" (Sanchez, 2017, p. 205).

In Chapter VI, we heard teachers describe activities and experiences where children awakened their senses by beholding natural objects, or bonding with a special tree. We heard about teachers crying out to the "greater reality," or force, of which they express being both a part of and in awe of its greatness. Maya spoke of her belief that each human has a true nature that is both unique and in union with all of life. Aliveness is *felt* oneness.

Heron (1992) believed that rational language alienates humans from one another and fragments our psyches. When teachers emphasize aliveness in their classrooms, they are building connection through non-rational ways of knowing, both experiential knowing and presentational knowing – the bottom rungs of Heron's up-hierarchy.

The theme of Aliveness emphasizes presentational knowledge, also called expressive knowledge. Teachers spoke about learning to be in touch with and trust their "inner guide" and their intuition. They talked about how language cannot possibly

capture their learning, and only experience, often through movement and the arts, helps to bring an experience alive. They talked passionately about the importance of imagination. Charles and Edmond, in particular, talked about how imaginative story telling is a powerful agent for helping "fragmented" children bring coherence to life. As Charles said, "It's really through the imagination that we make sense of our lives; we can dream, and new ideas emerge."

In *Feeling and Personhood*, Heron (1992) provided many suggested activities for readers to use for building capacities in the various modes and forms of knowledge. Heron talked about breathing as one tool to reclaim the "imaginal power in perception." He talked about breathing being both voluntary and involuntary – we can control it (p. 146), and he offered many breathing exercises as opportunities for engaging with life force. Similarly, all the teachers in this study referenced the use of breathing as a technique for spiritual learning. For example, Albert, in his description of centering, explained to his children how important breathing is as something that just magically happens on its own, yet they can also control it, *and* they can breathe *together*, creating a group empathic rhythmic field, or "harmony," as Albert described it. A rhythmic field is forever in motion, and aliveness brings learners into the flow of the constantly shifting pattern of life.

Yorks and Kasl (2002, 2006) considered the expressive way of knowing critical as a bridge between pure experience, or feeling, and conceptual learning and communication. The images and expressions of presentational knowing, according to Heron's theory, must be brought out of our archetypal unconscious psyche before

engaging the rational mind if the person is to become whole. Expressive learning brings

thinking to life.

For these teachers, especially the ones working with young children, when they

bond with their students, they gain a window into the imaginary world of children, which

I can only guess enhances their own imaginative powers. Rudolf Steiner, in designing

Waldorf Schools, was greatly influenced by Goethe with regard to the importance for

teachers to develop rich mental images and a strong

> imaginative faculty, which as it were mirrors the context in which one lives. This
> ability involves an engagement with one's feeling and one's thinking, so that what
> is felt becomes conscious, while what is thought becomes infused with feeling. In
> this way, thinking becomes alive, and active and flowing. (Oberski & McNally,
> 2006, p. 942)

This is an excellent, Heron-like description of why aliveness and expressive learning

need to be cultivated before emphasizing the conceptual mind.

Mindfulness: Building Presence With Skillful Practice

Mindfulness, perhaps more than the other steps on The Path, is a skill – a skill that

needs to be honed with intentional practice. Mindfulness builds the capacities necessary

to ensure the learner will be able to carry out conceptual and practical learning (the upper

modes of the psyche) with a *mind* that can maintain a participatory presence. More

simply said, in non-theoretical language, mindfulness is a method for helping a person

maintain a graceful, loving heart when she thinks and when she acts, so she thinks and

acts with grace, good intentions, and clarity.

It is not surprising that all of the participating teachers spoke about the importance

of having a personal mindfulness or meditation practice in their lives. They spoke about

how mindfulness helps them to be less reactive and more loving with the children, and

they spoke about the importance of being completely present in each moment.

> I think spiritual pedagogy, a lot of it is about an inner stillness and mindfulness
> so that you're not always just plowing ahead with your agenda, but you have the
> inner strength or inner capacity to just listen and be present in the moment…then
> you're able to see more clearly what is needed in any given situation….and I feel
> like the best tools to develop that capacity are spiritual practices. (Rebecca, from
> Chapter VI)

After engaging with Heron's theory, I now understand how important

mindfulness, especially the non-judgmental aspect of mindfulness, must be for

overcoming the subject-object split Heron talked about. Rose, for example, told a story of

asking her students to truly taste a food without any partiality toward it, and how difficult

such a simple activity can be. Humans are so accustomed to assuming that our opinions

about things (chocolate is yummy) are real. Mindfulness helps one truly see from an

objective perspective, beyond mental frameworks. Patrick also talked about how our

thoughts and judgments "aren't necessarily solid or real," and how important his

meditation practice is to listening with non-judgment:

> Not being judgmental about what the person is saying or what the person's not
> saying, not being judgmental about what you're doing or what you're not doing,
> you know, and just let that non-judgmental space of love be the environment in
> which whatever is gonna unfold, unfolds, you know. And then maybe try to shape
> it a little bit, you know, but intuitively. (Patrick, from Chapter VI)

By learning to "see" non-judgmentally, teachers and students can better use their

expressive knowing to shift perspectives and comprehend the whole gesture of a person,

an object, or a situation, instead of merely seeing the world in material parts (Heron,

1992). Teachers who maintain an ability to "see the whole" are then able to literally and

figuratively "keep the big picture in mind" when working with children, which builds

patience. Furthermore, before engaging in the conceptual modalities, which breaks the

world apart into pieces, it is critical to be able to maintain the integrity of the whole at the same time.

The teachers spoke about truly seeing and listening to their students. Maya called it the "art of witnessing," where she would just "sink into the presence and really feel where they are, kind of, energetically." Maya, in particular, who works with emotionally troubled children, explained that the recognition mindful teachers provide to students helps the students (and the teacher) to heal (Fleming, 2014). In order to truly see another person, if Heron's theory is credible, the teachers have to be engaging in the participatory functions because to see another, they also have to see themselves *and* the whole of which they are a part. If this is accurate, then the mindful skill of seeing helps alleviate the illusion of separateness and reminds teachers of their connection to their students – the oneness they share.

Finally, mindfulness, and specifically meditation, generally involves "watching" or noticing one's thoughts. This too seems to be an important skill to build before the next step on The Path, which is Openness. To watch one's thoughts requires noticing and accepting one's psyche, including one's unconscious mind, motivations, assumptions. With mindfulness mastered, openness is more possible.

Openness: Developing an Open Ego

The theme of Openness encompasses a flexibility in thinking and behaving – an ability to accept life's circumstances and access one's creativity to think and behave in attunement with a given situation.

Considering Heron's theory, when a person is accessing the knowledge and skills in the upper modes of the up-hierarchy, her "developmental challenge" is to also be in congruence with the lower functions of the up-hierarchy – affect and imaging (feeling and intuition in the participatory modes) – in what Heron and Reason (1997) called "critical subjectivity."

Openness requires remembering the aliveness we are all a part of – the living, breathing, always-in-motion life force. To be in congruence with that force, one has to be in touch with "that flow," as Rebecca called it. Heron called it a fluid process. Charles talked about having a "living curriculum," instead of rigidly teaching according to a book.

The teachers also told stories about struggles and failures as teachers, and how openness and reflection helped them learn through the pain of those experiences. Teaching is a high-stress and emotional job that daily presents "disorienting dilemmas," such as the first step in Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Patrick, for example, told a story about receiving a crushing negative review from a student, and how he had to reconcile his defensive egoic reaction with his higher self. These spiritual teachers explained how they are able to examine their lives and self-reflect on their mistakes, something they have to do without too much defensiveness, or else they would not be able to model the equanimity and compassion they hope to teach their students to have.

Openness is only possible with what Heron called an open ego. Developmentally, when a person starts to gain a footing as a creative or self-creating person, as Heron called the first states of personhood, she still has moments of compulsion, for example,

but she is able to enter into dialogue and critical thinking around her compulsion and consciously make changes.

On a spiritual level, the teacher is doing something far more than being rational. She is exercising faith – a willingness and ability to "let go," or surrender," and be carried by a force greater than herself. Again, this would not be possible without developing the ways of knowing on the lower levels of Heron's up-hierarchy, such as presentational knowing, where the teacher is open to the flow of images in her psyche and, therefore, creative possibilities. Heron (1992) said a creative person can literally think her way out of a subject-object split dilemma and therefore beyond egoic living.

