

Mount Saint Vincent University  
Department of Family Studies and Gerontology

**Twilight of Joy: The Spirituality of Elder Women Religious**

by

Rose Mewhort

A Thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Family Studies and Gerontology

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DEDICATION

To Sister Ella Donovan

1914-

Who painted her life with the colors of love!



Painted by Sister Ella, 2007

## ABSTRACT

**Twilight of Joy: The Spirituality of Elder Women Religious**

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August, 2008

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Research that addresses the implications of a religious/spiritual worldview is now relevant in clinical, academic, and policy domains. The field of gerontology is putting greater emphasis on the challenge of understanding the “inner life” of the aging individual. Person-centered care and strength based clinical perspectives are dependent on research processes that examine the content of highly subjective religious experience. Institutional changes in health care, social services, and pastoral care require research initiatives that challenge stereotypical views of aging.

This study explored the complex phenomena of spirituality from the perspective of elder women religious. The interpretive paradigm and an ethnographic method guided research questions that centered on the lived experiences of Christian spirituality during the aging passage. I asked nine volunteer elder women religious to reflect upon the changes in their spiritual perspective as they encountered the adaptive requirements of aging. Dedicated women religious explored questions relating to the challenges and possibilities of aging with emphasis on the spiritual dimension.

Jungian psychology and feminist theology provided theoretical frameworks from which to analyze the research data. Depth psychology encouraged exploration of intuition and metaphorical self-expression. Feminist theology provided for a feminine sense of the sacred. Analysis included comparison of definitions, concepts, and theory presented within the academic literature and the subjective descriptions of the spiritual journey as understood by the participants in this specific denominational context.

Priorities for spiritual development included a continued emphasis on prayer, community, and service. The later years invited the respondents to a deeper appreciation of contemplative prayer. The life-span relational orientation to God and others persisted into the very late stages of elderhood. The respondents welcomed new social roles that accommodated changes in physical status. Their vitality included a positive attitude toward world, self, and others that transcended hardship and limitations. Transcendence included acceptance of difficulties as part of authentic human experience. Hopefulness and joy expressed the capacity to live in the present moment with acceptance of future uncertainties. Celebration, compassion and social justice characterized a transformative vision.

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## Chapter One: Uncovering the Question

The language of Christian biblical tradition is richly evocative of the natural world. Imagery from the natural world had universal appeal and was suited to the study of spirituality. As the metaphor for the stage in life experienced by elders, I have chosen the twilight time in a day. As in a landscape, colors shift from soft yellows and reds of dawn, through vibrant and clear greens and blues of noontime to gentle blues, violets, and grays of dusk. A parallel in the day of life's experience is the peaceful and contented evening when meditative, reflective consciousness allows for new ways of seeing. The twilight state of consciousness parallels the morning and evening transitions, when light transforms to awakening or to becoming restful. It is the time of the dream. Images and symbols surface, the song of a new day brings joy and hope or travels through memories of the day meditatively sorting important themes.

Cognitive changes sometimes accompany the process of aging. Considered as shifts in consciousness rather than losses, a shift often opens the possibility of encountering the muse, the dream, the vision of what will come to be. I understand consciousness to include the dream, some of which I remember as twilight images. Dialectical thinking, comparison and contrast of apparent contradictions, can include the dream consciousness as the emergent of the new vision. It is suited to the study of aging phenomena in which the transitional passage leads to the conclusion of the life journey. Each life, as I understand it, begins the concluding path as the completion of a personal epoch and that to

understand fully what is going on, I must have the capacity to dwell with elders as a companion in the land of twilight.

### *Clinical Background to the Study*

Several years ago while I was employed as a community mental health nurse for seniors in Victoria, I initiated an art therapy project with a group of elder women who met weekly to share their experiences about common themes. We developed an idea of painting a mural of their history in this city that could serve as a personal reminiscence and celebration of communal bonds. Because most of these women were able to remember the early days of the 20th century, the art project was an exciting representation of a world long past. I was particularly interested in their portrayal of a traditional church in the middle of the town. The women were eager to share personal memories associated with roads, buildings, gardens, trees, houses, and this church. I was impressed at that moment with the richness of these memories. When these women told their stories, the multidimensional truths of their life experiences seemed to hold subtle potentials for healing. We discussed the role of the church in family life and the importance of faith and community. As I listened, I recognized the need for professionals to be aware of religion and spirituality as a vital resource for healing and belonging.

Art Therapy, an adjunctive approach to mental health nursing practice, facilitated deeper explorations in the meaning of these women's lives. From image making with elders, I recognized hidden assets of creativity and spirituality that became the foundation for our work together. Religion and spirituality were familiar concepts to many of my clients. In the elder population, the expressive

therapies often evoked reminiscence of spiritual themes. Religion, in my understanding, represented a collective expression of spirituality that allowed for divergence of individual expressions of personal meaning. The adjectives, religious and spiritual, were not mutually exclusive. I could recognize, however, that not every religious format provides a forum for the expression of individual spirituality and not all spiritualities use religious terminology. My orientation to the topic at that time was inclusive and respectful of both adjectives, religious and spiritual, as descriptive of the universal human quest to understand life as meaningful. Therefore, in this thesis, I understand spirituality as the awareness of something greater than the self that may find expression in religious language.

Although I am not currently involved in clinical practice, I reviewed the academic issues influencing fieldwork focusing on elder health. In this way, I discovered the multidisciplinary research addressing the rapidly expanding field of religion, spirituality, and aging (e.g., Atchley, 1999; Koenig, 1994; Levin, 1994; Moody, 1994; Tornstam, 1994). In this multidisciplinary field, research is confronting the reality of an aging population and a changing culture.

Today, there are elders able to participate in new movements to enhance personal growth and late life learning. However, there are other less privileged aging individuals confronting the experiences of meaninglessness. One of the realities of aging is the experience of dementia among the very old and the need to acknowledge a less cognitive and verbal approach to understanding and communicating with elders. Persons with deficits in one area of functioning have resources within themselves-spiritual, affective, intuitive, or sensing capacities

that enabled effective communication. From my clinical experience in mental health, I conclude that there are elders who are suffering from inadequate forms for the expression of their spirituality and require the affirmation of religious and spiritual truths they intuitively understand.

In my experience, a religious orientation was largely unacknowledged in the social networks of contemporary society that feared the burden of aging persons that may accompany physical decline. Further, I found that the spiritual dimension in aging is difficult to define, poorly understood, and a neglected area of concern in the health care field. In the field of gerontology, there was a need to expand the limits of research that embrace topics of relevance for aging individuals and the society that suffers from deprivation of elder giftedness. Giftedness emerging from long experience with life included wisdom that binds families, generations, and communities. Traditions, family, and community, including church communities are fragmenting in western culture, de-centered by economic and consumer ethos (Kavanaugh, 1993). In this study, I drew upon my experience as a nurse who has seen the limitations of professional approaches in the care of the elderly, especially those concerning core issues of the deeper meanings of being human.

#### *Focus of Thesis*

This study is a qualitative examination of the spiritual experience of a group of senior women who have dedicated their adult lives to a call to Christian life in the context of a religious congregation. I studied the religious thought and practices of the elder Sisters of Charity (SCH) of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax.

Religious practices, in their lives, supported their spiritual lives. The religious culture supported and guided each person to address universal questions of love, suffering, and the search for meaning, common themes within the spiritual quest. The study was exploratory in nature, opening an inquiry into features of lived spiritual experiences identified by the sample. The elder sisters have lived for many years as vital, healthy, successful, and capable individuals. They manifested the characteristics of self-actualization that Maslow (1971) described. Self-actualisers worked at “something, which is very precious to them- some calling or vocation in the old sense, the priestly sense” (p. 43). As I saw it, among these persons, the idea of a search for meaning receded as the experience of being alive shone forth. They survived and incorporated the new face of Catholicism emergent in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were the quiet voices of spiritual experts who have much to teach and a legacy to endow. Their concerns reflected the substance of lived spiritual experience. The findings of the study illuminated certain features of spirituality, that of women, in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The principles of the founders of the organization guided them. The spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Elizabeth Seton was the manifestation of their relationship with God (SCH, 1985). The sisters often expressed charitable action in the midst of the labour and contradictions of a troubled social and cultural context.

By situating the study in the local, historical, and cultural context, I explored the in-depth meaning of the topics of religion and spirituality as influences on the well-being of elder individuals. I provided fresh insights from

the participants about the transformative potentials of a spiritual orientation to aging. Transformation, in this study, meant changing for the better, in mind, body, and spirit. Spiritual practices, as lived by these elders, highlighted the important connection between the sacred and spiritual in elder health. For example, an understanding of the human capacity to transcend held promise of both psychological and spiritual healing. Transcendence, from my perspective, was the capacity to rise beyond limitations. This included rising beyond a limited understanding of self, narrow expectations of others, and a worldview shaped by learned experiences of frustration or grief. It may be a situational experience in the human heart or a felt release from burden. It freed the human person to be aware of order and beauty in the universe. Christians use the word “grace” in sensing that the ability to move on in a new way was a gift rather than an achievement. Transcendence required openness to new possibility. Transcending memories of past trauma included the act of will that is forgiveness (MacKinlay, 2001). This was a healing movement within the self.

The richness of insight available among these women emerged from both the culture of religious life they have chosen and from the wisdom of their elder life experiences. This thesis includes exploration of the meanings that underpin the structure of religious life as expressed within their congregation. Religious life in the Catholic Church has been a prototype for Christian life. These aging women were capable of teaching from a position of the authority of their personal journey throughout life in their chosen culture. In a dialogic manner, I asked



questions that illumined my understanding of the spiritual needs and resources known by this group.

*Theoretical and Practical Importance of this Study*

Research into the multidisciplinary field of aging has only recently begun to explore religion and spirituality as important concerns of mature and older adults (MacKinlay, 2001; McFadden, Brennan & Patrick; 2003; Moody, 2003; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999). A thesis on the topic of religion and spirituality can offer support to our current understanding of the aging experience by recognizing the fact that through the acknowledgement of a spiritual center within each individual, a resource within the person is available to assist in confronting the challenges of aging. Physical and cognitive changes are intrinsic to the aging process. This study attended to the resources within individuals who are living with these changes, but who also have nourished their inner lives.

Social science perspectives support institutional changes that accommodate the needs and wants of a diverse aging population (Moberg, 2001). Assessment of spiritual needs and recognition of the distinction between psychosocial and spiritual dimensions is a valuable contribution to caring for elders in a holistic manner. Research in this multidisciplinary field opens the door for educational programs focusing on nursing, social work, pastoral care, and medicine. Research supporting the broad determinants of health enhances the resources available to clinicians and policy makers. Spirituality and religion may in the future be included in the category of broad determinants of health. Authorities in many disciplines related to health contribute to policy documents

for best practices in elder care. Clinically relevant research, also called evidence-based research, informs policy. Policy makers in government, hospitals, and community health centers following research into aging, religion, and spirituality may start to recognize a strand of hidden health care and begin to acknowledge the role of church or spiritual community in healing.

In this sample of religious women, the language of their tradition provided nuance and depth to the understanding of the fruits of religious life. Demographic trends in population aging displayed a rapid increase of aging persons who are seeking a higher quality of life. It was important to examine some of the characteristics of healthy aging and the interactions of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual factors on well being. Consumers of health care services may benefit from the identification of a spiritual locus to their difficulties. These research participants modeled and described spiritual well-being. Exploration of the positive emotions associated with religion and spirituality required a study of specific religious beliefs and the content of beliefs on well-being. For those who believe in conscious aging, the challenge is to come to awareness of aging as a process of continuous spiritual growth that embraces the grief of tangible social and physical losses and the expansion of latent capabilities. Conscious aging is a social movement attracting many healthy and motivated elders seeking personal development. Moody (2003) defined conscious aging as “a spiritual process that draws its inspiration from religion, art, lifelong learning, and other forms of self-transcendence that are reflected in the field of transpersonal psychology and wisdom traditions in the great world religions” (p. 139).

Research that investigated aging as decline contributed to marginalization of elders. The mental health system presented a negative view of aging as “some 90% (of health-care related research) focuses on deficit and deterioration (and consistently paints a picture of aging as inherent decline” (Gergen & Gergen, 2001, cited in Ronch & Goldfield, 2003, p. xiv). In my experience, marginalization of elders and their contributions to society deprives society of the variety of gifts older individuals made available to younger generations. In presenting documentation of the characteristics of a “vital old age” (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnik, 1986), I counter stereotypes on the nature of the aging process.

Life course theories charted straight lines of development from infancy onwards. For example, Erikson (1968) described a linear progression of human development through eight stages in life. Many developmental theories did not adequately address elder development or women’s path toward wholeness. The opinions of elder religious women offered fresh insights into the nature of developmental changes in aging. A positive view of aging includes a perspective that sees the elder years of life in terms of continued or new roles in society and another stage in personal or even spiritual growth and development (Freidan, 1993).

### *The Research Question*

With this exploratory analysis as a background, I asked a group of elder women who made a lifelong commitment as women religious “What, in your own words, is your spiritual experience and its meaning, importance, and priority in

your life?” Related questions elicited or focused on professional and academic insights as these related to the primary question. For example, additional questions explored issues such as biological and genetic factors, meaning of call and theological referents, life style and behavioural aspects, orientation to preventative health, intelligence, creativity, social, and community features.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In my review of the literature published on the topic of aging, religion, and spirituality in the past 15 years, I noted the difficulties confronting the leading scholars of the field. The following is a synthesis of some of the major issues influencing research that focuses on the relationship between religion, spirituality, and aging. I have selected a few of the disciplines that were seeking to address what I perceived to be the core needs of elder persons. In a multidisciplinary approach to practice, no single discipline was more “right” than was another. Rather, a collaborative approach respected each contribution. I addressed epidemiology for its capacity to understand disease processes thus contributing to physical well-being. Social gerontology recognized the importance of cohesive human relationships among elders and their social networks. Psychology offered insights into the unique functioning of every individual, their strengths and self-imposed limitations. Gerontology focused on particular age cohorts who have experiential histories not available to younger persons. There were contributions from many disciplines that enhanced wellness but were beyond the scope of this study. In my experience, what bound these disciplines was the new paradigm of cooperation rather than competition.

I explored paradigm dialogues as they pertain to research and ideologies that are undergoing revision in the academic realm. I addressed the articulated concern in the research about the problem of definition of both religion and spirituality, and the specialized language of each discipline, by choosing to situate the language of the research data in the words of my participants. The literature

on religion, aging, and spirituality referred to themes that were also perceptible in clinical practice. I selected those themes I believed to be important for the understanding of spirituality and religion in my encounters with the research participants.

*Challenges to the Study of Religion, Aging, and Spirituality*

Among my health care and religious colleagues I often heard the reference to a need for a new “paradigm” or a different model to evaluate current trends that shape the cultural movements of contemporary society. This concern was most often expressed by persons who were educated outside of the traditional scientific framework. Many were able to include scientific knowledge but also yearned for a familiar substratum of the spiritual and philosophical base upon which to monitor “right action” in their employment world. In the academic realm this trend is articulated as a paradigm shift. In the literature on aging and the religious dimension I also encountered the quest for a new paradigm for understanding the religious and spiritual needs of elders.

*Paradigm dialogues.* Paradigm dialogues deal with a discussion of the systems of belief that guide action. As a research topic, it involved systems of belief, both those of science and religion, which were undergoing revision in a post-industrial age and a post-modern culture. Post modernism, the term used for the emergence of contemporary culture, affected the status of knowledge (O’Donnell, 2003). Western society challenged claims to absolute truth. “Grand narratives of any type, whether religious, philosophical, or scientific are limited and historically conditioned” (O’Donnell, 2003, p. 29). Grand theories were

distant from the data. On the positive side, with this challenge to traditional frameworks, there was also a focus on self-awareness, tolerance, openness, and flexibility. Respect for personal and individual perceptions of truth was emerging from the pursuit of depth psychology, those approaches to psychology that explores the realm of thought, feeling, and memory. These “local and partial narratives and insights” (O’Donnell, 2003, p. 29) provided the substance of therapy in depth psychology. A paradigm challenge at the heart of this thesis topic was whether the belief in God or gods was acceptable in a society that valued productivity, acquisition, and technological proficiency. These elders had the breadth of understanding to challenge the consumer ethos most insightfully.

Multiple psychological and sociological theories influenced the field of gerontology. Scientific knowledge was one way of understanding the experience of aging. Aging studies encompassed a broad spectrum of disciplines including the health sciences and religion. As well, these studies searched historical traditions of culture, faith, literature, and the arts. Included in the research are the influences of 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, and feminism (Schacter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995). The paradigm shift included attitudinal changes that challenged rigid and hierarchical boundaries between disciplines. In the health care field, the term “holistic” demonstrated a shift in perception from strict medical model with emphasis on disease and cure, to the recognition of multi-factored processes involved in illness and health. Cooperation among disciplines provided a larger framework for understanding the presenting difficulties and suggested the necessary interventions. Schacter-

Shalomi and Miller (1995) presented a discussion of changes in paradigm that affected the contemporary view of aging.

A more holistic perspective is emerging that stresses cooperation rather than competition, ecological awareness rather than mindless consumerism, and intuition to complement our obsession with rationalism. We see the evidence of this paradigm shift in the social justice and ecology movements and the rise of feminism. We see further evidence in the appeal of transpersonal psychology, with their call for an expanded human potential and inner knowledge, and the widespread interest in Eastern and Western mysticism (p. 77).

*Ideologies shaping scholarly and scientific practices.* Positivist science, the scientific approach to inquiry, was concerned with areas of life that are observable and measurable (Levin, 1994; Weiland, 1995). Objectivity in science assumed researchers could place themselves at a distance from the area of study, thereby controlling for the effects of the observer on the observed. Yet, in the study of human processes, there were unrecognized variables that interfere with objectivity. There was agreement among scholars in the social and behavioural sciences that the “traditional scientific models have an uncertain status” (Weiland, 1995, p. 590). An historian of aging, Auchenbaum (1987, cited in Weiland, 1995), challenged scholars to question whether gerontology can be a science or should be a science.



In academic disciplines, a freedom developed to expand research endeavours to include research that stretches the boundaries of traditional science. In discussing qualitative research, Janesick (1994) presented the term “methodolatry” to draw attention to a preoccupation with method to the exclusion of substance. McFadden et al. (2003) acknowledged the complexity of the phenomena of aging and the need for tolerance of diverse forms of inquiry when discussing recent studies of religion and spirituality. Neugarten (1985, cited in McFadden et al., 2003) suggested that gerontologists acknowledge cultural and historical influences on their scientific endeavours and recognize the dialectical nature of change. Scholars of gerontology began attending to the study of aging with greater attention to themes such as spirituality and religion (Atchley, 1999; Moody, 2003; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999; Tornstam, 1994). Religion and spirituality, as well as gerontology, did not easily accommodate strict scientific methods in the pursuit of knowledge. Social science in the post-modern era retained a respect for non-measurable realms of human experience, that of the mystical and poetic. With the recognition of diversity in ways of knowing, the rational and hierarchical was one of many systems that provide avenues to truth.

Labouvie-Vife (2001) offered a refreshing perspective by showing that contributions of metaphorical knowledge expressed in art opened avenues to truth. Her area of study was that of knowing and feeling in later life. She included metaphors and images in a slide presentation to Gerontological Society of America symposium on epistemology. Ancient images of mythic and spiritual themes embodied a positive view of aging that highlighted elder capacities for

wisdom and imagination. Words alone were insufficient to express her meaning, and images were integral to her talk (McFadden et al., 2003). In addition to recognizing a need to include metaphor and image as avenues to understanding, gerontologists were exploring the social value of elders as a repository of cultural wisdom. Wise counsel from elders assisted younger persons to make choices that enhance rather than diminish society. The topic of wisdom itself was under review from both the scientific and cultural perspectives.

*Definitional considerations of religion and spirituality.* A requirement for discussion of this broad topic was the task of finding common definitions and constructs to facilitate communication among researchers. Definitions have preoccupied a decade of scholarship. No simple definition of religion described the numerous religions in the world. A broad definition of religion was “a system of teachings and practices concerning living one’s faith, generally in an experience of community with others who honour the same beliefs” (Mount, Lawlor, & Cassell, 2002, p. 305). However, there was a difference between spirituality and religion. Religion generally focused on the communal dimension of spirituality and the place of tradition. It provided the connection with the spiritual experiences of others including those who have gone before and enabled the tradition to become alive in the faith community of the present. The purpose of religion was to enrich spirituality.

*Spirituality* was the whole life of a person “the core part of who we are” (O’Murchu, 1998, p. ix). English and Gillen (2000) identified the outward movement of spirituality in their definition. “Simply put, authentic spirituality

moves one outward to others as the expression of one's spiritual experiences" (p. 1). Spirituality includes the sphere of ultimate meaning in people's lives and leads outward to compassion for others and the world. It is not self-centered. The spiritual impulse is lived as a process of becoming, a process of growth that requires an ongoing response and commitment. It is lived in relationship to the other and others, a personal and individual quest for meaning that moves a person out of a preoccupation with the self. It leads to love and compassion for others and the world. However, a person's spirituality may or may not incorporate the rituals, practices, and beliefs of a particular religious group.

Older adults may have their own definition of their religious or spiritual experience. In both the research and clinical realms, there was a need to be attentive to the context of the culture, education, and life experience of elders to learn the meanings of these concepts. This acceptance of the uniqueness of each person's perception provided depth to the understanding of the person. It was important as a caregiver to respond to each person's uniqueness and to inhibit stereotypical or categorical impositions. The language of an individual's history expressed the richness of lived experience and permitted divergent ways of knowing and self-expression. For example, a visit to the home of an elder provided the understanding of the symbols of important features of the life journey. Books, artifacts, pictures of significant others were non-verbal representations of what has nourished their spirit. The elder person was able to tell the story of the symbols in her environment.

Elder self-expression often emerged in the form of a narrative during the process of reminiscence and life review. Based on my experience as a mental health nurse, I found reminiscence to be a healthy and natural process. Elders engaged in life review as a searching kind of phenomenon, that of remembering and organizing their history. Reminiscence, as I have observed, seemed to invite the listener to share in their journey. It had a more intimate and trusting quality. The two processes often intermingled. I also saw the possibility of a distinctly spiritual life review emerging from reminiscence when the caregiver inquired from within the belief system of the elder. The question addressed to the elder was “How has God been active in your life history?” The response was often a story. Story, considered as literature, deviated from factual truth and wove into the domains of myth and metaphor. Other art forms including poetry, music, dance, and visual expression more adequately expressed deeply felt religious and spiritual realities. To attend to non-verbal and metaphorical self-expression required that the listener bring to the event not only analytical attention and an understanding of the person’s worldview, but also a reflective and thoughtful presence.

#### *Overview of the Study of Aging, Religion, and Spirituality*

In the following paragraphs, I highlight insights from several disciplines that relate to the broad topics of aging, spirituality, and religion. It is neither an exhaustive nor a comprehensive overview of a very interesting and dynamic new field. Rather, this section provides a sufficient context for the presentation of the thesis intent, format, and method.

*Gerontology*. Moody (1994) recognized that gerontology has neglected to acknowledge the religious dimension of human aging. Levin (1994), too, discussed the difficulties he encountered as a student trying to examine religion, health, and aging. Until recently, the topic of aging and the topic of religion seem to have been “taboo” subjects in academic environments (Levin, 1994; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999). Levin drew attention to the deficiencies in theory and methods of science that may have been causative factors in the marginalization of religion as a topic for scientific inquiry. He was able to recognize the problems of a strict empirical approach to the study of the meaning of religion while lamenting the biases of modern academe that overlooked the religious dimension. His research supported the development of improvements in research design and statistical methods.

Levin (1994) also provided an overview from scholars of several fields to advance the research agenda in this field and refined the methodological sophistication of studies in the area of religion and well-being. His work suggested that the subject of religion could now move into the mainstream of aging research. In the years following his exploration of the theoretical and methodological frontiers of this topic, researchers and practitioners who are committed to studying subjects earlier omitted from the gerontological mainstream, have published from a variety of disciplines including scientific, historical, philosophical, humanistic, theological, and literary resources (Ingram, 2003; Moody, 2003; Snowden, 2001; Koenig, 1995).

*Epidemiology.* Lanum and Birren (1995) observed that the “relationship between aging and disease remained obscure, as was the relationship between aging and mortality” (p. 513). Epidemiology involved searching for cause and consequently the treatment or cure of disease. A scientific premise underlies this type of research and the focus was on biological events, measurable by controlled studies. At best, epidemiology contributed to longevity and quality of life. The ultimate experience of death facing every living thing brought the epidemiologist’s search to conclusion. Snowdon (2001) was interested in disease processes in his study of aging nuns. The longstanding and stable life style of the sisters with the absence of many behavioural factors that cause diseases provided an almost perfect laboratory for studying genetic and learned factors in illnesses such as Alzheimer’s disease. However, his studies did not investigate the ritual, religious, or mythological content of his participants’ ways of life.

In this past decade, advances in geriatric medicine have opened avenues to the understanding of dementia, degenerative physiological processes, pharmaceutical, and rehabilitative interventions for disease processes. Medical science also embraced discoveries that led to healthy practices for maintaining physical well being. In my own experiences of health care services, I was able to recognize that medical technology provided many helpful tools toward enhancing the physical well being of the aged person. A medical approach to symptom control prepared the ground for the multidisciplinary team approach to geriatric care. Adjunctive areas for intervention included psychosocial and spiritual resources.

Gerontology research reflected both recognition of the limits of science and an acknowledgement of the gifts of science. The medical establishment was highly esteemed in our culture, which has medicalized all aspects of the aging process. The majority of elders over the age of 65 were healthy and the role of religion in providing hope, emotional strength, ritual, faith, and self-reliance has promised an enhancement to understanding of the broad determinants of health. Koenig (1995) has engaged in studies on religion and aging that continued in the empirical path to knowing. Systematic study of the relationship of religion to health and aging revealed that, “when religious variables are included, they appear to exhibit consistent, positive relationships with well being” (Larson, Sherrill, & Lyons, 1994, p. 192). Qualitative research (MacKinlay, 2001; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999) has also offered the situated realities of religious well being that some elders expressed.

*Social gerontology.* Sociological theories of aging were concerned with changes in the elder person’s relationship with the tasks and roles involved in maintaining healthy connectedness with human society. Activity theory (Caven, Burgess, Havinghurst, & Goldhammer, 1949, cited in Lanum & Birren, 1995) stressed the importance for elders to maintain involvement in the structures of meaningful work, cognitive stimulation, physical fitness, and healthy relationships in family and community. Activity theory argued that the more active elderly persons were, the greater their satisfaction in life. In order to maintain a positive sense of self, elderly people must substitute new roles for those lost in old age.

A critical perspective on activity theory underscored our North American culture-bound emphasis on productivity and the contemporary idealization of youthful vitality. Older adults may find that in the pursuit of physical activity, social stimulation and intellectual challenge, they were denying age related losses. Although active involvement in society suggested healthiness, a too rigid emphasis can lead to disrespect for the needs of many elders to reflect on their life history. From my experience in the nursing home setting as a mental health counselor, I found an overemphasis on activities annoyed many elders who wanted to reflect and talk about their history. I consistently found that a social environment that valued productivity often neglected contemplative qualities in personality. For those elders who were experiencing the disabling effects of an aging body, a social context that does not acknowledge real pain and suffering was insensitive to the realities of aging. Further, the dimension of reflective self-awareness available in a less hurried world offered rich insight into positive intrapersonal resources for those who were experiencing physical limitations.

In contrast to the emphasis on maintaining elders in an active lifestyle, a disengagement theory first proposed by Cumming and Henry (1961), suggested that elders gradually withdraw from society and it is functional to do so (Atchley, 1999; Tornstam, 1994). However, this theory marginalized elders and contributed to feelings of loneliness and alienation. This was a prescriptive and generalizing theory that if brought to a clinical setting could justify neglect of elders. In the larger society, this theory may justify “warehousing” elders in homes away from the family and community they have nurtured into being. It was a contemporary



choice to relegate frail seniors to nursing homes, a sad alternative for many elders and their families. The literature on disengagement theory also noted that people may find themselves disengaged by lack of opportunity. Age discrimination and social structures that neglect to provide opportunities for seniors to develop in optimum ways encouraged social withdrawal (Atchley, 1999).

Nevertheless, social withdrawal may be an adaptive choice with a variety of purposes for the individual. It may preserve strength when physical capacities are diminishing. Elders may withdraw from material concerns to facilitate a more reflective environment that nourishes a vital inner world. The elder may be engaged in ways not understood by well-meaning caregivers. This shift may signify an intuitive priority for persons entering the final stages of the life journey.

There is a growing body of research that shows adaptation or successful aging in relationship with multiple dimensions of individual life experiences. External influences on quality of life were one way to examine elder quality of life. The inner experience of beliefs and perception were also significant (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999). Continuity theory explored the development and application of life patterns the individual has created in order to make life satisfying and promote ease in adaptation to change (Atchley, 1999). It implied that an individual had a sense of self, a locus of control, and an underlying identity of the self throughout life. Atchley (1999) observed that the aging person substitutes new roles for lost ones, and in so doing continues to maintain typical ways of adapting to the environment. He reviewed activity theory and observed that this earlier social/gerontological theory did not address the personality factor, the

possibility that a person with a resilient and strong self-concept could more easily move through the adaptations required in old age. Atchley further suggested that spirituality and religion, as aspects of personality, remain important in later life if they have been central in younger years. Thus, continuity theory incorporated the psychological observations of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. It suggested that disengagement might not simply mean social withdrawal. It could be an involved detachment, a change in worldview. A religious person may experience spiritual deepening in later years. Continuity theory was inclusive of the spiritual diversity among elders and suggested there is spiritual growth in later years and it is an evolutionary process.

Spiritual growth may lead to experiences of transcendence. An aspect of spirituality was a belief in a level of reality that exceeded the limits of human existence. Some people referred to the transcendent as God, Mystery, or as the Other. Many people pointed to various aspects of nature to convey their experience of transcendence. Spirituality involved the quest to be in relationship with this Mystery. To clarify the meaning of transcendence in older adulthood, Atchley (1999) referred to the work of Tornstam (1994) with his concept and theory of gero-transcendence. According to Tornstam (1994), “gero-transcendence” is a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction” (p. 203). This was not disengagement because the person engages with life in a way that has exceeded their previous capacities.

This theory described the final stage of human growth toward maturation and wisdom. The disengagement process, withdrawal from the concerns with acquisition, visible in the lives of many elders contained the seeds of “departure from materialistic and rationalistic views toward an involved detachment, concerned with a cosmic, transcendent perspective” (Atchley, 1999, p. 142). In reviewing the characteristics of gero-transcendence in his own work with a focus group, Atchley (1999) noted variations in understanding of the concept of transcendence in literature of spiritual development. There was a distinction between the transcendent experience of the mindful observer and that of mystical consciousness (Atchley, 1999). In my understanding, the Buddhist tradition taught mindful observance and the Christian tradition taught mystical consciousness, however these terms overlapped in both traditions. The work of Tornstam (1994) and Atchley (1999) examined the interface between spirituality and aging with measures of characteristics of transcendence, a gero-transcendence scale.

However, Atchley (1999) acknowledged a need for conceptual refinement and the need for a meaningful language for collecting data. A further observation concerned methodological needs. Atchley recognized the need for qualitative analysis rooted in individual life histories and longitudinal perspectives in order to understand complex interrelationships (1999). He also felt that this topic tended to resist the logic of concrete, linear answers to questions, consistent with the scientific model. To study spiritual development as an emerging goal of development in later life, it was necessary to be much more open to discovery and exploratory analysis (Atchley, 2000).

*Psychology*. The *Journal of Religion and Health* was one of the first journals to begin to investigate the intersection of religion and health and proceeded in a method of science that operationalizes definitions of religion based on external behaviour. For example, using quantitative methods, Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, (2001) published extensive data on the positive and negative effects of religion on health, including mental health. Religious beliefs might adversely affect mental health. Empirical research was responding to the need for study of the effects of religious involvement on mental health, psychological well-being, social and psychological processes, and aging. A wealth of research supported the inclusion of religion as a dimension of health (Koenig et al. 2001).

However, grand generalizations on the effects of religion on people's ability to cope were misleading. Certain religious orientations may actually thwart coping efforts. An individual person's concept of God may not reflect a healthy worldview. An image of God, internalized from the family, social, cultural, and religious milieu, might have powerful disabling effects on the human spirit. Moreover, a belief that God is distant, punitive, and vindictive supported a fearful approach to life and death. Religious delusions, fanaticism, refusing life saving medications, failure to seek timely medical care, refusing blood transfusions, refusing childhood immunizations and fostering child abuse were a few of the unhealthy practices that have been supported by religious ideologies (Koenig et al., 2001). Finally, measures of religiosity often neglected idiosyncratic spiritual and religious constructs. From my experience in counseling elders, I have seen

that not all seniors use religious beliefs as a source of strength in difficult times. More often, elders based their spiritual belief on positive life experiences. These beliefs emerged in trying times to re-awaken an interior sense of meaning and purpose in the personal language of the elder.

Lanum and Birren (1995) reviewed theories of adult development. They believed that the psychology of aging had multiple informational resources but it did not have theories that unite them. They also noted that, “research in psychology has not dealt with questions regarding the experience of life” (p. 526). A long experiential history gave the elder person a divergent and highly individual perspective.

Koenig (1994) outlined several perspectives on human development that have been influential in our understanding of the person. Many of the stage theories focused on childhood development. For the most part, psychological perspectives have neglected to explain later adult and elder development. Many of the stage theories described chronological development from childhood to middle age and tended to be “too fixed, hierarchical, and prescriptive” (Bianchi, 1984, p. 5). Fowler (1981) developed a theory of faith development that relied “heavily on theories of psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development” (Koenig, 1994, p. 82). Fowler’s synthesis may over-emphasize the cognitive aspects of religion (Koenig, 1994). For example, this theory did not explain how elders are able to maintain a vital faith while experiencing a decline in cognitive function and neglected to develop a comprehensive understanding of the unique tasks of elderhood. Nevertheless, Fowler presented an interesting approach that has

become a favoured viewpoint for education within religious frameworks. Spiritual development may parallel other developmental phases and perhaps take precedence as cognitive, interpersonal and physical capacities decline.

Erikson (1963) placed emphasis on the social forces on the individual. His theory for late life development is the most cited in the literature. In his classic work *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erikson outlined a model of the life cycle. In the eight stages of man, he suggested that in the eighth and final stage, the developmental task concerns ego integrity vs. despair. Wisdom, a “detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself” (p. 133) was the product of successful transition.

We achieve a sense of completeness and self-acceptance that offsets our inevitable physical decline. Success in this task... leads to wisdom, which in part includes our acceptance of our ‘one and only life as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted no substitutions’ Failure at this task leads to despair, a fear of death, and the feeling that time is too short to start another life. (Schacter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995, p. 71)

Interestingly, he stated, “I am not ready to discuss the psychology of ultimate concern” (Erikson, cited in Thomas & Eisenhandler, 1994, p. 8). The work of Erikson et al. (1986) speculated that a ninth stage with its own quality of experience might include a dimension of aging experienced by the very old. This ninth stage of development included a “sense or premonition of immortality” (Erikson et al., 1986, p. 336).