On a slightly larger level, some of the teachers talked about shedding societal conditioning. At this advanced place on The Path of Spiritual Learning, the students' and the teachers' experiences are at very different levels from one another than on the earlier parts of the path, for most children are not ready to question their cultural upbringing or their identity too much, whereas the adult teachers are. However, the teachers talked about their spiritual pedagogy laying the foundation and preparing students to

> find themselves in a situation where they are sort of confronted with themselves, and they'll be able to reflect on some experience that they've had and realize that they have choices. You know, that they're actually...they're empowered to do what they think is right, or they're empowered to step out of what might be called conventional point of view. (Patrick, from Chapter VI)

Patrick was talking about building the capacity of openness in his students, so they will have the capacity to develop their spiritual learning when they are developmentally ready.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the teachers in this study displayed the qualities of creative, self-creating, and self-transfiguring persons on Heron's

developmental model. The reflective qualities of openness have helped them to examine their lives, and to bring into coherence many ways of knowing. Next, the last theme of The Path of Spiritual Learning, Authenticity, truly brings wholeness to the holistic learning experience.

Authenticity: Being and Becoming a Person as the Culmination of the Path

Authenticity is not an esoteric word. One might have imagined a more mystical sounding concept as the culmination of The Path of Spiritual Learning. Remember, however, that the core question I asked each of the teachers in this study was to describe a spiritual moment(s) with students. Their responses were not full of esoterica or magic. The teachers talked of drawing trees, singing together, being in nature, learning to communicate, telling stories, conducting dialogues, and more. They also talked of sitting in circles, meditating, or conducting simple rituals; but even these slightly more "spiritual sounding" activities, while perhaps not typical in conventional schools, are not occultist. These teachers are practical people working hard to accomplish the practical task of educating children.

As Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) pointed out, educators don't need to "directly discuss spirituality" (p. 32) to be using spiritual pedagogy. They just need to create the fertile environment for spiritual development (for both their students and, as this research has demonstrated, for themselves). Recall Maya talking about how spiritual pedagogy turns content on its head. It is not about *teaching* spirituality, but providing the right conditions. These teachers certainly are not trying to impart any particular religion or belief to students. They simply want their students to learn to function within the world as

their highest selves. To do that, the teachers need to be their highest selves. Teaching with spiritual pedagogy is more about who the teacher *is* than what she *does*.

Authenticity relates to practical knowledge; so it is the culmination of The Path and is akin to the full integration of the ways of knowing and the modes of Heron's up-hierarchy. It is the place where the teacher brings into coherence all she is, all she has learned, and offers it to the world as the practical art of teaching.

The Intersection of Spirituality, Authenticity, and Transformation

Elizabeth Tisdell and Patricia Cranton have written beautifully about the intersection of spirituality, authenticity, and transformation. They both engaged in grounded theory research with postsecondary educators and/or activists as their participants. Neither of them mentioned John Heron as far as I know, but they were both influenced by Carl Jung, whose ideas have some similarities with Heron's theories. Even though Tisdell's and Cranton's participants were in higher education rather than K-12, they both ended up with findings and conclusions almost synonymous with my findings on authenticity in this dissertation.

Below, I discuss briefly each of the subthemes from my findings on authenticity. I make some comparisons with Tisdell's and Cranton's findings with Heron's theory of personhood, and I look at how my phenomenological findings of the experience of K-12 educators might enrich Tisdell's and Cranton's theories. Finally, transformative learning theory is considered through a more holistic, spiritual lens.

Distinctness and Unity

Based on the findings of this study, my definition for authenticity is "*a combination of expressing one's unique individual creativity and one's universal true nature.*"

The definition of authenticity that Cranton and Carusetta (2004) used is "*Knowing who you are as separate from (and the same as) the collective of humanity*" (p. 6). Cranton and Carusetta were essentially equating Jung's concept of individuation with the process of authenticity (Dirkx, 2000).

Both of these definitions of authenticity capture what I now consider to be the core concept of spiritual learning – what Heron called the One-Many. Heron (1992) referred to the "One" as transcendence and the "Many" as immanence. In *Spiritual Science* (1998), he referred to the whole concept as "di-polar spirituality."

Di-polar spirituality is essentially based on the aspects of Aliveness, which portray the interconnectedness of all life. Interconnectedness is something Tisdell (2012) also talked about: Everything is connected. The teachers in their interviews described a sense of oneness. They talked of knowing their true nature, original self, or essential self. Some of them also talked of knowing God. Albert, for example, talked about seeing God in everything and everyone.

If everything is connected like one giant organism, then everything *is* one. Everything is a part of a powerful living force that permeates all of life – the One, the transcendent consciousness that is greater than any individual. Yet, the "distinctness," as Heron (1992) called it, of each soul persists: "…within the One there are Many. Distinctness of being is thus quite other than separateness of being" (p. 68). Heron used

the phrase "distinctness-in-union." When we express our distinctness while being in harmony with the oneness, we are authentic. Authenticity is divine. The "Divine" is a term Heron used that encompasses the dialectal resolution of the One and the Many. Some might call it God.

What is more is that the Divine, as a force that is alive, is always in motion. As each of us as individual people are self-creating, and each of us is part of the Divine, then the Divine is constantly creating us…and we are creating the Divine. As Albert said in Chapter VI:

> We're part of that oneness, that one consciousness. We're a conscious part of that. So, with my consciousness, my thoughts affect the greater consciousness of what's going on, and I can affect what's going on in my life with my thoughts and how I approach things. (Albert)

So the Divine is a creative force we are a part of that is always in motion. What are we moving toward? Heron would probably say "entelechy" – a return to the original self and toward our greatest potential. Tisdell would say authenticity.

Healing and Recognizing Wholeness Are Aspects of Uncovering Authenticity

Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) expressed seven assumptions about the nature of spirituality in education. One of them said, "*Spirituality is about an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things…*" (p. xi).

If everything is interconnected, then we express our authenticity when we honor that interconnectedness through recognizing our own wholeness. I originally worded this subtheme as "Healing and *Becoming* Whole" rather than "Healing and *Recognizing* Wholeness," and the participating teachers in the focus group emphatically explained that wholeness is not something we become; it is something we recognize. As Albert was

quoted in Chapter VI, "We are all whole and complete. We have everything we need, but we don't always remember."

Yes, we forget. We forget that if we are interconnected, then when we hurt another living thing, we are hurting ourselves. We forget that when we deny ourselves love, we deny the world love. We forget our shared humanity.

The parts and pieces of us are nothing without the life that spirit breathes into us. We can medically explain all the parts and pieces of our bodies, for example, but there is still no explanation for the breath, the ether, that makes us upright, moving, and conscious. There is no explanation for it, yet we are whole. It is the wholeness that brings life.

It is also the wholeness that brings healing. In Chapter II, I pointed out that healing, wholeness, and holy have the same root word – something Tisdell (2002) also pointed out (p. 48). Without recognizing our own wholeness, it would be impossible to recognize our interconnectedness with all of life, because each of us is a microcosm of all of life, of the One. So to heal thyself is to be whole. Recognizing our wholeness can only be done by recognizing ourselves. As Socrates advised, "Know thyself" (Scott, 2007).

Cranton (2006) and Tisdell (2003) recognized that a spiritual path is a path of self-awareness. Spiritual learning requires knowing how one is thinking and acting in relation to one's values and beliefs. To do so requires healing, or uncovering unexamined assumptions, compulsions, and unconscious neurosis – the process of moving toward authenticity.

Spirituality and the experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy all come back around, *again*, to the self. Authenticity is a return to the source of life. Know thyself. Know others. Know life.

Building Authenticity Is a Developmental Process
That Integrates All Aspects of The Path of Spiritual Learning

Spirit is alive. It moves.
Spirit is life. Life is constantly in motion.
We are life. We constantly change.

From Tisdell's (2003) seven assumptions about the nature of spirituality in education, *"Spiritual development constitutes moving toward greater authenticity or to a more authentic self"* (p. xi).

Authenticity is a process, something we are always "moving toward." For the spiritual seeker, it is a continual quest for God. As Patrick said in Chapter VII, "That work's not over, you know? It just continues; it just keeps getting deeper." Again, life is always in motion. We learned through the teachers' humbling stories in the Openness section that the moment we think we have arrived, life will provide a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991).

The kind of movement to which Tisdell and the teachers in this study referred is not random. It is developmental. In Chapter VII, I provided examples of how the steps on The Path of Spiritual Learning build upon one another in "moving toward" authenticity. Heron's up-hierarchy similarly provided a theory about how one moves toward authenticity, or toward personhood.

Heron's developmental states could be seen as movement toward the Divine. As the teacher integrates the individuating and the participatory functions of her personality,

she is bringing the One-Many together. The teacher is discovering her distinctness-in-unity. Looking at Figure 21, this integration is across the poles of Heron's up-hierarchy – the horizontal arrow. Heron also talked about "coherence" among the modes, or "critical subjectivity" (Heron & Reason, 1997), represented as the vertical arrow in Figure 21.