In recognition of inevitable death, a sense of immortality may provide an opportunity for renewed integration in the face of deterioration. The requirement for mutuality and interdependence was a feature of this final stage where the elder has a reservoir of history to share, along with the need to accept assistance with increasing frailty. Religious traditions prepared individuals for a final state of “*letting go*”, the state of merely “*being*” (Erikson et al., 1986, p. 333). Joan Erikson, Erik Erikson’s wife, lived into her nineties long after her husband’s death. Her observation of the challenges to her own personal growth in late life influenced her understanding of human development. She coined the term “gero-transcendence” which celebrated creativity in old age (Erikson, 1997). It was important to note that her description of the ninth stage did not follow the scientific rigors she and her husband utilized in their study of earlier stages of life. However, it provided a transition into the insights of the very old that seemed to speak from the authority of their own experience. Interestingly, St. Thomas Aquinas found the rigors of his complex discourses on disputed theological questions burdensome in old age, because he was “absorbed in lofty contemplation” (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1947, p. 9).

Two additional themes in spirituality emerged from the framework of life span development theory and transpersonal psychology. Labouvie-Vief (2000) noted two trajectories of positive development in old age, identified as *conscious aging* and *successful aging*. The first or holistic line incorporated the idea of increasing integration of divergent elements of the self, both rational and emotional, to yield a more complex structure. The second, the adaptive or

successful trajectory described an elder person's ability to maintain optimum well being in the face of age related losses (Moody, 2003).

Conscious aging may include a sophisticated acceptance of the four features of personality described by Jung (1921) in his essay on psychological types. These were features of intuition, feeling, reasoning, and sensing. Jung's concept of the "transcendent function" was a fifth capability emerging from the command of the other four. It allowed perception beyond the limits of human pain and suffering (Campbell, 1971, p. xxviii). Jung was not a stage theorist but used the metaphor of the day, the movement of the sun from dawn to dusk to describe various passages in life (Campbell, 1971). He noticed a later life yearning for spiritual values (Lanum & Birren, 1995). He gave "symbols, mystery, spirit and the unspeakable a central role in human life" (O'Donnell, 2003, p.70). In this theory, the goal of development in later life was toward integration and inner peace. Jaffe (1990), a scholar of Jungian psychology commented,

Jung says we cannot stand a meaningless life and he offers us the myth discovered and made his own: that our effort to be as conscious as possible contributes to the evolution of God. The name for this process is individuation, the first essential component of Jung's healing message. p. 12).

Jaffe (1990) incorporated the notions of consciousness into a religious framework that paralleled the contemplative process understood in Christian mysticism. In this way, the connection between individuation, consciousness, and Christian mysticism was established. In the mystical tradition, contemplation may



lead to a form of prayer, called unitive prayer, the prayer of mystical union with God. It was a gift rather than an achievement. Inner peace was the outcome of unitive prayer (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1948).

Qualitative studies highlighted questions for later quantitative research. Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) opened opportunities to explore the spiritual lives of older women. In their study of spiritual resiliency in older women, the authors encouraged in-depth expression of the unique experiences of elder Lutheran women in the US and Germany. From the encounters with these women, the authors described spiritual themes common among these strong older women, including personal characteristics of vital faith, warmth and generosity, the capacity to relate openly at an emotional level, and the importance of interpersonal relationships. Community, in this context of the Christian community, included a broad understanding of oneness with others across the globe and with both the living and the deceased.

#### *Themes for the 21st Century*

The following themes reflected some of the broad categories addressed in the literature review on aging, religion, and spirituality. I selected those themes that I explored in the unique group of research participants who were well versed in the experiences of both aging and spirituality. I consider the life span perspective of aging by understanding aging as a spiritual journey. The lived experience of the person situates the spirituality. I discuss conscious aging, although it is a social movement, from the perspective of the individual psychic experience. From this vantage point, I explore experiences of contemplation and

mysticism as inner phenomena. Outward expression of inner experience, I consider as late life creativity. Lastly, I discuss wisdom, its nature, and value as a spiritual gift of the human spirit for the creation and maintenance of human society and culture.

*Aging as a spiritual journey.* A popular metaphor for aging was that of a journey. This allowed for a longitudinal or lifespan perspective and was respectful of aging as a dynamic process. Naturalistic descriptors of this journey included metaphors such as the seasons of life or the movement of time over the day/night cycle. Some mythological traditions spoke of the “long body” in acknowledging the journey from birth to death (Campbell, 1989). A medieval alchemical text diagrammed life as a circle and uses the lunar cycle of 30 days as the metaphor. The 15<sup>th</sup> night of maturity thought to be around the 35<sup>th</sup> year of life brought the mystical consciousness, learning the mystery of oneness with all of life. The 22<sup>nd</sup> night began the waning of the moon as metaphor for aging. In the remaining days of life, the individual became submissive to the facts of physical decline and ultimate death (Campbell, 1989).

What was appealing about these metaphors was that they spoke of universal and natural processes easily understood by all persons of all cultures. The relationship between the individual and the cosmos formed the foundation of understanding. The worldview accommodated an acceptance and understanding of natural processes. Images of common human experience respected the boundaries among diverse spiritualities.

In religious traditions, aging began with birth and the spiritual life was a process throughout the life course. Western society marked retirement, changes in biological functions, and loss of significant others as some of the challenges of the aging experience. Chronological aging often became a measure of the aging process. These social and physiological categories of aging experience, however, may range over many decades. Further, caregivers and elders may neglect to understand these processes as intrinsic to the spiritual resources within individuals. The spiritual processes occurred in the daily encounters with the challenging aspects of life through multiple passages. Elders may have mastered many healthy transitions utilizing the religious or spiritual as the core of motivation. As with all dynamics, experience and proficiency may establish an accelerating motion. The very old may, because of extended life experience, have expertise about spiritual experiences as well as physical and psychosocial experiences.

Bianchi (1984) who admitted to the influence of Jungian psychology began to establish a framework for a spirituality of aging. Like Jung, he asserted that elders are “summoned to fuller participation in the great concerns of humanity . . . Jung calls the main task that we face during the second half of our life the individuation process, an open-ended process of psychological maturity” (p. 2). However, preoccupation with the great concerns of humanity was not limited to aging persons and some aging persons may have a long history of alienation and self-centeredness. The concept of spiritual maturity and the distinctions between psychological and spiritual maturity emerged in the

interviews with the participants during this thesis project. In choosing persons who have been intentionally spiritual throughout the life course, I observed for finely nuanced concepts of spiritual experience.

*Conscious aging.* Conscious aging was a social movement in progress as older persons sought personal growth and late life creativity (Moody, 2003). This movement aimed to reshape society along the ideals of wisdom and compassion. I explored the notion of conscious aging from the religious and transpersonal perspectives. Moody (2003) noted that conscious aging is “A spiritual process that draws its inspiration from religion, art, lifelong learning, and other forms of self-transcendence that are reflected in the field of transpersonal psychology and wisdom traditions in the great world religions” (p. 139). Becoming conscious required a sense of the larger meanings involved in everyday experience. It questioned how these experiences collectively shape into a larger vision or plan. Further, conscious aging represents an option for positive aging, but may not be the pathway for all elders (Moody, 2003). The inwardness involved in aging may or may not be a healthy process. One insightful question Moody (2003) posed is “Because conscious aging involves greater inwardness and focus on the self, how will this approach avoid the pitfalls of narcissism that challenge mental wellness in later life?” (p. 141). The successful aging trajectory on the other hand, with its contemporary cultural ideals may include a denial of losses involved in growing old and attempt to recapture mid-life ideals. There were hazards to mental health for elders who try to remain focused on the tasks of younger ages.

The study of individuals who have practiced inwardness as a spiritual discipline illuminates the distinction between self-centeredness and transcendence. The participants in this study retained varying degrees of psychological and physical health. They provided insights on both adaptation and thriving from their religious tradition. Jung saw in the religious traditions a school for psychic development where the vision of a future is possible with the hope of eternal life (Campbell, 1971). This paralleled Joan Erikson's suggestion that a ninth stage of development may contain premonitions of immortality. The paradox of individuation and transcendence involved being an "ego" or self and "letting go" of self, that is, moving on through difficulties guided by intimations of truth residing in the deeper levels of consciousness. The social and community setting may activate deeper levels. A wisdom tradition influencing society offered nourishment to this process. Ritual united a community in a way that facilitated deeper consciousness.

*Contemplation.* One contemporary resource for understanding of the contemplative process familiar to the research participants was the Centering Prayer movement, a recent revival of an age-old Christian tradition. In the Christian tradition, contemplation was involvement with the stream of inner knowing that developed towards the communication with God that is prayer. Contemplation was a listening and reflective approach to the events and people of daily life. Strictly speaking, contemplation was a method of letting go of words, images, personal injunctions toward activity, and distractions. The goal of prayer was expansion of the self toward an increasingly finely tuned love of God. The

goal of contemplation was not self-fulfillment or self-actualizing but self-emptying, overcoming the ego to attain cosmic consciousness.

Religious persons may have mystical experiences considered here as a heightened intensity of subjective religious experience. There were wide variations in both the form and the intensity of mystical experience. Usually mystical experience led to changes in quality of life that follow the experience. Maslow (1968, 1971) explored these phenomena in people who have described “peak” experiences characterized by enhanced vitality, productivity, serenity, and joy. In religious terms, the inner and outward aspects of a person’s life harmonized in union with God. In secular terms of medicine and gerontology, an elder person exhibited life-satisfaction. The mystical experience, as known in the Christian tradition, suggested a profound and life altering phenomenon but many people have lived a religious life without these experiences. They may have been contemplatives after years of practicing the discipline and exhibited the signs of a richly lived spiritual life yet cannot name a profound experience of visions, words, or felt knowledge of God.

There was a trend in contemporary western society to explore mysticism, perhaps in response to the de-centering of the person in a culture that has a powerful consumer ethic. Some artificial mysticism was the goal of the drug culture. The interest in eastern mysticism demonstrated in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was likewise a pursuit of a deeper sense of meaning. Moody (1995) suggested there may be clues to understanding spirituality in the literature of cross cultural faith traditions that speak of the mystical life. Mystical traditions taught

that the goal of personal growth was to become more conscious of all our relationships, with our own spirit and the oneness among all things (Beck & Metrick, 1990). It was a paradox that in the “condition of aloneness, the mystic experiences union with all creation” (Moody, 1995, p. 93).

The participants in this study were part of the Vincentian tradition that does not seek profound insights or extraordinary experiences in prayer. They believed that holiness was a wholeness that participated in the world rather than apart from it. They integrated the idea of contemplation with their action in the world (SCH, 1985). In this Christian framework, the Holy Spirit gave gifts independently of the efforts of the believer. The gifts were abilities of the individual helpful in creating community. The topic of prayer and the contemplative tradition however, was relevant to the pool of religious persons who were reflecting on their experience of aging during the interview process. In the period of their formation in the religious life, prior to Vatican II, the monastic influence emphasized the interior experience of God as well as prepared the sisters to follow active service in the example of the founders. The sisters renewed their spiritual life by an interior experience of God in solitary prayer, prayerful ritual, and union with all of creation (SCH, 1985). Elder sisters who were not engaged in active ministry continued in a ministry of prayer.

*Transcendence.* The theme of transcendence, particularly gerotranscendence was of interest in the field of aging research (Atchley, 1999; Tornstam, 1994). Transcendence was a response of the person to the challenges of life that involved development of deeper and more meaningful personal resources.

In the transcendent response, the person believed in a level of reality that exceeded the limits of human experience. In identifying the self with this mystery, the universal or cosmic Other, or in religious terms God, the person who suffered was not isolated by pain but was “brought closer to a transpersonal source of meaning and to the human community that shares that meaning” (Cassell, 1982, cited in Mount et al., 2002, p. 305).

Tornstam (1994), who initiated explorations into the phenomena of aging and transcendence, offered a positive image of aging that countered stereotypes of aging as a process of morbid physical decline. In gero-transcendence theory, there was a promise of a perspective on elder health that affirmed the capacity of the human person to find meaning even in aging, suffering, and dying. The theory of gero-transcendence ran a risk of creating blindness to the diversity of elder people’s interests and needs (Jónson & Magnusson, 2001). From my experience with elders as a mental health counselor, I questioned whether all elders experience a natural movement toward transcendence. Not all elders believe in a level of reality that exceeds the limits of human experience. I have also heard of younger people describing the transcendent experience. In this research process, I discussed the idea of transcendence with elders who are familiar with the concept and who were able to compare and contrast experiences over many decades of life.

*Late life creativity: Aging as fulfillment.* Studies of the creative process explored the depth dimensions of the human psyche. Spirituality springs from the roots of consciousness, what Jung called the “collective unconscious” (Campbell,



1971, p. 59). The manifestations of spirituality emerged in a multiplicity of forms unique to the individual and often resonating with collective truths. Some of these expressions manifested an intuitive sense of truth that evoked a consensus acceptance of the form as an “art” that spoke for and to the individual and the culture. For the individual, self-expression in a favoured artistic form was an expression of the individuated self. Not all elders were inclined to artistic expression as was Joan Erikson, yet elder spirituality required an outward direction.

A broad understanding of creativity acknowledged the outward movement of self-giving to family, society, and culture. This thesis explored creativity as the life giving capacity of individual participants and the heritage of creativity expressed in the works of the congregation. This included music, paintings, and other representations of tangible works by the respondents of art by elder individuals on display in the retirement residence and the assisted living annex.

*Wisdom.* Wisdom was commonly associated with aging in mythology, in spiritual and religious traditions and in the literature of social science. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, wisdom was a feminine person, Sophia. The definition of wisdom in the scientific realms focused on the cognitive and rational aspects of knowledge. Baltes, Staudinger, Marker, and Smith (1995) defined wisdom as “expert knowledge about ambiguous problems in life” (cited in Moody, 2003, p. 153). Lanum and Birren (1995) use the word “metastrategies” to describe how wisdom may be the ability to integrate present circumstances with previous experience thus allowing the new information to extend the capacity to balance

the self beyond its previous limitations. These approaches to the topic of wisdom were practical interpretations of wisdom suited to an empirical frame of reference and were lacking the nuance and depth of the great cultural explorations into the nature of wisdom (Moody, 2003).

Aboriginal cultures that model their spiritual understanding on relationships in family, community, and the mystery and beauty of the natural world recognized a social role for elders. Often the term wisdom described the spiritual gift of aged persons to their society. For the human person, the process of aging included the experience of decline in physical functioning to varying degrees over time. There may be also an ascendant movement characterized by wisdom and hopefulness. Cognitive and physical changes may simply be challenges to the flowering of spiritual life. The later life psychobiological decrements did not affect integrated functions. This is why a greater proportion of elders exhibited the quality known as wisdom (Atchley, 1999). For this thesis, I explored the concept of wisdom as a way of being throughout the life course and observed the expression of wisdom in relation to the challenges of the later days of the lived experience.

### *Summary*

This literature review looked at only a few of the academic disciplines actively researching the issues of aging, religion, and spirituality. Early studies of the topics of religion and aging reflected the academic inclinations toward science and technology. Quantitative studies were able to address external influences. Pioneers in this field stressed the importance of respect for diversity in elders

needs thus the suitability of qualitative research methods. I have chosen those disciplines that in my experience were dominant influences in the application of research in a clinical setting or in care settings for elders. Today, homes for elderly are varied and there are many resources available to their elder residents. Adjunctive psychosocial and spiritual professionals coordinate services according to their particular disciplines. I have often experienced productive dialogue and common understanding when working in a multidisciplinary team. Cohesion among caregivers gives the elder and their significant others a more compassionate and insightful approach to care.

The themes in this research study reflected my quest to have a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the religious and spiritual dimensions of aging. Because the richness of the traditions of religions and the variety of faith perspectives in contemporary society, I searched a broad spectrum of academic resources to highlight themes I expected to emerge in individual interview. The literature was only beginning to use exploratory and descriptive studies that enter the domains of culture and the arts.

Diversity in religious domains necessitated in-depth studies of particular beliefs and contexts. The academic literature has been lacking in pursuit of particular expressions of religiosity and vague in the understanding of the distinctions between religion and spirituality. I acknowledged the pluralist approach to religion common among Christian denominations but situated my study in a Catholic context, which was in keeping with the pioneering qualitative works discussed in the literature. I have addressed the definitional problems in the

literature by including some major secular theories of human development. As well, I included definitions as understood by elders themselves. I researched elders who are fluent in both the language of religion and of spirituality in the hope of providing insight and clarification of definitional problems as well as suggesting areas for further research.

### Chapter Three: Theoretical Frameworks

For an understanding of the paradigm guiding this research, I selected the interpretive model. The ontology was relativist, the epistemology subjectivist and the method qualitative. My own “lens” to analyze the data of research was feminist theology and Jungian psychological theory. These two theories provide latitude in searching the data in depth and from a feminist perspective. However, I first describe the interpretive framework that offers the broader context in which the two theoretical frameworks reside.

#### *Interpretive Paradigm in Social Science*

In the midst of paradigm dialogues and epistemological controversies characteristic of contemporary academic debate, the interpretive approach to social science research offered a challenge to longstanding models of scientific pursuit. The worldview of an interpretive paradigm tested what falls within and outside of legitimate inquiry (Levin, 1994). The ontology of the interpretive paradigm challenged the accepted understanding of the form and nature of reality. “Realities are . . . multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature . . . dependent for their form and content on individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

This interpretive stance was ideally suited to studies of the experience of aging. This area of study was in the realm of legitimate inquiry. The realities of the respondents were diverse and shaped by unique personal experiences. The values were experientially based and specific in nature. The study explored the

wellsprings of personal resources understood by the persons encountering the challenges of aging. McFadden et al. (2003) recognized the interpretive paradigm in their discussion of qualitative research. They commented upon the multidimensionality in studies of religion, aging and spirituality. The authors advocated for a broad base of knowledge and elasticity of method in approaching this topic. After reviewing a decade of research on the topic, they were able to envision a number of possible research directions. These include the qualitative and feminist perspectives demonstrated by Ramsey and Blieszner (1999). They saw the need for a better understanding of the content of religious and spiritual belief, the recognition of diversity in belief. They hoped for new research that led to an understanding of how beliefs affect health.

A pluralistic viewpoint encompassed individual, highly personal beliefs, theories and practices. It was most suitable in this post-modern era of respect for diversity of belief. In interpretive social science, there was the opportunity to engage with elders in dialogue that evoked the language of their own individuality, their interpretation of their personal and collective history, and their visions of possibility. A subjectivist epistemology permitted an interactive link between the subject and object of study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A new synthesis included a consensus interpretation rising from a depth understanding between individual researcher and participants.

In planning of dialogue with elders and research into deeper meanings, there was a need to discover the personal and communal language of elders. Religious language in a variety of cultural and faith traditions expressed universal

themes concerning moral action, love, suffering, loss, and life after death. In the literature review and this study there were terms that have specialized meanings within the variety of disciplines that contribute to the understanding of religion, spirituality, and aging. Contemporary research included a search for understanding of these terms from the perspective of elders. The concept of faith, for example, was central to religious thought. Faith “may be understood as confidence, reliance, trust, or belief without need for proof” (Mount et al., 2002, p. 305). However, deeply religious persons will talk not of belief in God as much as knowing God. Clarification of the language of religions opened to the variety of underlying meanings.

The experiences of encounter with God may lead to mystical phenomenon, in this study considered as “heightened intensity of subjective religious feeling” (Levin, 1994, p. 7). The mystical understanding was less amenable to the language of science and favoured the use of poetic or metaphorical descriptions. Literal translation must give way to the understanding that the experience is “as if” or “like” another more easily perceived phenomenon. Some religious persons experienced extraordinary gifts including visions, prophetic words, capacities to heal, and parapsychological phenomena. Those areas of human experience that were not visible, that were suggested by description of experiences unique to a particular individual or elaborated in the literature of world religions required the language and context of the person or tradition for full understanding. In this research project, I perceived the need to be

open to the unearthing of phenomena that is real to the participant and expressed in the language of individual faith and communal tradition.

The methods of interpretive research released the researchers to examination of the unique language and tradition of the individual participant. The qualitative method concentrated on process and interaction. In this naturalistic manner of relating, the richness of the experience of both the researcher and participant were discovered. Many constructions were possible. Values were an implicit or explicit window to viewing reality. Within this model, “the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the ‘findings’ are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). Dialogue and hermeneutics were avenues for exploration of varied ways of knowing. Dialogue was the method to provide the interactive link between the participant and myself. The participant understood and spoke from the reality of her unique personhood that was a product of her history and context. Hermeneutics was the method of analyzing text in a manner that accepted and included the context of that data.

#### *Theories for this Study*

*Feminist theology.* For this study, I used two theories. The first was feminist theory, particularly feminist theology. Feminist theology attended to the interpretive issues prevalent in a contemporary review of scripture and church structures. Its argument was that language used in the religious and academic frameworks might not adequately express the reality of spiritual experience. Smith (1995) described a “line of fault... between the forms of thought, the



symbols, images, vocabularies, concepts, frames of reference, and institutionalized structures of relevance, of our culture, and a world experienced at a level prior to knowledge or expression” (p. 49). My research participants have lived this line of fault. They were able to maintain their bonds with the Church and stand in their own truth as individuals.

Institutional structures within a patriarchal church were designed to perpetuate the dominant power and have often failed to listen to the poor, marginalized, oppressed, and women. The Catholic Church has only recently used inclusive language in scriptural, liturgical, and prayer formats. Feminist theology countered the distancing qualities of the received view. “Today our spirituality is rooted in experience and story: the experience and story of women . . . the experience of the poor and the oppressed of the world; the experience of aging” (Fitzgerald, 1986, p. 287). These observations brought new insight and richness to stagnant and patriarchal concepts of God, self, and others.

As a dominant institution for nearly two thousand years, the Catholic Church strayed far from the Christian ideals of justice and compassion. Religious women, however, have persisted in “works of mercy” establishing schools, hospitals, and resources for the underprivileged. A women’s theology has gone unspoken and unrecognized until recently. The feminist stance recognized and enabled the silent and marginalized person and culture. Religious institutions in the feminist milieu accommodated the multi-faith and interdenominational perspectives and individual spiritualities were valued as expressions of the lived spiritual journey. In this study, the women religious had expressions of spirituality

inclusive of individual diversity and common structures to express shared understandings. In the process of research in the feminist model, I was listening to the everyday experience of the respondents that spoke of their experience as women, religious, and elders. I encountered and explored a women's experience of the sacred.

As a feminist, I questioned the model of the scholar as interpretive authority. Both the qualitative method with a subjectivist epistemology and the choice of elder women religious as participants were central design elements in this research, essential to the illumination and in-depth understanding of academic questions. Inclusion of the feminist perspective countered an overemphasis on reason and rationality in science and religion. It acknowledged the intuitive, emotional, and sensory aspects of being. The importance of communal living and relational features were characteristics of both the Christian life and women's understanding of interdependence. This research design also avoided a common error in research and clinical settings of underestimating the intellectual ability and spiritual concerns of elders (Eisenhandler, 1994).

A feminist theological interpretation of the transcendent in real life suggested the important issue is not how to develop spiritually but how to live authentically. Authenticity may be described as "the state of 'mindfulness of being' . . . of being fully self-aware and conscious of being the creative composer of one's own life" (Beck & Merrick, 1990, p. 7). Traditional church teachings spoke of a "higher" or perfect order, ordained by a masculine God and directed by an exclusive and right rationality of ecclesial authority. It had spoken poorly of

women's experience of the body and feminine sexuality, of women's sense of interconnectedness and of their availability to nurture. The mind/body split in traditional western thinking had repressed the reality of the feminine body, the gifts of intuition and emotion, the Divine Feminine. A feminist theology of aging addressed the belief in the incarnation and the embodiment of spirit (Knutson, 1995).

From a feminist perspective, transcendence was more than a rising above the limitations of an aging body. This may be denial rather than transcendence. The experience of grief, the emotional response and the final acceptance of losses, restored a person to the depth dimensions of the self, the authentic being. The body, in the tradition inherited from Plato, St. Augustine, the Fathers of Christian theology, and Descartes was inferior to "idea and spirit." The dualistic split involved insensitivity to the realities of social isolation and diminishment of physical capabilities. An ethic developed where to speak of hardship, physical pain and emotional turbulence ran counter to reason and intelligence as dominant. In essence, people would not listen to or communicate their pain. It was through acceptance of the body, recognition of gender, and experience of the tangible realities of cultural, social, and historical structures that human beings encountered the divine. A feminist theological perspective recognizes embodiment and social justice for women. Interviews with the participants allowed me to understand their sense of embodiment and their experience of God as compassionate and just within the concrete realities of everyday experience. The transcendent experience lies in the knowledge of a relationship with God.

*Jungian theory.* A second framework included Jungian theory as suited to the study of religion. It expanded and probed symbols, images, myths, and intuitive knowledge. These intimations of truth, individual and cultural archetypes, explained realities that were deeply understood but difficult to articulate in a culture interested in facts from the scientific model. Spirituality was the vitality of the person and culture. The person and culture died where it is diminished, confined, negated, or overtly suppressed. With its openness to myth, symbol, image, and the individual path, Jungian theory provided a theoretical approach to explore personal understandings of the spiritual journey. In this study of aging women and spiritual knowledge, I encouraged expression of the four functions of consciousness, those of sensing, feeling, reasoning, and intuition, outlined by Jung (Campbell, 1971). A fifth function described by Jung, that of transcendence, I expanded to include the tradition of Christian mysticism.

According to Jung's theory, the later half of life included a search for spiritual values. Jung's individuation was similar to Maslow's (1968, 1971) self-actualization. Maslow used the term self-actualization in a descriptive sense. Self-actualizing persons were involved in "a cause outside their own skin. They are working at something, something which is very precious to them- some calling or vocation in the old sense, the priestly sense" (Maslow, 1971, p. 43). He did not understand self-development as a narcissistic pursuit. The research participants understood this priestly sense.

Older adults may be more inclined to introversion as an orientation to life that helps to locate a spiritual center. Extroversion was required in early life that

calls for adaptation to the external world. Our Western social structures largely prohibited the leisure time required for introverted and contemplative activities. When the tasks of physical survival and procreation were resolved, a more introverted second half of life permitted continued individuation, the finding of one's spiritual center (Lanum & Birren, 1995, p. 520). The language of Jung expressed polarities. These dualities were the stuff of mythological exploration in which a hero responded to an inner call, transcended tremendous obstacles, resolved contradictions and returned home to share wisdom for the community's benefit. Wisdom was often the capacity for creative reconciliation of seeming opposites. It was also a religious/spiritual quest. Aging as spiritual journey was a reference to these mythological themes. The mythological journey of an individual in its deepest form may emerge as a dream.

Jungian psychology explored the dream state. The door to the unconscious opens in dreams. The content of dreams may be challenges in the process of moving towards harmony and integration, the search for wholeness and meaning both for the individual and the community. Dream states express the images of the tradition and of the individual that hint toward the quest for harmony within self and community. Jungian perspectives included the idea of a collective unconscious, perhaps a biological memory of our collective history expressed as archetypes (Campbell, 1971). On a communal level, people yearned to hear the voice or see the visions of the dream in art works that spoke of the culture, the civilization within which hopes and aspirations gathered. The simple song of morning, a glimpse of a starry night and the collective human expressions

of our identity and dreams, provided solace. Solace was the comfort in transitions, those of individual growth and development and those of a community or culture reaching to fulfill its potential. Solace opened people to hope in the assurance that we are not alone and that “every kind of thing will be well” (Julian of Norwich, cited in Carmelites of Indianapolis 11, 1997, p. 453). My intent was to allow the unconscious and pre-conscious to play a role in this qualitative research. In this, I might perceive the possibilities and hope residing in and expressed in the words, art, and dreams of elders.

In art and dream, the personal and collective archetypes or elementary ideas from the unconscious speak in metaphorical terms about the preoccupations of the person and culture. In this thesis, respect for the respondents required that I be familiar with the language and processes of the person and their traditions. Listening attentively to the images and recurring themes in dialogue as well as openness to twilight states of consciousness permitted depth understanding of key issues.

As in Jungian approaches, the theological tradition recognized intuition as a guide in the development of knowledge. The language from pre-enlightenment religious context situated the individual “journey” of development in the idea of a process of conversion to greater and greater levels of communion with others and God in the structures of the Church. The contemplative life was a process of awakening to union with others and the cosmos. It was not withdrawal; instead, it was a call to union with God at the deepest level of the self. Community was the visible form of that union. The community was on a “pilgrimage,” the destination

was God and “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Love manifested in the person, as awareness of unity in prayer, in relationships with others and in the transcendent Other. It was a journey toward selflessness rather than self-fulfillment. Paradoxically, selflessness led to self-actualization.

## Chapter Four: Methodology

### *Assumptions*

In this study of spirituality in elder religious women, I made observations and gained insights based on what I have learned while interacting with elder women in clinical and informal relationships for many years. The persons in the research pool were physically and psychologically healthy persons. They exhibited what Maslow (1968, 1971) described as happiness and fulfillment. In my participation in liturgies and casual encounters with elder Sisters of Charity, I was impressed with their hopefulness and joy. This gave rise to my assumptions about what factors were unique to these elders compared to many of my former clients.

First, I assumed that the culture of religious life nourished spiritual development. By situating spirituality within a particular culture, I used a research method that called for immersion in the culture in order to experience the truths of that culture. Ethnography as a study of culture was suited to this setting because the beliefs, the communal and private rituals of liturgy and prayer, the religious language and the formats for day-to-day experience expressed a religious worldview. Second, I assumed that one can be spiritual in a religious context and that the purpose of a religious context was to nurture and support spirituality. Third, I assumed that the experience of transcendence was a process throughout the life course of these respondents and that their dedication to religious life was positively experienced.



### *Sample Description*

Nine respondents agreed to talk about their spirituality in-depth. To protect the confidentiality of the sisters, I have omitted in this document the names of persons or of the places where the sisters practiced their ministries. My observations of the culture of religious life included women from their mid-life to 104 years of age. However, the respondents' ages ranged from 77 years to 95 years. All were very well educated in one or more fields. Formal education was not only encouraged and enabled in the congregation during the early years of these sisters' formation but also continued with on-going professional upgrading and spiritual development. The sisters' family roots were widespread, from Canada and the United States with both French and English heritage. They ministered for about 60 years across Canada and the United States. Some of them had traveled to Great Britain and Europe for education and ministry.

### *Ethnography: Religious Life as a Culture*

A requirement for in-depth knowledge of this unique group of persons and contexts prompted my immersion in the culture in order to explore the ideas, values, beliefs, practices and visions that create the culture. As a naturalistic approach, ethnography was sensitive to the setting. As a *participant observer*, I found it an easy task to adopt an attitude of respect or appreciation (Hammersly & Atkinson, 1983). The research approach was a means to address questions that arise out of my own and the participants' involvement in a way of life distinct and unique from others. The religious life of the Sisters of Charity is a culture, rooted

in a long history of Christianity and more recently in the spiritual gifts of its founders.

The Sisters of Charity are a congregation founded in Emmetsburg, Maryland by Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her simplicity and tenderness in caring for the sick and the poor inspired the birth of a women's congregation that rapidly spread in the eastern United States. The new congregation of Sisters of Charity adopted the rule of the Daughters of Charity founded by St. Vincent de Paul in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. The sisters excelled in their professional capabilities as educators. In 1849, the Bishop of Halifax invited four sisters from New York to assist in the religious education of the youth of the town, particularly girls. The Sisters of Charity quickly expanded their service to the fields of health, education and social services. In Canada, for over 150 years, the evolution of the congregation encompassed the establishment and divestment of institutions including hospitals, homes for the aged, and centers of education of children and youth. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period of rapid expansion brought the Sisters of Charity across Canada into a wide variety of ministries serving all classes of society. The Sisters brought their capacity for leadership, high professional standards and compassionate sensitivity for the marginalized throughout Canada. The elder sisters in this study pioneered in many of the newly established hospitals and schools.

Research into dimensions of faith that document in a qualitative way the personal experiences of individuals was an invitation to a new relationship with persons who have inherited a long and rich spiritual tradition. A tradition survived

and grew because of the people who entered into the tradition, who re-created the tradition in each generation, or who discovered it from their own experience. In this way, it became a living tradition, with the power to enlighten and guide. This research required a “listening” approach, the challenge to learn in the silence, in the spaces between the words and in the experience of respectful participation in the tradition. Many of the constructs were complex and required an integration of religious and secular terminology.

The lived experience of the participants and their reflections on the spiritual dimension of their lives provided the core insight into the evolving nature of transcendence in the life course, the notion of aging as a spiritual journey, and the fruits of religious life. Remembered experience did hint at qualitative differences in the experience of transcendence during the different stages of personal development.

#### *Ethnographic Procedure*

The ethnographic procedure for this study included an immersion in the culture and occurred in the naturalistic environment of the retired sisters’ residence. My immersion in this environment involved casual conversation, attendance at liturgies and congregational functions, dining with elder sisters, and friendly visiting. I spent three weeks “in the field” for in-depth conversations with elder sisters. At the time of the interviews, I was familiar with the respondents through having attended multiple congregational functions as a guest and from having lived with the sisters for a part of my life. The familiarity with the sisters allowed for ease and openness in communication, the insider perspective (Merton,

1972). I used field notes selectively and appropriately to the context. Field notes in some settings (e.g., liturgical and prayer settings, during shared mealtime) would have been disrespectful of the bonds of friendship and community already established. For this reason, I documented ritual in a research journal as my subjective response to the experience of participation and as it emerged in the dialogue with the respondents. Ritual and celebration were important features of the religious culture. I observed rituals as supporting the well-being of these sisters and discussed some aspects of ritual in the individual interviews.

Individual interviews were the primary source of data for the thesis. They revealed the personal spiritual journey of the respondent. In notes posted in central locations of the sister's residence, I asked for 10 to 12 volunteer sisters to participate in the study. I compiled file folders containing a letter of introduction (Appendix A) that explained details of the research method for the participant and offered flexibility in the duration and frequency of interviews. I included in the folder an informed consent form (Appendix B) that outlined the intent of the research and required signed agreement to participate. I also included the list of questions (Appendix C) to provide an opportunity for reflection prior to the interview. The list of questions served as a non-directive interview guide that encompassed themes commonly experienced by elders (Ingram, 2003). I used it in some situations to facilitate conversation.

The first question invited the respondent to share meanings attached to a personal religious symbol or icon of her choosing. Most of the respondents readily shared an image, a scriptural quote, or theme that expressed her deepest

understanding of God. Christian symbols were abundant in the talk of spirituality. A symbol may for some people help to establish the experiential basis for their story. In Van Maanen's (1988) impressionist mode of ethnography, the ethnographer's intention is "not to tell readers what to think of an experience but to show them the experience from beginning to end and thus draw them immediately into the story to work out its problems and puzzles as they unfold" (p. 103). The sisters did not require that I help them express themselves. Most of the interviews lasted for more than an hour, were free flowing in content and laced with humour and good will. The process of life review often had a life of its own and questions were not in all situations necessary, especially when the respondent spontaneously elaborated in a reminiscent manner that linked her spiritual or religious beliefs with the challenges in her aging passage. This spontaneous approach was suited to the respondents. However, there were times when questions were useful and some probing was necessary to assist discussion of dimensions of adjustment involved in aging including the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual experiences. The questions provided a tool to use as appropriate.