Figure 21. Integration between the individuating and participatory poles and coherence among modes

Authenticity, in relation to Heron's model, could be thought of as a combination of the coherence of critical subjectivity *and* the integration of the individuating and participating modes. Coherence and integration work together. Movement toward

coherence helps bring movement toward integration, and movement toward integration helps bring movement toward coherence.

This representation of authenticity ends up becoming yet another reflection of the One-Many. The transcendent function represented by the vertical line connects with the immanent function represented by the horizontal line. The individual connects with the participatory, and the participatory connects with the individual.

Authenticity Is a Gateway to Inner Freedom

An old adage repeated by various religious scriptures, mystics, and popular culture self-help authors essentially says that love and fear cannot exist together. Fear $\neq$ Love.

Love, in its deepest spiritual meaning, is pure bliss, being in union with all of life. It is the ground of all life and the exaltation of transcendence. Heron (1992) also said love is the most basic human need. Unfortunately, the many "tensions of the human condition" (p. 78), such as our physical needs, can create an illusion of separation. We "forget" about our interconnectedness with life, and we think we need to protect our separate self in order to survive. This is the separate ego – our identity as a separate self, and we lose our interconnection with the whole. In our effort to gain love, our fear denies it.

Authenticity is in alignment with love. At its fullest, authenticity is beyond egoic fear because when we heal and remember our wholeness, we become "free of compulsions of the past" (p. 71).

While this particular aspect of Authenticity is about "inner freedom," it is about much more than the individual. Mezirow (2000), Friere (1970), and Cranton (2006) all

referred to "emancipatory knowledge," a concept Mezirow adapted from Habermas (Finlayson, 2005; Marsick, & Finger, 1987). Cranton (2006) talked about emancipatory knowledge as that which "frees us from personal and social constraints and leads to awareness and development" (p. 18). The personal and social become, again, two sides of a coin. Harken back to Dirkx's definition of authenticity: "*Knowing who you are as separate from (and the same as) the collective of humanity.*" This is a long process of authenticity that requires both internal work and critical reflection about one's society, culture, and conventions. Cranton (2006) talked about viewing society and self *in context*, thus in relation to one another. Tisdell (2003) focused on the importance of one's culture in spiritual development. When we learn to critically examine our culture, we can better appreciate it and contribute to it. Freire (1970), in particular, spoke about the courage emancipatory work requires (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). Love and fear do not exist together.

The concepts and stories of freedom and liberation I heard from the K-12 teachers were enriching. Their authentic freedom allowed them to experience joy when teaching. Maya, from Chapter VII, shared:

> It makes teaching sustainable because I can bring my whole self to the table and I can be vulnerable. So I'm just, I'm with them in that I benefit from not having to have the teacher face, and it's just a joy. It's a joy! And it's a positive feedback, with the safer I feel, the more I can be myself, the more they can be themselves, the more trust. You know, it just grows from that.
>
> But I'm human, and if it's an unsafe space, then I get that I have to put on my teacher face, and tuck myself in, and then it's tiring. It's tiring because you're constantly deciding, "What do I share, what do I not share? How do I...?" I don't know. You're guarded. It's exhausting. So being guarded is exhausting. (Maya)

Teachers have to make many split-second decisions – probably hundreds a day – where they need to act instantaneously, without time to think. So trusting themselves to

act with integrity is incredibly freeing. Schön (1983) referred to this as reflection-in-action, something only highly developed individuals are capable of doing. Charles talked about listening to his "inner guide" and learning to trust it. Recall Charles's story of when he dropped to one knee to show appreciation for each child. That was something that would seem completely bizarre in almost any other circumstance and with most any other person, but he was able to do it out of spontaneous intuition, trusting his spiritual freedom to do so.

Thinking about Heron's lexicon, there is a difference between being "impulsive," which is a spontaneous move, and being "compulsive," which is an action that results from unhealed, un-integrated, unconscious ego. When freed from compulsion and unexamined societal conditioning, teachers can freely work with children without constraints. This freedom does not mean they are not conscientious of the rules and conditions of their context, nor does it mean they are "perfect." It means they can intuitively and consciously act with authenticity.

Once the person knows how to behave with authenticity, she has been transformed, "rewired," "enlightened," to always include parts and whole, to integrate the individuating and participative, to see and be the uniqueness within a felt unity. She is co-creating with spirit and acting on behalf of spirit. She is acting on behalf of love. She is free.

The Path to Authenticity Is a Transformational Journey That Is Ever-Unfolding

> I have since come to view becoming authentic
> as a transformative process for educators.
> ~Cranton (2006, p. 181)

In the findings in Chapters V through VIII, teachers told stories that echoed the steps of Mezirow's transformative learning theory in many ways. As some examples, Rose talked about taking her students across a metaphorical bridge and helping them to reflect critically on themselves and their society. Patrick talked about how once experiencing something, one is changed forever and one cannot un-experience it. Charles described how alone it can feel on the path to becoming authentic. Maya compared her development to that of excavating with dynamite sometimes!

However, considering the intersection of transformative learning in relation to the holistic transformation of Heron's theory of personhood and The Path of Spiritual Learning, the transformation of these teachers seemed to go much deeper and begin much earlier than the constructivist epistemological process that Mezirow described. In Mezirow's model, the "disorienting dilemma" is the first step. In comparison, the first steps on The Path – Connection and Aliveness, and the first participatory levels of Heron's up-hierarchy – feeling and intuition, are necessary *preparation* for dealing with disorienting dilemmas in a spiritual manner that moves a person toward authenticity.

So much preparation may sound elementary, or even tiresome, but Heron argued that without the preparatory work of integrating our participatory psyche with the individual, learning ends up in a cycle of egoic life, engulfed in the subject-object split. Palmer (2008) called it "the work before the work" (p. 103). When teaching with spiritual pedagogy, it is important to remember that who the teacher is is even more important than what the teacher does. Teachers need to be constantly learning and moving toward being authentic, whole people. The "work before the work" *is* the work! I return to the refrain of spiritual pedagogy as learning that allows us to meet life.

Finally, another contrast with Mezirow's theory that I highlight here is the concept that has come back around over and over in this synthesis, which is that of spiritual transformation simply being a return to the original self. In Chapter VII, Edmond called spiritual learning a "cyclical experience" and a process of "constantly becoming."

I began this section on Authenticity and transformation with a quote from Patricia Cranton (2006), and her wisdom also concludes it: When "conscious development replaces unconscious behavior [the process of transformative learning is becoming] more fully the person you were always meant to be" (p. 197).

Meaning and Purpose

Meaning and Purpose is a little different from the other themes on The Path of Spiritual Learning, which is why it is set apart from the other steps as more of a frame. It is the beginning and the end.

As talked about in Chapter VIII, teaching is inherently meaningful work. However, the meaning a teacher associates with her work is not static. As a teacher transforms, her perspectives on the purpose of teaching may also change – something Mezirow (1991) called a premise change. Some of the teachers in this study talked about their purpose for teaching evolving from being about enhancing academic learning to about helping children to develop spiritually and recognize their highest selves. Edmond, for example, talked how important he views spiritual pedagogy as helping children to become more morally mature.

Thinking about the life stories of the teachers in this study, they all were intentionally on a spiritual path before they were teachers (or in addition to their teaching). One could say their "mental set" was slanted toward spirituality. Whether they would have experienced advanced spiritual development without that mental set is conjecture. But it is interesting that Heron titled the top of the up-hierarchy "intention" on the participatory pole, as if intention matters more than the action itself. As I learned from probing and questioning the hermeneutics of the participating teachers, the intention behind the action reveals the richness of the spiritual life of these teachers.

These teachers *chose* transformation rather than being surprised by it. They were not experiencing a role change as a disorienting dilemma, nor did they have to lose their belonging in a culture or group upon experiencing transformative learning. None of them, except for maybe Maya, talked of any giant disorienting dilemmas that precipitated their quest for spiritual growth. Their transformative learning seemed to be what Mezirow (2000) identified as incremental rather than epochal transformation (Cranton, 2006).

Tisdell (2012) called for a transformation of consciousness, which she said grows out of a "cultivation of daily attempts at living deeply" (p. 31). Meaning and purpose are embedded in the loving work these teachers perform. These teachers are making intentional daily attempts at living deeply. Day by day, they are transforming consciousness.