I used a biblical quote for the participants' reflection prior to phrasing each question. The question that followed permitted freedom to the participants to delve deeply into reflections, with minimal control by me. It became apparent early in the research process that the sisters found the questions somewhat burdensome but were able to relate to the scriptural passages more easily. Others were more comfortable with the basic research question "What is your experience

of spirituality?” Flexibility with interview time allowed for the possibility of fatigue in the respondents. The sisters were responsive to my inquiries about fatigue and showed remarkable stamina. None of the respondents indicated a desire to pursue self-expression in a repeat interview. I concluded that conversations could continue in a climate of trust outside the research format. With the special consent to audio record, I used a digital recorder to collect the nuances of feelings, unspoken emphases, as well as articulated understandings to ensure trustworthiness of the content for transcription. It did allow freedom from the distraction of note taking and provided precision in data collection, a requirement for later discourse analysis.

*Hermeneutic and dialectic methods.* The hermeneutic method (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) involved the continual interpretation of the words contained in texts, which emerged out of the interview, and in other symbolic expressions of meaning. This approach from the tradition of exegesis of biblical and classical texts is suited to the deep involvement in the culture and the search for understandings, which consider the context from which opinions and directives emerge. The research idea was to invite an exploration of the participant’s insights into spirituality, prayer, contemplation, and transcendence as remembered in image and text and as related to aging.

Dialectics was a logical process that moved through apparent contradictions by systematically weighing each fact with a view to resolution. In interviews with the respondents, I used dialogue, a reciprocal conversation. Dialogue, as I understood it, was mostly listening. The dialectic method (Guba &

Lincoln, 1994) involved an intensely dialogic approach and an attitude that inquires into the comparison and contrasting of information. This was an opportunity to “listen in stereo” (Anderson & Jack, 1991) to nuances, spoken and muted sounds, and pauses for reflection. The objective is to evoke thick, rich descriptions, to explore for meanings, make interpretations, and perceive themes as they arise, make linkages, and note inter-relationships (Wolcott, 1994). In this study, the research journal and data analysis phase records the dialectical process. The conversations were free flowing with the spiritual intimacy shared between the respondents and me. Research with elders must be flexible enough to allow for the dream and the twilight consciousness that express image, symbol, or myth. In some of the interviews, a sense of timelessness and deep meaning came in the silence of deep communion.

*Reflexivity.* I used a research journal to foster reflexivity. It was necessary after each interview to “debrief”, that is evaluate my method of interviewing, revise my approach if there were indications of a better way to accomplish my goals and be sensitive to the personal realities of the respondents which are distinct from my own. It was also a time to reflect upon my own spiritual understandings and to follow the recommendations for reading that came from the sisters. Included in the journal was documentation of relevant personal experiences in the community outside of the interview. This reflexive process continued throughout the experience of composing the written study. Written journaling ceased at the conclusion of the data collection period but the sound

files of my continuing reflections were available to review on my computer for the writing of the final chapters.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) note that epistemology is concerned with the relationship between knower and known. I, as researcher or inquirer, was both knower and known in relationship with these elders. Some of these elders know me well, having been teachers and mentors for many years. There was honesty and authenticity between us because of our common history. This included respect for differences without commentary. We were all capable of standing in our own truth, which has adjusted to age differences, and changing roles with one another. There were times that the words of the sisters inspired me to revisit my pre-conceptions. I needed to affirm for myself some differences in theological understanding. At the same time, there were times of consensus in understanding that came out of the nuance and depth of the elder's insights and my reflections upon them.

During the data collection period, I was "on-site" for interviewing. This was the period of intense listening, reflecting, analysis, and writing. I used primarily two forms of documentation, interviews and the research journal, collected as sound files and downloaded on to my computer for transcription. Transcription of the interview contents required additional time and reflection after the three week data collection. Field notes were included in the research journal and were commentaries on my observations after interviews, of methodological needs, on theoretical concerns, and personal observations.



*Qualitative Approach: Validity/Reliability*

Validity in the qualitative realm had “to do with description and explanation and whether or not a given explanation fits a given description” (Janesick, 1999, p. 216). Lather (1986) recommended that for validity, the researcher build the following minimum into research designs. These included triangulation of methods, data, and sources. I triangulated theories in the thesis. Theory triangulation involved the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data. Data, in this thesis, included the variety of people interviewed and the literature review of secular and religious theories in several disciplines. It also included the subjective components from the journal of the researcher in the search for deeper understanding. The method included dialogue and hermeneutics.

Catalytic validity (Lather, 1986) included my documentation that the research process has led to insight on the part of the respondents, such as an expressed desire to discuss the themes of research further with me or in community groups. This would take time to observe because the sisters may reflect on the themes and engage in conversation with one another on an on-going basis. Upon revisiting the participants several months later, none of the sisters expressed a desire to revisit their interview. I reviewed in a précis form with three participants the content of each interview that I had included and offered for their review their individual transcript or the final two chapters. One said it was not necessary, the other said, “I trust you.” Another said, “That’s very good! Did I say that?” and laughed. We proceeded to have an enjoyable visit discussing a wide

variety of topics. I reconnected with all the respondents and the most significant feedback was that they felt chronological age is not very important. I have personally invited many elder sisters to attend the defense.

The concern for reliability includes confirmation of agreement on the meaning and interpretation of data. Reflections on current research findings from other sources, particularly MacKinlay (2001) and Ramsey and Blieszner (1999), suggested that these findings are very similar to their studies. Discussion of findings with thesis advisors served to confirm reliability. Collegial examination of field notes and interview transcripts would enhance reliability but I neglected to pursue this method in the interests of confidentiality.

#### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of data in a qualitative inquiry proceeded simultaneously with data collection. Time in the field was equal to the time in analysis. Guidelines for qualitative research design included organizing the data and understanding the data (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). For this study, the process included production of verbatim transcripts from sound files, identification of categories, selection of themes, comparison, and contrast of themes, observation of relationships, and the construction of working models.

I diagrammed the models on my computer using Mind Mapping software. Several clusters were developed. The first cluster organized primary themes in response to my questionnaire and to the basic research question from which I selected the headings for sections in the fifth chapter. The second diagrammed the respondents' understandings of the "Mystery of God." Central to the mystery is

the knowledge that God is love. How love is understood and expressed surrounds this core belief in the diagram. The third model centered on the Congregational principle of the “Dignity of the Human Person.” From this model, I was able to understand spiritual needs of elders from the larger context of the Congregation as well as how it contributed to the vitality I was experiencing from the elder sisters. The fourth diagrammed a “Sisters’ of Charity Vision of Aging” and included the psychosocial sensitivity to elders that is the product of Congregational reflections. The fifth diagrammed a model of spirituality based on a retreat I attended during my stay. From this, I reflected on the concept of transformation as understood in the Christian context. I was able to conclude that what I was hearing in the interviews was very much a transformative vision. This process enhanced the final process of arriving at conclusions and verifying accuracy of data.

There were no negative examples on the content of the interviews, although I did ponder the reticence of some sisters who did not participate. The discussion of ageism and the inter-generational challenges in Chapter 6 contained the conclusions from these reflections. It is possible that I would not find agreement among all elder Sisters of Charity either on the priorities I selected or on the importance of the themes that I observed. Among these sisters, I believe if they did not agree they would simply allow me to have a different opinion.

Meanings emerged from informed interpretations. The essential recurring features in the interviews included my exploration of deeper understandings from within the faith model of the elders. This involved continual reassessment and refining of concepts as the fieldwork proceeded. It involved reading literature

presented by the elders prior to the interviews proper, attending liturgy, communal prayer, centering prayer, and exploring the literature of theology and spirituality available in the sisters' library. It was a facet of this qualitative approach to note that there was no single right or correct interpretation. However, common understanding of scriptural and congregational structures provided me with a deeper knowledge of our shared understanding when expressed in the perspective of the elders of the community.

Moustakas' (1990) heuristic approach provided a helpful guideline in that it "offers room to use inductive analysis through five phases" (Janesick, 1994, p. 216). These included an inductive phase of immersion in the setting, an incubation stage to allow for thinking, an illumination phase where awareness deepens, an explanatory phase, and the final stage of creative synthesis (Janesick, 1994). The incubation stage occurred in the many pauses for reflection throughout the process. I did not limit the illumination phase to a specific period. This is in part due to the heuristic elements of my own journey in the spiritual life, and a process orientation in my understanding of others and me. In this way, I am able to contemplate research questions on an on-going basis and may once again embark upon documented research within the qualitative model.

My aim was toward "illumination" on this topic. With the insider view of longstanding and varied relationships within the congregation and the current relationship of Associate, my understanding of the culture has evolved through many years. I have participated in the evolving Associate movement in Western Canada since its beginnings. While living in the retirement residence, I made a

commitment to be an Associate as it is understood in the Nova Scotia area. The Associate movement is a recent innovation within many religious congregations including the Sisters of Charity to include as associates those persons who desire affiliation with the congregation, who live the charism, and who maintain an independent life-style. Associates do not take vows and are included in some of the Congregational activities.

For this study, I was inquiring about how the culture nourishes the elderly person. My goal was to understand both the respondents' spiritual dimension and her experience of aging, from the interviews and from documentation of the content of journal and interviews. The written documentation of the thesis was the creative synthesis.

Ethnography and a naturalistic setting suited the study of the fluctuations in human language and behaviour. Data analysis was on going and in a research journal directed my attention to the awareness of and reconsideration of my previous notions. The strength of validity in this context was in recording of the depth and breadth of the spiritual phenomenon with a small group of people in a single research setting. Interviewer technique required a disciplined approach to information gathering. This required attention throughout inquiry to the research agenda. The reflection back to the research question guided this process. Interesting tangents, storytelling, and metaphor were in keeping with the qualitative method and were a rich source of meaning. Ongoing data recording and analysis was required during the three weeks of interviewing to avoid loss of

important information and the emergence of pertinent themes. The qualitative method required careful delineation of the process of research.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Protocols of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) protected those who freely give of themselves to further knowledge. Interactions with UREB were an opportunity to improve research. Guidelines for ethical review included respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons who are not a means to the end that is research. This required the presentation of the research agenda in a transparent and open manner, including a description of the nature and purpose of the thesis in verbal and written format. A Letter of Introduction (Appendix A) and a written consent form (Appendix B) specified the methods I used. I reviewed the salient points from the informed consent verbally at the beginning of each interview and gave assurances of confidentiality.

To provide a convenient means of requesting the elder sisters' participation, I posted copies of the Letter of Introduction, List of Questions, and Informed Consent on a bulletin board outside the cafeteria of the Mount Saint Vincent Retirement Residence. In the central elevators and beside the interview room, I posted a request for volunteer sisters. The residence housed persons who are cognitively intact, competent to volunteer, and functionally independent.

I offered two settings available in the residence as "drop-in" resources to provide privacy and ease in communication. The elder sisters' community leader provided a room behind the chapel that had an outer and inner room. In the outer room, I was available on an informal basis. The inner room provided privacy for

interviews. I also used my apartment in the residence. To those persons considering participation, I gave a file folder of introductory information, stressing that there was no obligation to participate. In the consent form, I asked permission to audio record individual conversations between participants and myself. To protect privacy and assure confidentiality, I offered to turn off the recorder at any time and I respected requests not to include selected conversations in the thesis. However, none of the sisters requested that I turn off the recorder. I informed each woman that the interview data transcribed to computer directly from tape is confidential to the researcher and advisors. Identifying information included a pseudonym, number of years in the congregation, and primary ministry. I asked in the consent form if I might keep non-identifying data for later research. A researcher log of identifying information on my personal computer permitted me to return to individual participants for clarification of verbatim statements.

A number of specific considerations regarding the unique cultural context of elder religious women, the sensitivity of this topic, and the relationship of myself to the participants were relevant. The orientation to research rather than therapeutic interaction required gentle guidance. At the time of selection, I attended to the general well-being of each volunteer for risks of potential discomfort or anxiety. There were indications of frailty and lack of assurance of internal or external safety. These are common features in elder presentation. I was sensitive to these potentials by inquiring about fatigue on several occasions. The

respondents verbalized either that they were comfortable to continue or that they had completed what they wished to say.

The facts of physical decline are important research considerations in understanding the lived experience of the respondents and are included. Spontaneously most of the sisters revealed a medical concern that was a challenge for them. A number of them experienced the onset of a metabolic illness in later life. Because this study was exploring the sensitive ground of beliefs and values it was necessary for me to be familiar with the language and comfort level of this group that was sharing personal information. The sisters varied in their willingness to share their struggles or in the freedom within themselves to disclose details of spiritual growth. For the sisters willing to participate, the familiarity of the respondents with me provided trust and openness to explore meaningful content. Spiritual concerns, however, are individual and private. Several sisters simply said “No” to participation. One told me her spirituality is very deep. I understood this to mean her spirituality was too deep for words and considered this a guideline for me to respect with any sister. In some of the interviews, I needed to respond to questions about my intentions and methods. A dialogic method of interaction was a familiar and acceptable approach to interaction in this group and conversation included honest responses from me to any of the participants’ questions. I interacted with the participants in a non-intrusive, non-coercive manner. This involved respect for verbal and non-verbal indications of unwillingness to pursue any particular topic. Indications of reticence to respond to my inquiry or to give detailed elaboration required



sensitivity on my part. I used the skills in dialogue from my years as a mental health nurse to identify reluctance to pursue any given topic or to participate in the research.

Women religious have a highly evolved ethical sense. While in dialogue with the sisters who agreed to participate in the research, it was important for me to engage in listening as a way to provide guidance and to respond to their challenges. Familiarity with this context has helped to prepare me to be attentive to indications of power imbalances, to be aware of resistance, and to use a self-critical awareness to reformulate or redesign the approaches I used. Years of counseling elders in the mental health field provided me with experience in discussing sensitive topics. The guidelines for this process include allowing time for responses, using gentle probes, attending to non-verbal behaviour, and respecting the authority of elder points of view. A recurring theme in mental health practice that I have internalized is the importance of authenticity and unconditional acceptance of the other.

A further ethical concern was the research relationship I established with the participants. The relationship among potential participants, the congregation, and me has a history including most recently, Associate status, and rented accommodation in an apartment at the retirement residence. This familiarity may have influenced participants' readiness to become involved either positively or negatively. The voluntary nature of the study allowed for individual choice.

I disengaged from the research agenda using the process I have learned in therapeutic contexts. Disengagement involves a decrease in the number of formal

regular contacts. At the conclusion of the interview phase of research, there were no indications from any of the participants that closure was incomplete. A situational asset of this research permitted continued interactions between the elder sisters and me whereby I was able to withdraw from a research agenda while continuing to maintain communication based on long-standing personal, religious, and spiritual bonds. I was open and available upon my return to the residence many months later to discuss residual concerns and any inquiries, which may be indications of lack of closure. An elder sister invited me to return for the opening of a new retirement residence and I was welcomed to visit again by many of the elder sisters.

Assuring the comfort and peacefulness of these respondents was a priority. There was always the possibility that themes, which evokes distress, emerged spontaneously. These are realities in any understanding of the elder experience. The vicissitudes of life are the challenges to spiritual growth. Attention to this distress was important in the interview process and in follow-up. I found the sisters were resilient and forthright about their own discomfort. I did assure one sister that her community leader was available if she needed support. Following the interviews, I related to each sister with a discerning manner that considered both the need to respect her privacy, as well as the possibility there may be unresolved concerns. It appeared at the conclusion of the interviews that the sisters continue to welcome me with acceptance that seemed to have no bearing on the research relationship.

The research relationship between congregation and me includes ethical and methodological supervision. I obtained permission to do this research from the Congregational Leadership Team (Appendix D). I sent the Congregational Leader the revised proposal and letter of acceptance by the University Ethics Committee. A Sister of Charity was on the advisory committee for the thesis production. I have prepared a power point presentation to summarize and discuss my findings for the elder sisters and any interested Sisters of Charity. When I present my findings, I will be attentive to any possible unresolved issues that emerge and discuss these openly.

#### *Limitations to the Inquiry*

The sample was small, owing to the sensitivity of the topic. Spirituality is a private concern and many people are uncomfortable to share their deepest thoughts and feelings. The participants were volunteers who were willing to discuss their spiritual lives. The early education of sisters, who are now in the elder stage, encouraged privacy about individual spirituality. This was perhaps a way to live the virtue of humility. The “sacredness” of a person’s relationship with God was a priority beyond the need to do research. For this reason, I respected the depth presented by each sister. The research pool was limited to elder religious women in a Catholic tradition and thus excluded other faiths and Christian denominations. The discoveries emerging from dialogue with elder women included my personal understandings of spirituality that is, my subjective bias. The product of sharing in the conclusion became “our” understanding of spirituality.

Because I am an Associate member of the organization I was studying, the question of researcher bias does surface. I understand the insider perspective as an asset. In the dialogue with participants, I had an advantage in being able to explore specific religious themes as deeply understood and lived by the persons willing to communicate their personal spiritual realities. From an insider viewpoint, I attempted to illumine academic issues at the intersection of religion, spirituality, and aging. Merton (1972) focused on the unique perspective insiders bring to research. Both insiders and outsiders have distinctive assets and liabilities. In this situation, a liability I had was a limitation in understanding the perspectives of a vowed religious with many years of living in intimate communication with the congregation. I recognized that all persons were insiders and outsiders in various social situations. As an Associate, I did not take vows and chose to live a different life-style. I did not participate in some of the formal celebrations. The congregation included Associates in some liturgical and community functions and invited Associates to assist in various missions and ministries.

In this interpretive research, the question of generalizability was not relevant. The goal was not to discover universals, to make predictions, or to control outcome. It was rather to explore contexts and to achieve insights and understandings (Neugarten, 1985 as cited in Weiland, 1995). The study was not exhaustive or comprehensive in terms of the visible representation of the congregation. It was rather a consensus understanding of this particular spiritual movement as seen by the elders of the culture and documented from the “eyes of

the beholder.” Additionally, because the perceptions of the individuals included a retrospective view, the problem of memory arose. Memories were subjective states. Factual data may be obscured and therefore not objectively accurate. Reflective self-consciousness involved remembering the past in the light of the present. It also included the meaning giving component of memory. In asking the respondent to remember, I was taking her attention from the present, the lived experience of the here and now. It involved the distinction between the lived and the known. Winter (1971) legitimized the use of this kind of data.

## Chapter Five: The Stories- An Invitation to Listen

Among my nine responders, there was a history of the spiritual quest during their lives in the congregation. The day-to-day structure of living incorporated spiritual renewal for the sisters throughout their life in the congregation. Each day included time for prayer. Weekly and monthly days of recollection, workshops, and yearly retreats provided time for reflection and evaluation. With the changes in the Catholic Church after Vatican 11, came a shift in focus regarding spirituality. A flowering of personal growth included freedom for individual self-expression and coincided with the structural changes in religious congregations.

The five principles of renewal appropriate for religious life and expressed in the 1968/69 Chapter of Renewal included as first principle the dignity of the human person, which stated that each person has a proper and unique dignity and has rights and duties that are universal and inviolable. The second principle of subsidiarity provided for the right ordering of religious life. The level to which responsibility belongs had the decision-making authority. The third principle of collegiality or co-responsibility implied the participation of members in governing and obeying. Unity, the fourth principle, discussed the oneness of heart and spirit that binds a community for the purpose of its apostolic mission. Finally, the fifth principle called pluriformity recognized diversity in community. (SCH, 2007). Most of the respondents expressed a new sense of freedom and personal worth that emerged from the emphasis on the dignity of the human person and the

restructuring of personal and community living within the guidelines of these principles.

Primary ministries were education and health care. The early formation in the congregation focused on rules, regulation, and obligation to duty. The history of these sisters reflected extended hours of productivity well past the age of retirement. Retirement age was fluid according to the needs of the sisters, many assuming ministries related to their primary work for years after age 65. Health needs necessitated some gradual changes in level of activity. The sisters into their nineties continued to find ways to serve within and outside of the retirement residence. Duties of any sort were service to God and others. The elder sisters valued activity and retirement as a mixed blessing. This ethic of productivity paralleled the movement in the larger society during the depression, years of war and its aftermath. The paradigm for the congregation, however, imitated the life of Jesus who according to the scriptures traveled among the poor, liberating the oppressed and healing the sick.

Most of the sisters stated that a blessing for them has been good health. My observation of the elder sisters during research included a sense of these women flourishing in the holistic sense of mind, body, and spirit well beyond their chronological ages. The early rigors of religious life were a challenge to surmount and those who persevered led an ordered and regular life conducive to maintaining health. The life style of the sisters included good nutrition, regular sleep and exercise, meaningful work, and time for meditation.

They were not exempt from hardship or difficult challenges. In some of the early missions and during difficult times in society, material poverty was a daily reality. The sisters involved in health care worked for twelve hours every day of the week and had no days off for years before government administration of the hospitals. Lack of adequate medical resources and the need for thrift required clever adaptation to the realities of scarcity in the small hospitals. The spirit of cooperative living necessitated sharing of financial resources from those convents where the sisters earned good salaries. One nonagenarian recalled, “When they built the Infirmary they mortgaged every house (convent) in the city . . . we had fifty or more sisters with no salaries.” Another recalled that during the depression years, they never had fresh fruit with their meals. The sisters accepted material hardship as the reality for themselves and among those for whom they ministered. More than one sister described a period of personal stress that was debilitating in her younger years in the congregation; however, she was able to find support and healing during that crisis. Community life included common work and accommodation. Support from one another did not include communicating distress to others as much as working together with a common goal, accepting the realities around them, and living in fidelity to their responsibilities. Working together, prayer, and a focus on the needs of others gave structure and meaning to daily life.

Resiliency, determination, and self-sufficiency were dominant personality attributes throughout difficult times. In the interviews with these women gentleness, warmth, generosity, and interpersonal sensitivity marked their



individual styles. I was immediately at ease in communication where humour, joyfulness, peace, and helpfulness created a beautiful exchange of understanding throughout our discussions. When speaking of suffering, the sisters minimized their own hardships and reflected an integrated knowledge of both suffering and joy. They were acutely aware of the sufferings of others, individually and globally, and expressed not only compassion for others but remarkable insight into unjust social structures. One sister quoted Mother Theresa who told her that the greatest suffering for human beings is rejection. Their welcoming and hospitable style of encounter pervaded all my interactions and reflected each person's sensitivity to the human need for community and belonging.

Beyond the immediate concerns of day-to-day living, these elders were knowledgeable about local and world affairs from TV, newspapers, and daily communication among themselves. To the horrors they witness of a world with values very different from their own, they tried to remain positive and hopeful. One sister quietly prayed with faith, that change in society is possible. In witness to signs of social deterioration, she expressed her silent prayer. "Go into the situation, Lord." To me she gave counsel in her statement. "Even when we start talking at table absorbed in all the terrible things . . . we have to struggle but not let them oppress us." Trust in a benevolent God permeated all dialogue. Faith in the power of prayer and a sense of appropriate action allowed for a positive response in the midst of crisis. This elder sister reflected on her approach to harsh realities. "One of the gifts that I've always had (is) a sense of knowing when the thing is right . . . and if it's not . . . doing something about it."

The active orientation of this religious congregation was rooted in their knowledge of the process of prayer as an everyday relationship with God. For the Sisters of Charity, retirement was a change in the manner of giving herself to God. The elder sisters welcomed a new, less hurried period of life, an opportunity for deepening of a life of prayer. Retirement involved a new freedom not only from obligations but also of a release from constraints of thought, attitude, and emotional burdens. In the interviews, this was often expressed as a “letting go . . . It doesn’t matter . . . what is this to eternity . . . let it go.” Interiority, as a life long practice, allowed the sisters to easily step into the life centered on prayer.

I used to think . . . I would like time for contemplation . . . now it’s a wonderful blessing . . . I am delighted . . . not that I didn’t pray (before but now there) is so much more leisure . . . it is one of the joys of aging.

*Be Still and Know that I Am God. Ps. 46:10*

The time for contemplation was a central theme for the sisters. The sisters have a longstanding appreciation of listening to the “voice of God” as an inner resource. It was their awareness of the mystery of life, of their individual way of being in relationship with God and others. They have lived with the practice going into an “inner room,” understood as the deeper self, to pray. This awareness permeated the structure of religious life and was the conviction of each person. Many continued to practice the tradition of Holy Hour, a time set aside daily for the prayer of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Others had a less structured and free flowing style of prayer. Diversity is immediately apparent in the choices

of prayer-style, ranging from a personal mantra, to recitation of the “divine praises” to formalized Catholic traditions such as the rosary and “lectio-devina”. “We have a lot of freedom,” commented another elder sister. What seems to be a common quality of prayer was the appreciation that in the silence at the core of her person, the sister encountered God and was able to be aware of her subtle feelings and inner strength. I experienced the evidence of this interiority in the compassionate and generous acceptance of myself in both my research efforts and on a personal level.

For these sisters there was no conflict between being and doing. Being “busy” was understood as doing the will of God and as an active religious order the sisters were dedicated to service in a way that transcended the limits of a job description. However, during the passage of adjustment in aging, the contemplative stance provided the resource for continued meaning. As retirement from active service became a necessity due to health changes, the sisters appreciated the time and resources to nourish their relationship with God. “You get weary,” said one sister who had celebrated a Jubilee of 70 years in the Congregation. In reflecting on her current preoccupations she elaborated, “The scriptures mean a lot to me . . . you get an intimacy after a while.” The relationship orientation of their lives folded into and about knowing God and others at a profound level within themselves. It was not abstract or ideological in essence although is expressed with sophistication, such as a Trinitarian theology practiced as an everyday sensitivity to the needs of others. One Catholic teaching

was that faith without love is ideology. What the sisters express was more than ideology. They communicated deep faith with compassion.

Love as relationship was the core of contemplation. The Christian mystical tradition had concrete expression in the scriptures and in the lived experience of each person. This elder sister expressed her spiritual yearning in the following words.

What I'm looking for is a deeper personal relationship with Jesus . . . I don't go far away from the gospel . . . I don't have to be with it. (Some contemporary theologies do not) . . . have the staying power that the words of the gospel have . . . That's my spirituality.

#### *Multiple Ways to God*

For the elder sisters spirituality was lived within the Hebrew/Christian tradition and expressed in biblical metaphors and the interpretations of leaders of Christian spiritual thought in the later 20th century. There were many kinds of spirituality within that orientation including Jesuit spirituality, Dominican spirituality, Ignatian spirituality, Franciscan spirituality, to name only a few. Each sister found her own "way" within the frameworks of Christian spirituality and favoured her own authors and spiritual guides. My research question stimulated reflection on the nature of spirituality itself. One septuagenarian approached the topic as follows.

I think spirituality is much easier to describe rather than to define.

It is a very personal thing . . . For myself, my spirituality is not

static. It is a process. (It is) a combination of all the experiences of my life . . . (It has) grown and been enriched by all the people, circumstances, pain, joy . . . (These things) changed my spiritual thinking.

Each sister relates her spiritual quest in the understanding of the Christian call or vocation. As one said,

For me spirituality is about a personal God . . . for others perhaps it is more vague . . . a personal relationship with Jesus . . . the words that Jesus said are very much a part of that relationship. It is the totality of a person. Everybody has life experiences, a unique persona . . . There are certain basic tenets of Christian spirituality that are vital to what the spiritual life is . . . Each spirituality may provide emphasis on one aspect or another, intellectual, emotional etc. By nature, I lean more to one than to another. My spirituality is connected to a call.

#### *Aging as Spiritual Journey*

The evolving understanding of the mystery of God occurred in the daily tasks of meeting the obligations of each vocation as well as in the more personal experiences of medical, family and community crisis. It was a process throughout the life span with new experiences in the later years. As the aging passage presented new challenges, these elders remained grounded in their beliefs. Aging furthered the process of spiritual growth. "I think at my age my desire is to deepen what is there . . . I'm not looking for a whole lot of new things . . . all I want is a

deeper personal relationship with Jesus.” Another sister found new direction in later life.

I reached the age of 70 where I had a private revelation that I was doing the right thing in packing up and going away in search of something deeper and every step of the way was blessed because during all what seemed like a haphazard sort of direction . . . was really God’s way of preparing me for the work of a lifetime that didn’t begin until after the age of 70.

She referred to an Old Testament prophet as a metaphor for her the new passage that began after retirement from teaching. “That was the first beginning of Habakkuk being taken by the hair of his head and replanted.”

Most of the elder sisters described a change in their spirituality coinciding with the freedom of self-expression emerging in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Larger society in the west experienced the deepening brought about by psychological insight. Psychological health included the cognitive triad of a positive view of world, self, and others. “In the early years, religious life was all about regularity and the rule . . . nothing about God’s love, and the nearness of God.” It was, “not a deep spirituality, (we were) living more on the surface.” Both personal and congregational growth intersected when these sisters were in mid-life. “In my early days I wouldn’t dare speak out, I was very shy, I wouldn’t dare say anything . . . (Now) I speak what I feel I want.”

One octogenarian experienced a serious health crisis in later life. From a diagnostic perspective, she faced a life threatening illness and uncertainty about

the outcome of surgical intervention. She was successfully treated and is continuing as a vital contributor to her community.

Until these things happened to me . . . God wasn't close but then also I developed a strong attraction to Jesus as the Son of God . . . how precious we are to God and how much God loves us . . . such a positive aspect . . . God in our life . . .

Another nonagenarian stated,

We were not taught that you see God in every person . . . its only as I got older that stuck. You could have a mother coming in because some kid was having a hard time or giving you a hard time in the school and you had to leave her in the parlour . . . and go for your prayers.

The change in her understanding of prayer developed from that of a duty to that of an intimate personal relationship in which she is able to recognize herself as loved and loving. "I think I've prayed enough that I know what I need and what I want and I'm getting to know Jesus more everyday . . . the scripture means something to me . . . you get an intimacy after a while." Interestingly she is observing this change after celebrating her 70th Jubilee and having been in an active ministry for 50 years.

The vitality of each of the sisters was immediately perceivable on all levels of functioning. The physical changes of aging were an everyday challenge for each person that they approached from a spiritual center. All the sisters continued to express their love of God through service. One sister who ministered

in the hospital setting was aware of her new limits. She prayed, “Oh God help my feet, they are not my best feet. That I will be able to walk, some day I will not be able to.” Another octogenarian reflected on her body with kindness in her words, “Body, would you be willing to let me go downstairs?” A third saw her diagnosis and treatment of a tumour as the opportunity to deepen her spirituality. Another with a chronic condition accepted her new need for restful periods during the day. As she became fatigued during the interview, I asked her, “What is your body telling you now?” Her good-humoured response was “I need a snooze.” To the cognitive changes that included some forgetfulness, the sisters showed humour and kindness to themselves and one another.

In dialogue with the SCH over many years, I often heard references to the words of St. Iranaeus that the human being fully alive is the glory of God. This was a non-hierarchical perception of the mystery of God developed in many current Christian spiritual approaches. The gospel message I have heard in contemporary Christian church settings emphasized fullness of life. The elder sisters reiterated that perception. Spirituality is, for this sister,

Being alive in God . . . It’s a gift . . . an openness of heart . . .  
 always to receive . . . not only just the joy, (both) the ups and  
 downs . . . I think spirituality (helps us) to see God in incidences .  
 . . to see God in the happenings of the day.

Another sister referred to her resource of spiritual literature. A spiritual writer “spoke about awareness . . . being in touch with the movements of your



heart . . . I've been very much in touch (with my heart).” An appreciation of God as a personal experience in the mind and heart permeated all my interviews.

My spirituality is very much based on the word of God, the presence of God . . . This gospel orientation is evident in the words that Jesus spoke, such as ‘I come that you may have life and have it the full . . .’ these words have enriched me and given me a goal.

### *The Mystery of God*

At the heart of Christian belief is the recognition that “God” is incomprehensible. All religions are attempts to understand and live the mystery that is beyond all images, metaphors, and conceptualizations. Any language of God was analogical and beyond empirical fact. Spirituality expressed the individual understanding of infinite mystery. Sadly, for many people learned experiences and culture have shaped a fearful perception of this mystery. An over-emphasis on a judgmental and punitive God based on the worldview of some ancient scriptures and a dogmatic religious teaching promoted stagnation in personal growth and crippling evolution of the person and society, and was contrary to the message of Christianity. The sisters described an evolution in their understanding of God throughout the life span.

In the early years of religious life, daily obedience to a “rule” marked the path to ascent to God.

I used to think if I tried hard enough I'd be perfect.

Now I know I won't . . . (laughter) . . . I used to think that God would really love me if I was good and now I know that God loves

me unconditionally. I used to think that . . . I can do this and this . . . then I realized without God I can do nothing . . . that didn't happen all at once . . . It happened gradually.

God as understood by these Sisters of Charity was in alliance with human flourishing. "God is love and love heals everything." An image from the Book of Jeremiah helped one elder sister who found her way to spiritual understanding by comparing God to a potter.

He has molded me . . . God's hand never leaves you . . . (You are) on the wheel, it has to be centered . . . persons, places and things . . . if any are off center . . . (There is) difficulty . . . That has spoken to my life . . . when things get hard.

Spirituality for these sisters included a discipline that cultivated virtue. The understanding and experiencing of God as love required continual reviewing of difficult situations, acknowledging the positive way of a loving response to life and facing hardship with courage. Another sister reflecting on her evolving image of God acknowledged, "I was never one of those who feared God or thought of God as a harsh judge but as I reflected I began to realize that my image has changed . . . maybe not my image of God but my image of myself." She centered her process of spiritual growth from childhood on the belief that "God is so good." This belief sustained her even in difficult passages of health problems and loss of immediate family

A nonagenarian began her interview with the central tenet of her paradigm being that God is immanent. Her reflections later in the interview demonstrated

her awareness of the transcendent mystery of God, her appreciation of “God’s time.” In her first statement about her spirituality she expressed her sense that God is intrinsically related to the world, that God is with us.

If I could not fully believe that the very God of Heaven and Earth who became flesh and blood keeps his word and his word is that he is present there in the form of bread and wine . . . that is really such a shocking reality that to not live by it to me that would be like just wandering almost aimlessly in some form of a life that hasn’t got the depth that would see you through much . . . and I think that’s what has sustained me because life can be difficult.

What she describes as a “shocking reality” lies as the core belief animating the lives of all the sisters. Where the transcendence of God has been extolled and emphasized in Christian teachings, these sisters spontaneously expressed a belief in the nearness of God. The word “real” replaced authenticity as a desirable personal and spiritual goal. One sister expressed her reflection on personality change in aging “when you get old you don’t change, you just get more so . . . if you’re crabby, stubborn, bossy . . . you get more so.” The notion of gero-transcendence, while appealing, may be qualitatively different among elders. The “letting go” of rational and materialistic concerns had been a life long quest and accomplishment to varying degrees for these women. In her understanding of “letting go” this sister notices an ease she now experiences in the letting go of prejudice and preconceived ideas. Another sister pointed to a change in herself that she notices as her spirituality.

What I can tell you about spirituality . . . as I got older that I got that sense . . . things don't bother me too much any more . . . when you are young things would bother you . . . I couldn't care less what people think of me.

Her aliveness and freedom of spirit came from her rich experience of reflecting on the scriptures.