The Uniqueness of the K-12 Teacher Experience

This marks the end of comparing The Path of Spiritual Learning from my findings with Heron's up-hierarchy and Tisdell's and Cranton's adult education theories on

authenticity. At this junction, I think it is important to point out that Tisdell and Cranton, when talking about educators being and becoming authentic, were referring to educators of adults, whereas the participants in this study were all K-12 teachers. They have the challenge and the delight of working with children – some of them young children – which provides a unique look at how teachers can learn and develop spiritually.

More than one of the elementary teachers in this study quoted biblical scripture about "becoming like a child" to enter the "kingdom of heaven." Rose talked about the deep respect she has for children and the remarkable wisdom they possess when they are given a safe space to express their natural connection to spirit, their natural spiritual gifts, or as Heron (1992) would say, their natural "felt unity" (p. 42). Albert said that one of the advantages of working with children that helps him with his own spiritual growth is focusing on basic wisdom and universal truths. He even made a reference to the book *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (Fulghum, 1998). Children portray and relate to honest, simple truths.

Therefore, I think that working with children might give these teachers a special opportunity to engage with deep authenticity in each moment. Children are naturally more genuine, less constricted by the constraints of society. Aostre Johnson (1998), author of *Education for the Heart* and a founder of Rainbow Community School, said she has "profound respect for their [children's] ways of knowing…their enormous capacity to imagine, to wonder, to believe, to hope, to trust, and to enter wholly into the experience of living" (p. 8). She added, "That's the way they are – and they bring out the hidden part in me that is still that way" (p. 8).

Patrick made it clear that the only way one can truly teach children is to deeply connect with them. When a teacher and her students reach a state of entrainment – where they are so in attuned with one another that their mind and bodies are in the same rhythms – they can act creatively, reverently, goofily, vulnerably, mysteriously, and so on, in ways that a group of adults may never engage or behave. If lucky, adults may get a weekend retreat once in a while to engage with deep, genuine authenticity, or perhaps a weekly religious or spiritual group, or a few peak experiences, but these teachers and students are together *every day*. They are living fully! *This* is the lived experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy.

Thinking about that, I get a sense of how huge the opportunity to be authentic with children is when a teacher is provided the rare educational context where teaching with spiritual pedagogy is accepted. As Patrick said, teaching as a spiritual path is such a profound opportunity that it is "almost like cheating."

Heron hypothesized, I would say even dreamed, about a society where children are raised and educated in such a manner where the subject-object split is not forced upon them, where even learning language can be done in such a way that children can transcend the limits of linguistics, so their natural felt unity with spirit could remain intact. Heron acknowledged that if children could experience an education free of indoctrination, they might have a different path of development – one where they would not have to overcome wounding. This would be a remarkable world indeed. I think this is the world the teachers in this study try to create within their classrooms.

A Participatory Perspective on Transformative Learning Theory

> What you are the world is, and without your transformation,
> there can be no transformation for the world.
> ~Krishnamurti (from Rose's personal writings, p. 5)

This final synthesis section is about the evolution of transformative learning theory in relation to spiritual learning. In Chapter IX, I provided a brief review of transformative learning theory and its 40-year history. I mentioned that Mezirow's theory has been criticized as being overly cognitive and too focused on the individual, and both of these criticisms are discussed in this synthesis. As alternative theories added to the discourse and evolved over the years, the concept of transformation became more holistic. However, perhaps it would be more appropriate to consider a new theory. Perhaps we should look at transformative learning with a new perspective – a transformation of transformative learning theory.

This section makes the case that a new theory of transformation has been emerging, and it may be enough of a paradigm shift from Mezirow's theory that it should stand on its own or subsume his theory.

Even in Mezirow's (2012) later years, when he was open to integrating more holistic aspects of the human into transformative learning theory, he kept cognition as central to transformative learning theory. For example, he talked about the importance of having emotional maturity in order to engage in the kind of discourse necessary to facilitate transformative learning, but he did not seem to acknowledge that becoming emotionally mature could be a transformation in itself, or that affect may be driving transformation more than cognition (p. 79).

Remember that ultimately transformative learning is about changing *behavior.* The final steps in Mezirow's theory are about taking on "a new role," so it is not just about thinking, but the results of that thinking. Cognition (or discrimination, as Heron named it) and action are at the top of Heron's up-hierarchy on the individualizing side. Note that the top in an up-hierarchy does not mean the best or most important, but it is the "consummation" of the whole up-hierarchy…*if* the bottom rungs and the participatory aspects of the psyche have been brought into coherence and integration with one's whole being.

However, Mezirow's theory does not account for how a person could develop the capacity to integrate her whole being. Looking at transformative learning theory through the lens of Heron's theory of personhood, it seems as if the individual experiencing Mezirow's conception of transformation may merely experience transformative learning in the egoic realms. The experience of the teachers in this study seemed much deeper, more complex – more whole – than transformative learning theory can fully capture. The findings in this dissertation indicated that the lived experience of the teachers in this study resembles transformative learning, but a holistic, integrated version of transformative learning.

Yorks and Kasl (2002) talked about a phenomenological perspective on transformative learning theory that includes the whole person. Heron and Reason (1997) talked about a participatory learning that reaches into a more evolved epistemology and ontology than Mezirow's theory. This section makes the case that transformative learning with a whole-person, participatory perspective is perhaps a whole different theory.

The Significance of One/Many in Adult Education and Human Development Perspectives – A Participatory Epistemology and Ontology

The One-Many aspect of Heron's theory is significant from a human development perspective when one thinks of the One-Many as the holonomic analogy to the human. Just as every cell of a human body has the coding of the whole body, each human has all of the codings of the One and of the Many. Bringing both the One and the Many into consciousness and integrating them is the key to living authentically as a person.

The One-Many means that *everything* is in relation, where nothing exists and nothing can be defined without the other. Heron (1992) said, "nowadays relationships should be used as a basis for all definitions" (p. 94). *I am because you are.* So without relational consciousness, Heron's theory of personhood would never get off the ground.

In Heron's model, as in Mezirow's, learning is constructed (i.e., Constructivism), because our learning is still based on our experience, but whole-person learning is so much more. Whole-person transformational learning is relational.

Furthermore, when transformative learning comes in the form of whole-person consciousness transformation, learning becomes an act of constant re-learning: a return to the source. The linear – the quest to reach the end – transforms into something circular. It loops back on itself, and like the mathematical formula for a circle, Pi, it is endless. Learning becomes life itself.

A Cosmic Transformative Theory

> From an embryo, whose nourishment comes in blood,
> Move to an infant drinking milk,
> To a child on solid food,
> To a searcher after wisdom,
> To a hunter of more invisible game.
> ~Rumi (Barks, 2006, p. 391)

Rudolf Steiner (2018), in some of his most prophetic expression, where he looked way back in time (*waaaay back*), said that the human spirit was spirit *and only spirit* in previous "incarnations." Through the course of eons, our spirit became "hardened" until it was made manifest, or became material.

I can see Heron's up-hierarchy in the participatory functions echoing our long incarnate spiritual development as described by Steiner's vision. First, as spirits, we were feeling, and feeling only. It is hard to imagine. No thought. No bodies. Then we developed imagination. Perhaps with imagination came desire – the emotion and motivation to become more. Then came thought, and our feelings materialized into names and categories. Finally, came physical materiality and the ability to act. In a cosmological sense, this would imply that humans, with our cognitive and physical abilities, are special compared to pure spirit. We are able to make manifest what spirit can only imagine.

Steiner's cosmology is extremely esoteric – certainly not something that can be proven with materialistic scientific methods – but it provides a new perspective on Heron's theories. It sheds light on why Heron's version of feeling is so difficult for humans to imagine. In fact, perhaps it is impossible to fully inhabit feeling because pure feeling can only exist without the confines of the human body. (This is why some people meditate – to achieve glimpses of the experience of pure, unfettered, spiritual *feeling*.) While Steiner provided his prophetic account of human spiritual evolution, Heron described it analogously on a human developmental level. Heron said that feeling begins in the mother's womb, a completely *felt* experience. The fetus and baby then gain capacity for "perceptual imagery," followed by language and concept mastery. Lastly, skills emerge that make effective action possible (Heron, 1992).

Seen from this perspective, if transformative learning is about the final "consummation" of thinking and acting, then Mezirow's theory merely captures the very tippy-top of transformation – the iceberg sticking out above the water.

Also, in light of the One-Many participatory epistemology and ontology, what is left out of Mezirow's theory is that the transformative change goes in more than one direction. When humans act and create change, they also change the One and they change the Many. Life is so interconnected from the participatory spiritual perspective that even a single person's thought transforms life itself. It is a cycle that goes round and round, always returning to the source. The teacher changes her students, and her students change the teacher. Our culture changes us, and we change our culture. Mind changes us, and we change mind. God changes us, and we change God.