### *Community*

For these sisters, the relationship with God colored and enhanced all relationships. For one sister, the process of maturing was a gradual change of orientation from the quest for independence to the recognition of interdependence. When I asked her when maturity happens, she laughed and said "Maybe this afternoon?" The elder sisters softened the distinction between God and others with a deep realization of the interdependence of all living creatures and the priority of loving bonds with others. "I've lived with wonderful people . . . those people kept me going then. Part of it is still with you . . . (They) become part of your own growth." She elaborated on the change in herself as she lived a communal life-style. "By age thirty, my joy (was that) I had a handle on things . . . (I was) not floundering." Now she appreciates relationships in a new way. Many of the sisters referred to immediate family as a model of intimate relationship. In reflecting on the death of her brother, this sister concluded, "At the end, people want their loved ones around them. Relationships do not just happen, they take a long time to mature, to be cultivated and nourished or they die."

Community was the product of communion, ritualized and celebrated in an abundance of forms. The elder sisters were grateful that in their retirement they were able to experience daily liturgy of Word and Eucharist. Liturgical expression was a shared responsibility, coordinated by a liturgist and music director. A choir of elder women prepared weekly for sung portions of the Masses and musically gifted elder sisters accompanied on the organ. Special occasions such as Jubilee events or feasts of the church were occasions for creative giving to one another and those who visit, through liturgy and sharing of meals. One sister was satisfied that each day a new thought from the readings propels her to greater intimacy with God. Most of the elder sisters shared communal prayer daily in small groups using a breviary or companion to the breviary, recitation of psalms, antiphons, and readings. One sister commented on the “good community” at the residence and her enjoyment of community dining.

### *Suffering*

The integration of suffering in the perspective on the life journey became clear in the aging passage. A nonagenarian began her reflections on spirituality with a loving remembrance of her brother who gave his life overseas in the Second World War. She had also recently experienced a painful physical illness and had given over an occupation at the residence with a new awareness that she is “tired.” During her narrative, she reminded me that for many of these elder sisters the cultural and historical realities of war and the depression years in Canada were lived experiences. “The road home (to God) is not always fair and just, bad things happen. There is the hill of old age that can include illness and

rejection.” The final passage of life included acceptance of the journey with an appreciation of a vision. “No matter what, I will be with God.”

During the time of the interviews, a member of the community of sisters died. In the content of most of the interviews, there was a reflection on grief, some expressions of puzzlement on the deceased sister’s last days, an evaluation of their responsibilities in their role as sisters to this person, and a more personal awareness of mortality. As a community, they celebrated Liturgy commemorating that sister’s giftedness. Remembrance of friends and important relationships stimulated questions of meaning. “I remember talking to an older sister (who emphasized that) we are dying so that we may live. She said ‘I’m just learning how to pray.’” Her sight, hearing, and energy were going and yet she was aware of a new dimension to her prayer. This understanding of life includes acceptance of death, not only of the body but also of the “daily dying . . . many deaths, there’s a spirituality to that, that’s what it’s about.” The spiritual deepening that attended acceptance of death opened the sisters to a deeper understanding of the love of God. “God’s like that . . . gives us something to compensate for . . . it’s a pretty universal experience . . . I suppose my death is not going to be perfect, nothing else has.” This sister did reflect on her death. “Will I have the strength? How will it be?” She concluded her reflection with an assurance “God’s going to take very good care of me . . . and everyone else. I don’t know how.”

In the course of reminiscence, some of these elders recalled times of loneliness. One continues to struggle with sensitivity to rejection. She commented, “I (become) very lonely . . . its part of my suffering.” She finds

healthy ways of adaptation. “I go out . . . I’ll put on music.” However, another said, “You can be lonely anywhere, even in a crowd.” The formation process and early ministries of young sisters necessitated separation from families of origin. The idea of sacrifice, in many situations the painful separation from family, is expressed by this sister. “It’s a means of love . . . put your own needs (second).” Another who chose to live at a distance from her immediate family, recalled loneliness for much of her religious life. She commented, “Living with adults . . . it’s not the same.” The changes in structure of religious life in the latter 20th century have brought the inclusion of family and close friends into the community of belonging to a much greater degree. Many of the reflections of the respondents included deep appreciation for family and spiritual connections outside the congregation.

### *Blessings*

One sister commented that “Religious life has been a blessing all the way.” Another reiterated her appreciation for the blessing that religious life has been for her. Another commented, “I have been very fortunate in my life, the way it has evolved.” A nonagenarian remembered and described in detail her journeys through Europe after retirement. She noted, “Every step of the way was blessed” and described uncanny events and meaningful coincidences that assured her she was doing the will of God. The notions of blessing, appreciation, and belief in the goodness of life interwove throughout the interviews.

The elder sisters often expressed a deep faith in the Providence of God. This concept was similar to the new age spirituality that emphasized and affirmed

abundance from the invisible, all providing source of life. As a lived belief, assurance of Providence allowed the individual to remain positive in the midst of difficult times. One nonagenarian confused me constantly whenever I took a pessimistic or what I considered a “realistic” perspective. Her positive viewpoint seemed in contrast to the realities of her illness. She expressed gratitude for all her blessings. She seemed unaware of any scarcity in life or need to be fearful. She reminded me “Love casts out fear” and quoted St. Theresa of Avila with the phrase, “Let nothing disturb you.” In her narrative, she gave details of a particularly difficult passage as a young woman with demanding responsibilities in her convent and school. She viewed the experience as part of God’s plan for her. To her, seemingly insignificant events were part of a plan, part of God’s plan for her. Synchronicities, that is, meaningful coincidences were not surprising when viewed from the beautiful and harmonious plan of God. She lived in gratefulness as she prepared for her final days and continued life after the transition of dying.

Another sister itemized the many blessings of her life. “My faith” was her first blessing and from there she appreciated her “family, religious community, health, intelligence, sense of humour, friends,” as well as activity, and the outdoors. The respondents did not seem to find fault with others or with their life experience but rather lived in a state of acceptance and gratitude. Each interview left me with the sense of being uplifted, inspired, and untroubled at a profound depth within myself, in itself transformative. I was able to see the spirit of



cooperation within the community and a trust that prayer and faith in a positive outcome easily remove obstacles.

*Gifts of aging: Creativity and Wisdom*

For these women, life is a creative process and each person is God's work of art. A goal for one sister is to "remain soft, pliable clay in the hands of God." In this perspective, she is the medium of God's artwork. Another, a musician, appreciated the notion of being "a reed of God" as is a wind instrument. Another found that music is very important for prayer." (Music) . . . comes back in the night, my heart is interceding . . . I awaken singing the divine praises." Early in my stay at the retirement residence, a sister gave me a book that with the title, "You are God's Work of Art." I understood at that moment that the sisters' creativity involves bringing people to their own beauty, a transformative capacity. The spiritual paths of creativity and transformation intersected in the making of community.

All approached life creatively and knew their own creative sources. Many sisters were well educated in various arts, literary, visual and music. For one nonagenarian, her education and gift with music, spirituality, and literature reached a new creative expression long after retirement. She reminded me that she was a visual artist as well. "Do you remember the painting I raffled at the fall fair?" She reminded me of how busy she had been in her life and was not able to pursue formal art education. Her accomplishments included a creative method for teaching communication skills to children with Down's syndrome.

Some of the very old sisters continued to find pleasure in painting, dancing, writing, and music even when in need of assisted living. As an icon of spirituality, one sister showed a picture of a poor child she sponsors in the third world. She grounded her creativity in the real experience of human loving. The retirement residence, the archives, and the assisted living corridor reflected an abundance of original works of art from sisters both living and deceased. Favoured themes were images from scripture and the founders of the congregation. Appreciation of landscapes in which the sisters lived, domestic aestheticism and symbols of what is sacred marked the image world the sisters inhabit.

Wisdom in the Judeo/Christian tradition is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit described in the letters of St. Paul. Old Testament scripture devoted an entire book to wisdom and prayer for wisdom was a response to the pursuit of right thought and action in difficult times throughout the life span. The elder sisters reflected on the changes in wisdom in late life. One agreed, "There is wisdom of old age." She described a situation in which a sister had communicated her distress to her, possibly due to judgments made by younger persons. "They treat me like a dummy, (As if) I am stupid." The responder recognized in the other woman "She was a bit erratic (but) a dear woman." Her compassion was clear as well in that situation. "I felt so sad about that." The wisdom of this sister in her elder year was "the wisdom of accepting the things you used to be critical of . . . (letting the other person be herself because that's her way . . . they are who they are." This wisdom of acceptance of the other echoed in the transcripts of other responders, as well as good-natured acceptance of themselves.

This tolerance was a discipline, however, as well as an adaptive capability when living in close proximity with other persons. An octogenarian talked of her irritability because of illness and her regret at an abrupt response to another sister. She reflected on the situation, prayed about it, and experienced a deep relief when, at an inspired moment, she was able to apologize and renew her bonds with the other person involved. Wisdom in personal interactions and ordering of a just society were ideals for these women. Another sister remembered her teaching days and wondered about the standards in contemporary schools. “We taught that there is a right and a wrong, and if it was wrong you didn’t do it.” Tolerance did not extend to uncivilized or disrespectful behaviour. The sisters cultivated other virtues such as justice, courage, compassion, and truth throughout their lives. Virtue is the by-product of charity, the core Christian teaching.

The legacy of wisdom in older persons may be more perceivable by younger persons. With one sister, I discussed the Gifts of the Holy Spirit as outlined in the Letters of St. Paul. (Gal. 5) including wisdom, understanding, and discernment. Her response was to affirm that, “all people have gifts.” She reflected on her talks with younger persons but did not note any differences in the wisdom of old age. Another sister commented that she believed that there is wisdom in old age. It was in the acceptance of the other without prejudice. She did not think elders leave a legacy of wisdom and she re-contextualized the concept of legacy. “I can see the desire to continue to preach the Word.” She reflected on a recent death of a family member and the process of the giving away of belongings.

The only thing we can take (when we die) is who we are . . . our relationship with God and our relationship with others. As far as other things (material), I couldn't care less. You have to leave it anyway . . . What you treasure someone else will pitch . . . Just pray for me at the altar wherever you are . . . We will never know what the legacy was anyway.

This sister saw her legacy in love, but cannot recall the many reminders of her inspiring words or actions from grateful students. "Most of legacy is in love and the love that you shared . . . that's all that matters." Another sees legacy "in God's hand." Another saw a duty to give me wise counsel in a variety of situations where I was confused by day-to-day happenings in the community. When I might have made less than ideal choices, her wisdom prompted me to be sensitive to the needs of elders in the community. Her legacy, from my perspective, included spiritual teaching that created a synthesis of everyday events. This is wisdom as a practical and integrated manner of approaching the challenges of the everyday.

### *The Eternal Now*

Mystical consciousness was present in the very old sisters as a perception of coherence between life story and the will of God. The very old, in my sample, showed some characteristics of a ninth stage of human development posed by Erikson et al. (1986). A preoccupation with the concepts of time and eternity expressed that sense of immortality, in this context, assurance of "going to God." This perception provided an opportunity for renewed integration in the face of

deterioration. The requirement for mutuality and interdependence was a feature of this final stage. Most remarkable was the prioritizing of what was important and meaningful about the life process. The reflections on time and eternity suggested that the veil between the two becomes very fine as one prepares to let go of the physical containment of soul.

Three of the sisters in their nineties shared reflections on time and eternity, chronological time or “Chronos” and God’s time “Kairos.” I include these delightful interactions as lengthy quotations to share the depth, humour, and divergent quality I so often experienced in dialogue with the very old. Their current worldview incorporated the in-depth theology they have pondered for a lifetime. Two of the sisters had postgraduate education in theology and continued to have a passion for the field. The other was a visual artist and musician. I believed all three of these sisters were highly intuitive and lateral thinkers. One told me that on psychological testing she was “off the scale on intuition.” To my inquiry about synchronicity, one sister, a former teacher said,

Write this down! We live in chronos and then in the midst of chronos in a particular action, it might be you smile at someone (and) you don’t feel like smiling . . . And then you get into God’s action in that moment . . . And that’s Kairos and if in that moment of Kairos you accept and do God’s will you are propelled further into eschaton. Which is Reality . . . well, eschaton as you know is the last thing in heaven . . . you are just leading an ordinary chronos life and then all at once you get an insight into that

meaning and you follow that meaning . . . suppose you meet someone you distinctly didn't like and you were doing something else or you were having a lovely walk and you meet someone who is a big gossip and you really don't want to talk to them and then unfortunately or fortunately an idea comes to your mind . . . it would be nice if you went across the street and you talked to her. Now that is Kairos hitting Chronos and you accept it. That action is lifted into eschaton. It's a blessed moment so God is there.

Another example of her recognition of a blessed moment was her reflection while she was engaged in a solitary activity.

You have your ordinary . . . You're making a cake and your grinding the whatever and all at once you say "that's what it means" and the whole meaning of our daily bread comes to you in a different way. It is the utter simplicity of the . . . seed or whatever and you are brought in your thought . . . it is really the action of the Holy Spirit into what the Mass really means. It is grace.

She continued to illustrate God's action in time, in the possibilities inherent in the moment we are living.

But it's . . . someone is coming to the door. Her brain is gone . . . I could say . . . no, go away . . . but I could say . . . come on in and meet my friend . . . that is grace given but I took the grace . . . but I was enabled to take the grace.

About the Fathers of Theology, she has her own conclusions.

Augustine . . . he went a little too far. . ! The religious life, the kind you were trained in and I was trained in . . . this is good . . . and we found out it was all heresy. (Tom, a former teacher) held it was a heresy later on . . . they so often edit the idea. The idea (is) without God, I can do nothing. (Tom's) basic (premise is that) there are three words, the ability, the wish or the desire but the achieving of the action comes from God.

I asked her whether this idea corresponded to a popular idea emerging in new age Christian spirituality, that of co-creating with God. She responded "Absolutely." For those who were familiar with the long tradition of Christian mysticism, the new age concepts are not necessarily new. One elder agreed and listed a number of saints who were mystics. Universal themes in spirituality were also evident in many faith systems. It was an awareness of the mystery of life and any individual person's role in the greater scheme." She concluded "God uses you . . . Sometimes you have to wait; the will comes from God . . . Luther says everything comes from God."

I followed this train of thought down the hall of the assisted living corridor to another sister who confirmed and elaborated on the theme of God's time and people's time.

Big difference, yeah, in God's time you know it is perfect . . . But our time . . . change . . . From all eternity God knew what he was going to do. (In people) you get disappointed. You would like to trust. But you are never disappointed in the Lord. You know in the

end that is where you know you are good . . . all the things I could not see . . . but I can see now. Looking back, it was the will of God. You do not know the will of God in the moment. It takes time to see. But you know in the moment . . . a good thing to do and a not so good thing to do, you can tell that . . . like if someone was being mean you'd know that that was not God's will . . . and joy . . . God wants us to be happy . . . if you get down in the dumps and you are worried that doesn't come from God. (What comes from God) . . . is for your good . . . its joy.

Many times during the interviews, the transformative qualities of the sister's words suggested that there is a unique spirituality known in the Congregation as the "Charism." This word charism means gift, and in this context a "gift freely and graciously given, a favour bestowed, a grace" (SCH, 1973, p. 3). God gives it to the Church. "The Church is essentially a truly 'pneumatic' or spiritual reality, built on the foundation not only of the apostles but also of the prophets." (Kung, (1965), as cited in SCH, 1973, p. 3). In the tradition of the founders, the "way" to live a spiritual life is that of giving "Joyful witness to Love: love of God, of one another, and of all persons" (SCH, 1985). This vision incorporates the mission statement in the constitution. Very few organizations in society can claim a spiritual premise to animate all activity.

In a retreat I attended during my stay at the sister's residence, an elder Sister of Charity chose to formulate the spiritual life in the model of Meister Eckhart, a 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic, spiritual teacher and philosopher (Fox, 1982). In



this outline, there are four valid paths to God. My experience of interacting with the sisters led me to believe that the sisters lived the “*Via Transformativa*” characterized by celebration, justice making, and compassion. However, one path did not exclude the others. Unlike the stage models of psychology that suggest mastery at one level before moving on to another, the “*via positiva, via negativa, via creativa and via transformativa*” were dynamic movements spiraling throughout the life span.

### *Summary*

The in-depth interviews provided a valuable glimpse at the perspectives on spirituality given by elders themselves. Healthy psychological traits of self-sufficiency, self-care, and self-direction were longstanding personality attributes of these women. A sense of humour, capacity for deep reflection and empowered ability to make good choices marked every interaction. The spiritual journey was a journey of faith and faith given by God rather than achieved through her own efforts. Some could trace the gift of faith from very early childhood and were grateful to outstanding models of faith from within their families. The language of Christian faith acknowledged a “call” and dialectic of call and response traveled with these persons throughout the life course. In the later years, most of these sisters were able to sum up their insight into their spiritual journey with the realization that “without God I can do nothing.”

As the experience of aging came into their awareness through the events of retirement and illness, there was a qualitative difference in their preoccupations and daily concerns. Many of the sisters reflected on a new appreciation of

relationship and interdependence. Out of this sense of relationship came the sense of duty, expressed as “doing our part.” The new freedom of time for contemplative prayer reoriented the elder to the relationship with God yet the distinction between God and others was blurred. God in action and generous response was experienced in the every day realities, caring of one another and awareness of global concerns. Acceptance of limitations propelled them into a larger vision of meaning, expressed as a deepening of spirituality.

The experience of vulnerability prompted a need for transcendence of physical limitations and independence continued to be valued. Many of the sisters resisted efforts to have assistance with the symbols of dependence such as walkers. In their intellectual capacities, they retained their capabilities, dignity, and authority. Dialogue included listening and clarifying of concepts that showed the sisters’ capacity for deep reflection and prayerful manner of approaching others. In this, I saw wisdom, in which a wealth of knowledge and understanding about life spilled into my everyday reality. Hope, a theological virtue nourished throughout the religious lives of these women, became the guiding reflection in discussion of hardship and in preparing to die. Love among these elders was the spirituality of compassion. Compassion was the awareness of our shared humanity.