From Transforming to Transmutation to Transpersonal to Transfiguring

Conceptualizing transformative learning within a participatory spiritual paradigm demonstrates that current arguments about the relative importance of individual or societal transformation are a false dichotomy. When we change ourselves, we change society and more. We change our culture. We change life. And life changes us in a continual reciprocal act. This does not mean we just focus on ourselves. When we truly feel attuned with all of life, we cannot possibly merely focus on our own selfish desires or perspectives. Inherently, participatory learning, according to Heron's model, is concern with others. Participatory learning fundamentally involves examining one's society in context to oneself. From Steiner (2002): "Self-knowledge is by no means the trivial sentimentality of which there is so much talk nowadays. Human self-knowledge is world-knowledge" (p. 35).

Heron used the word "transmutation" to describe the process of healing egoic wounds and individual trauma. In order to become whole, or develop, one needs to "transmute," which inherently involves being concerned with others and the greater being outside oneself. This is one reason why my friend and cohort member, Pamela Rosati Booth, who studies human development through orders of consciousness, called spirituality the "special sauce" of development – both because it is the elixir that helps a person rise above herself enough to see herself better, and also because such development does not happen without care for the other, the One and the Many.

"Transpersonal," as defined by Heron (1992), is "the personal change from one state to another, from the state of identifying with egoic separateness to the state of being free of that separateness" (p. 63). Simply stated, transpersonal is trans-egoic. This concept of the transpersonal matches the teachers' experience of authenticity in two ways. First, transpersonhood, like authenticity, is not something that we find but something we uncover; second, it is incredibly freeing. Heron went on to say, "In this sense 'transpersonal' means 'transfiguring.' Personhood is not left behind. On the contrary, it enters into its true estate, the heritage which has awaited it all along" (p. 63).

Self-transfiguring is therefore the name Heron gave for the state of a highly developed, trans-egoic person. He described transfiguring as such: "Selfish feeling becomes a feeling for others, compassion, and a feeling of identity with everything; sense perception and discrimination become inner vision and spiritual discernment…" (p. 188).

Perhaps "transfiguring learning theory" would be a better name for a participatory transformative learning theory. To demonstrate, Heron compared transfiguration to a Tibetan Buddhist concept he learned from the writings of Govinda that translated to

"foundation change," defined as a "transformation of our personality that comes about through the mystical path" (p 188). Transfiguring is a transformation that builds "a bridge from [ordinary experience] to timeless awareness" (p 188).

Summary and Conclusion

What is the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy? It is a path of spiritual learning. Tautologically, that answer brings up another question, "What is spiritual learning?" To a large degree, that is the question this chapter ended up trying to answer.

"Moving toward authenticity," a phrase coined by Tisdell (2003), captures the experience of the teachers in this study. Cranton and Carusetta's (2004) grounded theory on authenticity in education also aligns well with the experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy. However, neither Tisdell nor Cranton provided a full theory for how one develops toward and through authenticity. (Tisdell called her work a theory-in-progress, and Cranton and Carusetta were exploring through experimental grounded theory research.)

This chapter compared transformative learning theory to the spiritual learning of the teachers in this study, and found transformative learning theory is not full enough to capture their lived experience. Heron's theory of personhood, which could be viewed as a spiritualized, holistic, extension of transformative learning theory, seems to echo and shed light on the experience of teaching with spiritual pedagogy. However, Heron's theory, though sometimes discussed by scholars within the fold of transformative learning theory, seems extra-paradigmatic. I propose the possibility that a new ontology

of transformative learning theory akin to "transfiguring" would be inclusive of all these theories and possibly more appropriate. However, as expressed in Chapter I, spirituality is an elusive concept, which will continue to move, change, and disappear. No theory can completely capture it.

Finally, embedded within this chapter is a reflection on what a remarkable opportunity it is to practice spiritual pedagogy at the K-12 level. Children are closer to the felt unitive experience they were born with, and they have less social indoctrination than adults. Connecting deeply with the souls of children becomes a spiritual learning experience.

The conclusions of this chapter can be thus summarized as:

- Teachers of spiritual pedagogy are learning through an integrative developmental process I am calling The Path of Spiritual Learning that is framed by meaning and purpose, founded on connection, and moves toward authenticity.

- The ontology of teachers of spiritual pedagogy is a One-Many ontology, where they perceive themselves to be a part of a oneness of all life that is greater than themselves, yet they are also a unique part of it.

- The epistemology of teachers of spiritual pedagogy is so deeply relational and participatory that it includes co-learning and co-creating with the Divine.

- The learning of these teachers is akin to transformative learning, but the participatory, spiritual nature of their epistemology and ontology possibly warrants a new theory with a title that signals a paradigmatic difference, such as "transfigurative learning."

- Teaching with spiritual pedagogy is such an extra-ordinary spiritual learning

  opportunity that it can be considered a spiritual path of its own.

Researcher Reflection

Building a bridge from ordinary experience to timeless awareness.
~Heron (1992, p. 188)

Heron's phrase describes the journey I have been on throughout this dissertation. I have not only *crossed* a bridge into timeless awareness, I had to *build* it – I had to experience it myself. Interviewing the teachers in this study and spending the careful months of hermeneutically analyzing the "text" of their transcripts has been one of the most remarkable spiritual learning opportunities of my life.

As described in Chapter IV, I used my 3 weeks of vacation time last summer (2018) to seclude myself and deeply analyze and write about the findings from the 14 interviews with the teachers in this study. When asked how I could work so much and "didn't I need a vacation?" I would reply that there could be no better vacation. How many people ever have the privilege in their life to spend 3 weeks with sacred texts? The transcripts had indeed become sacred texts to me, and these teachers my gurus.

Meanwhile, throughout the many months of research, my practical life continued on (of course), and I found myself applying the sacred learning from my research into my own life. The research truly had become learning that meets life! Some of the quotes from these wise teachers had become like mantras to me. They were embedded in my consciousness, and I found myself reflecting on my own actions through their teachings. This happened to be a particularly challenging time in my life, and the lived experience of these teachers became words to live by – the living text of my life.

Now I understand aliveness. Learning that is alive is constantly in motion. I can now relate to the scientists who found that nothing is solid – particles are waves and waves are particles. Everything is in motion, and everything is in relation. I will never see life the same again. My whole world is shimmering.

Chapter XI

RECOMMENDATIONS, AND A FINAL REFLECTION

> Then research is a caring act…. And if our love is strong
> enough, we not only will learn much about life, we also will come
> face to face with its mystery.
> ~Van Manen (1990, p. 5, and from Chapter III)

When I learned about the phenomenological research method, I intuitively knew
it was the right methodology for this dissertation. I diligently committed myself to
conducting rigorous, or "strong," research, as Van Manen (1990) called it, in the "moral
and spirited sense" (p. 18) of the word rigor, while also being "'soulful,' 'subtle,' and
'sensitive'" (p. 18), as the rigorous human scientist should be.

As I revealed in Chapter I, I am passionate about education, and specifically
spiritual pedagogy. My commitment to the field and to conducting rigorous research
brought me face to face with my topic's mystery. This study has taken me geographically
and metaphorically to new places and back home again. I have approached this research
as a caring act, an act of love. Indeed, I have learned much about life.

Phenomenological research, at its core, is about studying the nature of being
human. As quoted in Chapter II, "A human being is not just something you automatically
are, it is also something you must try to *be*" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Just as a teacher
must be the best example of what a human is to her students and co-learners, the
phenomenological researcher tries to be the best example possible for her fellow

participants. Together, during the process of this research, I and the teachers involved in this study learned a little more about how to be a whole person.

With whole-person learning in mind, this final chapter provides recommendations for the field of education, recommendations for adult education, implications for further research, and a final reflection.

Recommendations for K-12 Education

One of my assumptions from Chapter I was that "I assume that spiritual pedagogy is a practice that is highly beneficial to enhancing education, and beneficial in creating an educational system that would help each child thrive." The research has confirmed that belief and more.

As a phenomenological study, this dissertation research was intended to reveal the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy. My intention was not to empirically prove its benefits, but my hope was that by making the practice of spiritual pedagogy better understood more educators might adopt it.

The teachers in this study are extra-ordinary teachers in extra-ordinary circumstances. Most of them are in private schools that understand the value of spiritual pedagogy and that have the freedom and faith to allow teachers to implement it. I recognize that some of these teachers' experiences may not seem possible in public schools, and some educators reading this document may think spiritual pedagogy is not applicable to their circumstances. Consider, however, that Van Manen (1990) addressed the importance of "strong and rigorous" phenomenological research having the "courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has

dedicated itself" (p. 18). Scholars and practitioners *need* to study that which is extra-ordinary…and in the case of this research, we have much to learn from studying the strength and courage of these extra-ordinary teachers. These teachers are eternal questioners. They question their own integrity, and they question society. They courageously question the meaning of education, and they show us that an authentic education is a path of liberation.

Emancipating Education With a Transformative Shift

My recommendation for the field of education is to bravely re-examine the purpose of education. Education was perhaps originally seen as an effort to "draw out" (literally the etymology of the word) what the human already possesses – to realize the entelechy of the person, seeded with potential (Heron, 1992). Unfortunately, in contrast, the *institution* of education, at least in American society, has become a system of limiting students' internal freedom and masking their essential self. It became an education of separateness, unintentionally luring children away from their natural felt unity, their indigenous selves, and "civilizing" them.

In Heron's (1992) language, it became an education of over-identifying with the individuating side of the psyche at the expense of the participative, his definition of egoic. The individual becomes trapped in the egoic cycle where life's pursuits become wrapped up in resolving the individual's emotions through material satisfaction, such as gathering possessions, gaining accomplishments and status, establishing physical comfort, and so on. Souls become lost, unable to connect or live deeply. Heron remarked, "the whole of traditional education, which further shapes the conventional self and

reinforces the compulsive self, is administered by those who are already well established in the [subject-object] split and who will present everything in terms of it" (p. 78)!

In contrast, *all* learners should have access to a learning environment that brings their *whole* person authentically into the room. Audrey Lingley (2016) is a critical theorist who argued that "spiritually responsive pedagogy" is necessary for a culturally conscious social justice education. In her article, *Democratic Foundations for Spiritually Responsive Pedagogy*, she used the work of Dewey, Noddings, Freire, hooks, and Thayer-Bacon to explain why spiritually responsive pedagogy is also culturally responsive and a "vital element" (p. 1) of emancipatory education. Lingley challenged the "supposed neutrality of spirituality's absence from conceptions of learning" (p. 7) as Eurocentric and as promoting alienation. She pointed out that particularly for children from collectivist cultural backgrounds, an education rooted in interconnectedness brings their whole selves into the center of the classroom, rather than the margins, and builds spiritual capacities such as compassion and resilience. She made the point that "oppressive political systems depend upon participants who are not aware of each other's essential humanity," and therefore an educational system that "suppresses compassion, wonder, tolerance for ambiguity, and a sense of interconnection" (p. 8) is hegemonic.

I am recommending a paradigm shift in K-12 education from the ontology of the Anglo-centric, positivistic ways of thought, which views people as separate individuals, to a relational ontology, which views people as interconnected with one another and all of life. To be clear, the concept of spirituality being "universal" does not mean everyone experiences spirituality the same way or sees it the same. Quite the opposite; it means that individuals and various cultures are free to embody their unique expressive nature,

while at the same time recognizing that my life is inherently connected to your life – both subtly and concretely. This paradigm change would mean evolving from an education that focuses on the achievement of the individual to one that focuses on the flourishing of all humans.

Heron (1992) credited Aristotle and the ancient Greeks with launching the Western model, which values rational intellect as the supreme asset of humanity – a model responsible for incredible strides in human achievement and control of nature. However, with the rise of reason also came an emphasis on the subject-object split, and a human condition of alienation responsible for the exploitation of other humans and the devastation of the natural world. "It is a model which has run its course, delivered its goods and is becoming transparent with its own inherent limitations" (p. 12).

Teaching is a powerful political act. It is important for us to realize that whatever ontology the teacher has, she will vicariously be sharing it with her students. If the teacher's reality is that humans are interconnected with all of life, where care for one another and care for the environment is care for ourselves, then students will cultivate their sense of relational connection. Likewise, if the teacher's reality is that every child is a sacred gift – a seed of unlimited potential in a world hope – then that will be the reality for each child.

Inherent in my recommendation that K-12 education evolve toward a relational, or participatory ontology, is the need for teacher education to also evolve. As stated in the synthesis, practicing spiritual pedagogy involves much more than learning a curriculum or perfecting instrumental practices. In order to embrace the wholeness of her students, the teacher must practice an epistemology of wholeness. She needs to be "moving

toward" authenticity (working on her own spiritual learning) in order to nurture the

wholeness of others. This means re-orienting teacher preparation toward teacher

epistemological and holistic development. I offer The Path of Spiritual Learning as one

model that would be relevant to helping teachers develop their whole selves and to

ground all of education within a field of relational connection.

Recommendations for K-12 School Leadership

For school leaders, I recommend listening to what the teachers in this study said

about the conditions they need and how they, as teachers, need to be supported in order

to teach with spiritual pedagogy. The teachers mostly said that they simply need

permission! They need permission to be authentic, and they need to be able to protect

sacred time and space in each day to practice secular spiritual pedagogy. Rose talked

about the difference between teaching at a school where spiritual pedagogy is a part of

the school and her previous job where it was not:

> There was definitely a different quality of relationship that arose from my first
> year of being here [at a spiritually supportive school]. When I look back at all the
> other years I taught in public school, and I saw then that it wasn't that in any way
> the love was lacking, but the space is not there, and was not there in the public
> school system for this [spiritual pedagogy] to have surfaced, or come to life.
> There was just far too much to do in a day, and far too much stress, and fear,
> and pressure needed to be done; and so that space, that space and that time, which
> we often feel is so [valuable], well, there's never quite enough of it. It didn't feel
> available there. But here [at a spiritually supportive school] it felt integral. It felt
> that if that's all I did, I would have done my service here. And if that's all I could
> have done all day, I certainly would have been better. (Rose)

Simply needing permission may sound simple, but it would require a major shift

in perspective for most schools today and most leaders. School leaders are under

remarkable pressure and stress to achieve according to the values of a competitive

paradigm that values production over contemplation, knowledge over wisdom, and efficiency over experience.

As a model for others in her organization, a leader has tremendous power to be a living example of paradigmatic change. Therefore, my primary recommendation for school leaders is to focus on their own spiritual development. I encourage each school leader to move toward authenticity. The Path of Spiritual Learning conceptualized in the findings offers a guide.

The Path is grounded in Connection. Every school leader has the opportunity to build relationships founded on interconnection, with the belief that every child – every human – is both a unique individual and part of a unified whole. Stories from school leaders in "The Mindful School Leader" (Brown & Olson, 2015) tell of overworked, oftentimes burned-out educational leaders who found mindfulness and reflection as tools for developing resiliency and strength in their own lives, and building the capacity for loving kindness, even in the midst of tremendous challenges. Just as the teachers in this study viewed teaching with spiritual pedagogy as a spiritual path, the leaders in Brown and Olson's book found leadership to be an invaluable opportunity for spiritual learning. By making space for their own spiritual lives, they had a greater capacity to be the leaders they envisioned.

Another recommendation for school leaders is to re-envision teacher professional development in three ways. First, ground teacher development in relational connection, because teachers need to connect with one another in meaningful ways. The various centering and circle activities described in the findings are excellent examples of how to build relational connection. Teachers learn best through experience. So they need to

experience the same secular spiritual activities they would offer to students to build connection. As the student, so the teacher.

Second, make the teachers' spiritual life and development central to their professional development. This study found that who the teacher is, is as important as what she does. Teachers need to be well in order to promote wellness for their students. As reported in the literature review, when teachers engage in mindfulness and other holistic practices, teachers find they can be more responsive to students (Flook et al., 2013; Frank et al., 2013; Hofman, 2012; Jennings, 2011; Lantieri, 2001; McCloskey, 2015; Palmer, 2001).

A third aspect of re-envisioning teacher development is to include opportunities for learning holistic pedagogical practices in teacher development trainings, and to offer teachers the empirical evidence behind such practices. Some important resources include The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (https://casel.org/), the forthcoming SEE (Social, Emotional, and Ethical) curriculum by The Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics (http://www.dalai lama.emory.edu/center/index.html), and Mindful Schools (https://www.mindfulschools. org).

Finally, I recommend that school leaders, especially those at the highest levels, restructure the educational model around a paradigm of wellness and connection, rather than economy of scale. Spiritually responsive school systems minimize bureaucracy and strengthen the sense of humanity. One litmus test is to ask "Does each child feel truly *known*?" This would require a reformation of systems, where small schools would be favored over large systems.

Such a large paradigmatic change would also require a radical rethinking of policy, where equity would be emphasized over equality. Equitable policies include the flexibility to treat each individual and each circumstance as unique – as "living." Albert expressed this concept to his second graders with the motto, "We are all the same. We are all different." This motto is a simple expression of Heron's One-Many ontology. Humans are all interconnected and all have the same basic needs, yet we are all unique. The proverbial tension between communal values and individualistic values is solved when the community cares for the needs of everyone, while also honoring the creative individuality of each. Learning comes to life when schools embrace the "lifeworld" (Finlayson, 2005), a term Habermas used as an antithesis to bureaucracy. But to do so would require a disruption of the industrial model of education – a model that was developed based on a positivistic ontology over 100 years ago. It is time for leaders to embrace a One-Many participatory ontology. It is time to redesign education.

Recommendations for K-12 Teachers

For K12 teachers, I recommend bringing their soul into teaching as much as possible, in any manner appropriate. Remember that spiritual pedagogy is not about explicitly talking about spirituality or engaging in esoteric practices, and it certainly is not about a particular religion. Really, most of the pedagogy described by the teachers in this study are social emotional learning practices, mindfulness, restorative practices, or other practices that are now research-based and gaining acceptance even in conventional education. Through the acceptance of these various holistic practices, teachers are developing more freedom to implement spiritual pedagogy within their classrooms, and it does not need to be called "spiritual."

That is good news. However, we learned from these teachers that spiritual pedagogy is more about who the teacher is than what she does. One of the reasons I chose to use the provocative term "spiritual" in the title of this dissertation was to invoke the heart. I wanted to make it clear that spiritual pedagogy is more about the mind-set, or "heart-space" than the actual practices. Spiritual pedagogy is not spiritual unless the teacher is "moving toward" authenticity and developing her own spiritual life. The teachers in this study all have their own spiritual practices and they all consider teaching as part of that practice. They see their students as co-learners. Therefore, every "spiritual" activity they do with their students is not something they offer as an expert, but something they also offer for their own spiritual enrichment. As Rose said, "The teacher has to be living it."

The teacher who practices spiritual pedagogy centers the human soul in the middle of the classroom, rather than on the periphery. One of the assumptions Elizabeth Tisdell made about spirituality in education is that "*Spirituality is always present in the learning environment (just not always acknowledged)*" (p. 31). She referenced a concept from Vella (2000) called a "spirited epistemology" in which every educational event is a "move to a less alienated state and a deeper awareness of [self] and others…further into [our] own authenticity" (p. 32).

As summarized in the literature review in Chapter II, science is proving that humans, at our core, are spiritual beings. We cannot possibly realize our full potential or recognize our wholeness without being allowed to bring our authentic spiritual self into the learning space. If this is so, why should spirit be the ignored elephant in the room? It is filling most of the room, so if we can focus on it, we do not have to waste energy

moving around it anymore. I recommend any teacher who feels in her heart that her students are sacred beings, have the courage to center spirituality in the classroom.

A final recommendation for teachers is to love their selves. Not only is love the base of all feeling and connection, but teachers need to be gentle with their selves and cultivate self-compassion if they are going to help others. Personally, I believe that teaching is perhaps the most challenging job there is. In the teaching profession, there is no such thing as perfect, and spiritual pedagogy is not about perfection. It is about love.

Recommendations for Adult Education

For the teachers in this study, their spirituality is completely wrapped up in their personal meaning perspectives. They are conscious of their spirituality being central to their lives. Whether its conscious or unconscious, intentional or not, spirituality resides at the center of who we are as humans. Qualitative and quantitative research are beginning to make this point empirically (Miller, 2015). Ignoring or denying spirituality in the learning environment, whether the students are children or adults, only creates barriers to learning, while acknowledging our spirituality has the potential to accelerate learning and development in other domains. Therefore, my recommendations for the field of adult learning are comparable to those for K-12 education.

I recommend adult educators consider spirituality to be ontologically real, as Lisa Miller (2012) put it, and center spirituality in the lives of our students and research participants. In turn, I also recommend adult educators center spirituality in their own lives. When we are courageous enough to bring our soul into the room, we are offering our authenticity and allowing others to move toward authenticity.

A spiritually centered classroom is particularly critical for diverse classrooms. Yorks and Kasl (2016) wrote about the "paradox of diversity," where the diverse backgrounds and experiences of learners provide incredible richness and value to any learning or working situation. The paradox is that the value of diversity might not be realized or could even be a hindrance to learning if learners do not feel safe and if they are not able to see one another's different perspectives. Yorks and Kasl pointed to the "epistemology of empathy" from Heron's up-hierarchy that is founded in experiential learning. They recommended adult educators create an empathic space of felt connection and provide opportunities for "embodied learning" that uses expressive ways of knowing to bridge people's diverse experiences and rationality. Yorks and Kasl were essentially describing the core, grounding elements of spiritual pedagogy.

Similar to my recommendations for K-12 education, I ask adult education to consider the paradigm shift that is necessary to evolve from the egoic trappings of an individualistic society and to embrace the relational participatory paradigm. In my theoretical synthesis of the findings in this study, I particularly made the point that transformative learning theory, which has become a central theory of adult education, should be viewed from a spiritualized participatory epistemology and ontology. Such a perspective transformation would clearly signal a shift from Western, Ango-centeric values, where the rational individual is the epitome of human development, to the ultimate participatory goal of a flourishing society.

Recommendations for Further Research

A major limitation of this study is its intentionally small and intimate group of participates who were also very homogeneous. A more racially and culturally diverse

group of participants may have yielded very different findings, and I hope that I or other researchers engage in qualitative research on this topic in the future with a variety of teachers and settings.

Another limitation of the sample of this study is that it included no teachers from preschool or prereading ages. Heron (1992) talked about how linguistic and rational thinking obscures the natural felt unity of individuals. Edmond, in the findings, referenced a neurological study determining that the daytime brainwaves of children before age 7 (before reading) are the same as adults' when dreaming, indicating that young children may be in contact with their unconscious and maybe even an archetypal dream world when awake. Aostre Johnson (1998), a contemplative educator who worked many years with very young children, talked about the "experience of being embodied in the beings of children" (p. 8), and the co-learning she and the children experienced "as [her] center touched their centers" (p. 8). The lived experience of the teachers of spiritual pedagogy who work with very young children might be quite different from the experience of the teachers in this study. Teachers of young children may have a particularly compelling opportunity to peek into the experience of the human psyche before much of life's woundings.

Also, the teachers in this study are all clearly highly developed. For example, if given one of the various inventories that test epistemological development, such as Kegan's Subject Object Inventory (SOI), they would all likely identify at some of the more complex levels. It would be interesting to explore empirically whether these teachers' spirituality was a factor in their advanced development. To conduct such research, a mixed-methods study that uses the quantitative evidence of participants' adult

developmental levels could be enlightening. For example, a longitudinal study might do a baseline SOI with teachers new to spiritual pedagogy as they begin their career path. The study could then track the teachers' development through the SOI levels over a period of years. It is possible that such a study might indicate a connection between spiritual development and other lines of development, such as moral development and epistemological development.

A need for holistic interdisciplinary studies. Spirituality is by its holistic nature an interdisciplinary subject, so it would be most beneficial to view spirituality from an interdisciplinary perspective. In particular, there is a tremendous amount of exciting neurological research exploring the natural spirituality embedded in our brains, and it would be useful to conduct a literature review comparing and integrating spirituality and authenticity through the intersection of research in neuroscience, psychology, and education. For example, the lab of neuroscientist Richard Davidson has teamed up with psychologists and educators to study how mindfulness and kindness help promote stronger executive functioning and prosocial behavior in young children (Flook et al., 2015). With the field of neuroscience burgeoning, there surely is much to discover that could benefit pedagogy and andragogy.

A need for participatory action research. Finally, several researchers point out that participatory action research (PAR) is an ideal method for future research into spirituality and spiritual development (Friedman et al., 2012; Heron & Reason, 1997; Richard, 2012). The ontology of PAR is evolved beyond the materialism of post-positivism that clearly does not match well with the non-material aspects of spiritual study. PAR is also evolved beyond constructivism which Heron and Reason (1997)

argued "fails to account for experiential knowing" (p. 274). PAR's experiential methods give *voice* to the *heart*.

In particular, co-operative inquiry, a form of participatory action research pioneered largely by John Heron (1998a), would be a natural next step to follow this dissertation. Co-operative inquiry is research *with* people rather than *on* them, meaning every subject is also a researcher, making the research completely participatory. In co-operative inquiry a team of participants engage together in numerous cycles of inquiry, action, and reflection. Quite naturally, co-operative inquiry immerses participants in all of Heron's ways of knowing, making the research experience an opportunity for holistic learning and for co-creating positive change in their lives, their organization, or their field.

As a phenomenological study, my goal was to simply understand the lived experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy. A co-operative inquiry study, as a follow-up, could engage a peer group of educators in teaching with spiritual pedagogy and in reflecting on co-operatively chosen aspects of their practical experience. One of the challenging aspects of studying spirituality is the notion that nobody can fully understand another's internal experience. Co-operative inquiry, however, through its methodology, would invite co-participants into one another's spiritual lives through connection, and into one another experience by co-creating change together (Watkins & Brooks, 1994). Congruent with spiritual pedagogy, co-operative inquiry is truly *living* research.

Implications for Researching Spirituality

The study of spirituality brings up many questions, practical and existential. In recent years, adult education has been more open to including spirituality within adult learning theory and to studying its impacts on adult education, especially in the area of transformative learning. However, spirituality's inclusion as a credible aspect of adult education is still tenuous and unclear. One big question that impacts further research is whether spirituality is its own area of study, is embedded in psychology, or is a cross-disciplinary study. Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) and Ken Wilber (2000) also made this point. They hypothesized about the various places spirituality may belong in relation to human development. For example, Wilber asked if spirituality is its own strand of development, a combination of many domains of development, the sum total of all domains of development, or whether spirituality is the highest achievement of development.

When trying to fit spirituality into linear developmental models, spirituality does not "play by the rules." Aostre Johnson (1998) disregarded "developmentalism," or the concept of linear invariant stage development, when it comes to spirituality, because spirituality is an all-together different animal. If children are born with spiritual gifts that are later obscured, that seems to leave the possibility open that if those gifts were not obscured in the first place one could develop spiritually in a completely different manner than developmentalists have conjectured. Furthermore, spirituality holds the potential for catalyzing peak experiences, insight, and miracles that could completely change the developmental trajectory. Perhaps transcendent spirituality (the One) has the potential to be a rocket shot that surpasses incremental development, while immanent spirituality (the

Many) comes from the ground up and from an indigenous relationship of feeling with all beings. With spirituality, all things are possible.

In Chapter II, I referenced an article by Koenig (2008) that asked if spirituality is merely healthy psychological development. Perhaps one needs to develop one's spirituality in order to develop psychologically? Conversely, perhaps one needs to develop psychologically in order to manifest spiritual development? Maybe the transcendence aspect of spirituality develops (it "goes up"), while the immanent aspect of spirituality "just is" – perfect as it always was and always will be, and just needing to be felt?

When considering spirituality as a form of development, the word *transformative* becomes extremely tricky. Transformation means change of a metamorphic kind. But can spirit, if it always was and always will be, actually change? Again, maybe it is just our psyche that changes. Maybe spiritual learning is a better name than spiritual development. Maybe…spirituality will continue to elude us.

Final Reflection

> My husband told me a story from long ago about two boys who are dear friends.
> One gives the other a small key in a box and says to find the wisest teacher and give him this gift.
> The young man travels the world searching for wise men, kings, and religious leaders. He tries to offer each of them his humble-looking gift, but none accept.
> Having spent his whole life on this quest, he returns to his own village, and finds an old man sitting under a tree. He decides to offer the gift to this old man. The man says, "Thank you, I have been waiting for this my whole life."
> At that moment, the two old men realize they are the dear friends of their youth.
>
> ~By Scott Owen (n.d.) – my husband

A dissertation is a journey. Mine was not a journey to conquer, to find yet-undiscovered knowledge. It was a journey into the heart, a journey of self-discovery. In the end, what I have to offer is the process itself: The Path of Spiritual Learning. While The Path is a documentation of what I interpreted the teachers in this research to be living, ultimately, it can only be a reflection of my own experience, my own path. Like never before, I understand how any search comes back to the *re*-searcher.

I am a seeker. In Chapter I, I referred to positive psychologist Emmons (2007), author of *Thanks: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, and a joke he made about how psychologists end up studying what they most need to learn for themselves. In my search for understanding the human spirit, I have learned to see myself better. For other searchers and re-searchers, I offer validation that the journey is worth the sacrifice.

In my case, I discovered my own theory of relativity. Just as quantum scientists who struck out to discover the source of all life ended up finding that which they were observing was observing them, I too ended up back at the source. The synthesis I offered in Chapter X technically said nothing more than I wrote in my proposal. It said nothing more than what shaman, mystics, and wise people offered centuries ago. Yet, I found exactly what I was looking for. Everything, and Nothing. That is all there is to find when one embarks on a spiritual journey. Nothing, and Everything.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol (#1)

Interview One

Open-ended questions with prompts:

1. Ask the participant to tell the story of how he or she became a teacher of secular spiritual pedagogy.

Visualization Exercise:
Let's light a candle for that which gives life. I invite you to take three breaths together. As you get comfortable, I invite you to soften your gaze or close your eyes, and remember a time during your teaching when you felt spirituality was experienced by you and your students together. See if you can picture what was happening during the moment. Notice your surroundings and those around you. See if you can recall what thoughts you were having. What emotions were you experiencing? What sensations were in your body? Reflect on what your sense of time was during that moment. Reflect on the feeling of the relationships (between people or perhaps between people and nature). Can you imagine what might have created this moment?

2. Now, would you please describe for me that moment you visualized? (Review all the same questions I asked them to envision above; use any prompts that seem necessary.) If someone were watching this moment, what would they see, hear, feel? Contrast that with what was going on inside you and/or your students.

3. To you, what is spirituality? How do you know when you have experienced spirituality?

4. What is the experience of including/embedding secular spirituality in your day-to-day teaching? (something I am calling spiritual pedagogy)
    a. What are times of the day that you intentionally or unintentionally experience spirituality in your teaching? What happens? Are there certain activities? What steps are taken in those activities? How do you plan for these activities? Do you prepare the space in any certain way? Is there a certain attitude?

    b. What might you do differently if you were not using spiritual pedagogy? What would be missing?

    c. Do you have to prepare yourself in anyway? How did you learn to teach this way? What did it feel like the first time you tried doing this? What happened?

    d. Tell me about your relationships with your children. (with parents? with colleagues?) How do see the children and relate to them?

5. What does the experience of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy mean to you?

a. What is the purpose of education? What is the purpose of teaching with secular spiritual pedagogy – why do it? (If a teacher who didn't get to teach this way wanted to know why you use spiritual pedagogy or what its purpose is – what would you tell them?) What was the purpose of the particular moment you described at the beginning of the interview? (If they didn't naturally talk about this.)

b. What would it feel like for you to teach somewhere that you couldn't teach this way? What would be missing for you?

c. Has this experience of teaching changed you (as a person, as a teacher)? What do you learn from it? What do you think would be different about your life with/without it?

6. Is there anything else you thought I might ask you, or that you wanted to share?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol (#2)

Interview Two

Note: A third purpose of the second interview was for the researcher to ask for elucidations and elaborations from the first interview. After reading closely the transcript from the first interview, I had prompts in mind as follow-ups. Finally, if the first interview was primarily descriptive, the second interview provided the opportunity to delve more into the interpretive and meaning making thoughts of the participant. The shape and texture of the second interview could vary greatly from participant to participant.

1. **Opening**
Since we began the first interview with a visualization, we began this one with a spiritual centering, or exercise led by the teacher participant.

2. **Discuss the opening spiritual activity you led.**
Describe for me the meaning, or purpose of that activity.

3. **Follow up in previous interview.**
Do you have any reflections on your first interview? Did you have anything you wanted to add? To clarify? To correct?
Do you have any other moments of teaching with secular spirituality you want to share, or stories you want to tell?
I share quotes of theirs I am curious about and I want them to expand upon, I ask them follow-up questions.

4. **Meaning making prompts.**
Why do you teach this way?
What does it mean to you?
Who does it make you?
What, to you, is the purpose of education?

5. **Is there anything else you thought I might ask you, or that you wanted to share?**

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

Participants were given the access code and information to participate in a Zoom (a virtual meeting application) virtual meeting. All participants in the same room together were represented on one screen with one camera, and one in remote location had her own screen and camera.

Facilitator led a brief centering.

The facilitator/researcher did six rounds:

Round 1: Each participant was asked to provide their pseudonym and real name and share any opening remarks they have.

Round 2, 3, and 4: The facilitator would read one of the eidetic themes, and would ask the following questions:

a. What are your thoughts on the theme
b. How does the theme correspond with, or not, your own experience?
c. What might you add?

After each of these rounds the facilitator opened the discussion up to the group.

Round 5: The facilitator asked if there are any other themes that participants want to comment on or discuss.

Round 6: The facilitator asked for reflections on the focus group process and experience.