The research intent in this study was to understand the content of specific religious belief from elder women who are the “saints” of our time. The post-modern tendency to seek diversity in religions encouraged comparative studies of faiths. These studies do demonstrate variety in religious and spiritual thought,

however, depth study of the beliefs of persons who are committed to the disciplines of a single faith tradition brought dimension to key religious concepts. From the elders in this study deep compassion for others, belief in a benevolent God, and commitment to service out of a personal relationship with God defined their faith.

## Chapter Six: A Relational Ontology

In this study of spirituality in elder women religious, I chose to discuss the experiences of women who have lived a vital spiritual life within the Christian tradition. This is in keeping with pioneering research efforts on the topic that recognize the complexity and diversity of the topics of religion, spirituality, and aging. As a nurse, I am concerned that the spiritual needs of elders are very important to them and many settings that provide care neglect these needs. I hope that my contributions assist researchers in understanding the spiritual dimension and in clarifying the use of the words faith, religion, and spirituality as understood by these elders. Some important considerations, such as image of God and continuity of spirituality throughout the life course discussed in the literature emerge as central themes for the elders in this study.

Among these women, I found a relational ontology that situates spirituality in the everyday experiences of communion with God in the realities of other persons and in a “call” to fullness of life for all of creation. Spiritual needs highlighted in these elders were satisfied in the resources available within the congregation. For those who care for elders in family, church, and health care facilities, the richness of spirituality and the insights from the respondents result in new understandings of the gifts elders can offer as well as ways younger adults can be sensitive to the vulnerabilities present in the later life experience of frailty.

The Jungian approach to psychology intersects with the Christian mystical tradition. Jaffe (1990) reviewed the connection between consciousness, finding meaning and individuation. “Our effort to be as conscious as possible

contributes to the evolution of God. The name for this process is individuation, the first essential component of Jung's healing message" (p. 12). Jung was unable to find reconciliation between his theory and Christian doctrine. The description of the Centering Prayer movement in this thesis is a most recent hybrid of Jungian psychology and the centuries old tradition of intuitive understanding of human spiritual growth. Among my respondents, the contemplative tradition is most familiar and I use that language to understand spiritual yearnings and challenges.

*Ageism: A Challenge to the Generations*

During the initial stage of research, where I posted the title of the project, an elder sister who did not wish to participate commented that the title was comparative to the popular term "The Golden Years". She said that aging is not like that at all but did not wish to elaborate. This sister may have been counteracting the stereotypical categorizations of ageism possibly evoked by the title and the research process. Simply studying a group and naming it as "elder" risks stereotypical categorization of the individuals who surpass the limits of our expectations of chronological aging. Chronological aging often becomes a measure of the aging process and this measure itself limits potentialities.

The facts of aging and decline do not define the reality of these women. Their sense of self is rooted in a call to the Christian life and the work of the congregation. The sisters affirm Atchley's work (1999) in the recognition that a person with a resilient and strong self-concept can more easily move through the adaptations required in old age and that spirituality and religion, as aspects of personality, remain important in later life if they have been central in younger

years. These elders substitute new roles for lost ones, and in so doing continue to maintain typical ways of adapting to the environment. The dialogues with the nine respondents express a positive and transformative vision within the community of elder sisters; this study articulates the experience of a small sample of the population of elder Sisters of Charity. Many elder sisters continue to live on the missions and are active in primary ministries. There is a rich variety in spiritualities within the call to the Christian life and the work of the congregation. Spiritualities express the diversity of the sisters' reflections and unity expresses the vocation to the apostolic work of this congregation.

These elder women lived within and introduced me to their way of mutual respect for one another. The culture includes their history and learned practices of communication. There are generational differences in what is appropriate in dialogue. My generation had the freedom to "tell it like it is," that is, how we perceive and how we express that perception. Depending on personality, the result of both genetic and learned experience of each individual, self-expression may exceed the acceptable boundaries of a culture. A popular phrase I have heard from the generation following me is "that is more than I need to know." I reflected on these words with an appreciation for economy of language and the messages that are unspoken among elders.

Styles of effective communication taught within this congregation were a requisite to live in a close-knit community. One elder sister described a model for communication that progressed through from superficial to intimate stages. She commented that in her experience not many people move beyond superficial

sharing of clichés and information. I did not find I needed to stay on a superficial level in the interviews but learned quickly on a social level that it is at times the most appropriate style of discourse. This social norm was obvious to me in my early encounters with the sisters. A number of my respondents expressed themselves within norms characteristic of communication style for that generation. In the intimate environment of family and community, to be expressing the extremes of positive thinking or constant complaints of illness can be irritating. My experience of this sample of women included appreciation for gentleness, self-restraint, and the ability of each to stand in her truth. Constraints in self-expression are common among this generation of women and this is so in the larger culture as well.

I explored the idea of joy as the emotional depth that expresses the encounters with real pain and suffering. In addition to the possibility that this research project suggested to the sisters an ageist bias, I considered that it was also possible that in their sacred depths, some of the sisters may have aversions to the topic of spirituality and the “feel good spiritualities” so popular in contemporary thought. Spirituality seems to have become a commodity in self-help books and positive thinking manuals that recommend tools that are clichéd and simplistic, unsatisfying as the path to wholeness. The experience of the elder sisters issues forth from disciplined encounter with hardship and long-standing fidelity to a vocation.

*Where Justice Dwells*

The elder sisters are not exempt from the oppressive and alienating forces permeating western civilization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During their early years, the Church was a form of social organization that placed power in the person of a dominant male who ruled over a graded series of subordinates, including women and the under-privileged (Johnson, 1992). Leadership among women religious followed this hierarchical model. However, the Chapter of Renewal in the late 1960s established a principle of collegiality or co-responsibility. To obey, for elder sisters does not imply subordination in the traditional interpretation. The vow of obedience is primarily to God and to a discipline of active listening for subtle prompting within each person. This mature sense of responsibility is the word of God for that person. Revelation is not only the inspired words of scripture but also these women's interpreted experience, the individual and collective understanding of God in their midst. The deeply internalized understanding of the messages of the gospel intersect with the everyday to give them a way of "being revelation." The elder sisters tell of the early days of their religious life when obedience was to a Superior and the rules. They now value their personal inner promptings and appreciate their own unique ways of living the word of God. The structure and life-style of the congregation is no longer "top down." It grows out of their unity as they encounter the growing edges of one another and the larger context.

In dialogue with the sisters, I did not hear complaints about the patriarchal issues in the church or rebellion against imposed hierarchies. Johnson (1992) sees



pride and anger as important and empowering for women however in this elder group there was a way of living in the moment that seemed to preclude dwelling on past structures in society, the church, or the congregation. There were very few expressions of righteous anger at authority figures in the interviews. The elder sisters were strong in their personal core and able to affirm themselves in their giftedness and mature sense of responsibility. Pride as self aggrandizement was absent. Satisfaction with life prompted one sister to comment that in the final days of life, God is ready to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." I was impressed with the serenity I witnessed in the demeanour of all the sisters. I saw recognition among the elder sisters that certain roles carry responsibilities and breach of form is socially unacceptable. "It's not her place," concluded a narrative of one elder sister who told a story about an American sister who challenged the Pope about the role of women in the church. The principle of subsidiarity is evident in this sister's respect for designated roles. Within this understanding of subsidiarity, they have been able to move in and out of leadership roles in response to the needs of the congregation.

Authentic community emerges from shared spiritual aspirations, and stretches boundaries that might reflect the rigid interests of a political, social, psychological, or cultural nature. To the best of each person's ability, the relationships among the sisters show their understanding of mutual respect and reciprocal valuing of one another and the marginalized of our society. The principle of unity enables a gestalt, where the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts and is sensed and felt as a high-energy dynamic in liturgies, communal

prayer, and shared endeavours. Obstacles, difficulties, and the woundedness in the lived experience of individuals begin to resolve in revitalizing of the person encountering the communal spirituality from this Christian perspective. This “charism” or gift of the congregation affects the intensely personal core of the self and expands beyond the culture of church into all creation.

The principle of the dignity of the human person is inclusive. The concept of transcendence in traditional theology supported the notion of a distant, male, God, who has power over all and is demanding of unquestioned loyalty. This view of God suggests that in remoteness, God is untouched by human suffering. Yet, remoteness in human relationships prohibits compassion. These elder women in the new millennium have cultivated the spirituality of compassion with a feminine sense of the needs of themselves and others. Many of these older sisters were leaders in bringing the transformative visions of Vatican II into the daily life of the church. The concept of church includes the people of God who move within and outside the boundaries of formal religious structures.

Spirituality as lived among the elder sisters retains the inherent energy of the ancient and primal quest of all persons to live a life of meaning and purpose. In the spirituality of the sisters, the world is a sacred place filled with meaning, suffering, and joy. They have been able to penetrate the metaphors of scripture and challenge oppressive social realities such as poverty, lack of education, and poor health. They contemplate truth from within and outside of themselves and express in their narratives their unique perceptions and insights. Their words became alternative ways of seeing and knowing. They are active agents in history

who have challenged subordination, and retain their sense of power and imagination.

The capacity of each respondent to relate openly and without the obstructions of argument and debate permitted in-depth review of traditional symbols and structures. Their vision has developed over many decades of reflection and integration of the Christian way of being in the world. It expresses a relational faith with a dynamic interplay among God, self and others. All the respondents showed the coexistence of continued activity, withdrawal from some social roles and in the quiet prayer activity, a connection to others. The much appreciated solitude connects them to their past, to the others of their lives, and to the global human community.

#### *Activity and Withdrawal*

A concern in the academic literature of social gerontology in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the question of whether elders remain active or withdraw from social involvement. (Atchley, 1999, Tornstam 1994). It is a relevant contemporary concern in nursing home settings where staff may inadvertently impose their beliefs about correct behaviour among elders. In many hospitals, prior to the establishment of nursing homes, elders endured the restrictions to bed rest and passivity. One of the respondents was at the forefront of the movement among health care resources to address the needs of elders. Her observations coincide with the emergence of Activity Theory. She recognized the importance of helping seniors to continue to be productive and included in the social context. This theory countered a pervasive tendency in health care at that time to neglect of

elders. During the later years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there may have been recognition of the need to allow seniors to be disengaged in a healthy way. At the time of my work with elders, I witnessed activity as an imposition on some elders. From a mental health perspective, I saw the importance for elders to share their experiences, grieve over losses, express regret and remember joyful experiences. It was within those communications that I was able to see the unique spiritualities of my patients. In some elders who engaged in reflection and dialogue there was a transforming movement in keeping with the theory of gero-transcendence (Tornstam, 1994).

Among the sisters, I saw further into the process of dialogue. The style of living integrated dialogue. It occurs in prayer as well as in intimate spiritual sharing with a trusted other. The sisters articulate very clearly that there is spiritual deepening in later years. Their insights into the Christian mystical tradition give shape to the concept of meditation. Contemplation is the term for Christian meditation. In this process, the participant confronts the restless and disturbing contents of the psyche as one experience on the path to union with God. Each session of prayer operates as a kind of therapy where the therapist resides within the individual and every movement of acceptance involves healing the wounds experienced in early conditioning and daily experiences of dissonance with the external world. The real self in Christian mysticism is present even in the midst of antagonistic personal and social structures. In this way, persons are self-actualizing, individuating, redeeming, and becoming perfect on a daily basis. Practice of the method allows the person to move into depth of peacefulness and

inner harmony. The faith perspective recognizes there is a power greater than the self. It is a forward way of thinking; recognition of what is possible. Progoff, a student of Jung calls the depth encountered in meditation the underground stream. Each of us is the well; the stream is the nourishing source of creative living (Progoff, 1980). A broad understanding of creativity acknowledges the outward movement of self-giving to family, society, and culture. The creative and transformative vision of the elder sisters holds a faith in a compassionate and just world.

#### *Women's Interpreted Experience*

Living within the culture of a feminine spirituality was an opportunity to see from the “lens of women flourishing” (Johnson, 1992, p. 15). The language of these elder sisters’ individual spiritualities expressed the variety, diversity, and multidimensionality of metaphors known and appreciated from years of recitation and reflection. For many elders, including these elder women, the traditional gendered idea of God remains part of their discourse. The underlying message of dominance and subordination has evaporated. From the theological framework, God is both immanent and transcendent. The emphasis in the context of these elder women is on the God who is with everyone, who loves, liberates and nourishes life in all its complexity and diversity. Some of the elders’ practice the inclusive language of feminist theology. Others are more comfortable with the poetry of scriptural passages. Appreciation and respect of each person’s spirituality allows for acceptance among themselves of a variety of points of view.

Johnson (1992) recognizes that religions die when “they lose their ability to interpret convincingly the full range of present experience in the light of their idea of God” (p. 15). Androcentric bias flows through the selection of scriptural passages and interpretations taught as dogma and doctrine in the history of the Catholic Church. Literal and dogmatic interpretations of metaphor and symbol may stifle the evocative power to enrich thought and feeling. Remoteness from the natural world characteristic of efficient urban and technological world inhibits appreciation of cycles of birth, evolution, diversity of forms, and beauty as divinely superfluous.

Biblical images from the natural world can provide metaphors that express yearnings for wholeness. For example, scripture expresses a metaphor in the daily experience of the sisters that they see on the landscape of their residence. “As a deer longs for running water, so my soul yearns for you, my God” (Ps. 42). I used a favourite of St. Elizabeth Seton in the list of questions. “Springs will burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The parched ground will become a pool, with springs of water in the thirsty land” (Is. 35: 6-8). This message of hope wove into the Advent liturgy, into both private and communal prayer.

Many metaphors from scripture include a feminine sense of the sacred. “Even if mother can forget her child, you will not forget me” (Is. 49:15). In the Book of Genesis, God created the human being in the image of God who is the source of abundant life for the entire created world. Johnson (1992) develops the theme of Wisdom/Sophia as feminine. She postulates that the history of Judeo-Christian thought neglects the feminine. Wisdom/Sophia as spirit hovered over

chaos and gave birth to creation and the person of Jesus is fulfillment of the Jewish wisdom tradition.

The idea of transcendence takes on new richness in the lives of these older women. In the transcendent response, the person believes in a level of reality that exceeds the limits of human experience. Cassell (1982 as cited in Mount et al., 2002) beautifully draws attention to the phenomenon of identifying with this mystery. The person who suffers isolation by pain came closer to a transpersonal source of meaning and to the human community that shares that meaning. Content of these narratives suggests a profound sense of mystical consciousness among these women. It is not a dramatic manifestation of other worldly phenomenon. Moody (1995) observed that there are wide variations in both the form and the intensity of mystical experience. Among my respondents, the mystical perceptions traced through the life span, were highly individual and offer the sense of their lives as richly lived according to their unique gifts. Two key qualities of this consciousness are the deeper appreciation in the elder years of the interdependence of all living things and that without God "I can do nothing." The traditions of these sisters demonstrate that personal growth involves becoming more conscious of all our relationships, with our own spirit and the oneness among all things (Beck & Metrick, 1990).

The symbol of God is the center of every religious system. The symbol is not God and the major faith traditions realize that the named God is not the real God. Spirituality is the process of beholding the mystery of the God. It is rooted in the experience of life. There were many references in the conversations with

elder sisters to the positive feminine modeling given to them by their mothers, grandmothers, and female leaders in the congregation both living and deceased. The capacity to listen, discern, and sense is a way of being, cultivated and refined throughout the life course of these women. Powerful experiences of grief, disappointment, injustice, and suffering propel each person to re-visioning and problem solving rather than denial and avoidance. The Christian way includes both suffering and joy in the Paschal mystery of death and resurrection. Reality ultimately includes acceptance with an “ever receding horizon” (Johnson, 1992, p. 65) that stretches past the everyday into the infinite and unfolding mystery of life. Transcendence for these women is a situated way of being, with psychological overtones such as the capacity to forgive, let go, and move on to new experience.

Each of my respondents, in her own way, understands God as love. Love is a dynamic that moves people toward care, forgiveness, inclusivity, and bonding. The quality of love known in these women includes respect for the feminine qualities of God, the feminine dimension as Holy Spirit (Johnson, 1992) and the process of maturing into fullness of life as female. Listening and sharing in the deep experiences of the other, both their joy and sufferings creates spiritual intimacy. Many of the sisters appreciate being able to talk with a few friends about their spiritual journey. An environment of spirituality with friends, spiritual reading, music, shared meals, and the sacraments nourishes these elders spiritual growth. For the respondents love is an everyday experience. Although the structures and emphasis of the religious life has shifted in the later years, the spiritualities of elder sisters continue to nourish the congregation. It is a



longstanding tradition that the elders of the congregation are the source of spiritual power. One of my respondents prays for an hour before bedtime everyday. In her prayer, she remembers everyone who has asked for her help that day. Younger sisters appreciate that they can ask the elder sisters for prayer in any troubling circumstances.

Images from the SCH archives express the gentle nurturing traits of St. Vincent de Paul as he embraces an orphan child. Additionally, St. Elizabeth Seton in her role as mother and inspired leader of women is a symbol for the congregation. Her letters reflect her capacity to be an intimate companion and friend. One of my respondents appreciated the male father concept as “Abba” or “dad” that in our culture evokes the intimacy of healthy family relationships. She wonders why we forget to pray to St. Joseph, who she sees as a patron of the community and as father, and a just and capable provider. The sisters remember the early days of the congregation with a symbol system that is richly evocative.

Johnson (1992) challenges the idea of “gentle nurturing traits” stereotyped as the only feminine qualities. The qualities of rationality, power, and capacity for leadership are not exclusively masculine. The sisters exemplified the capacity for leadership even when young and unsure of the expectations of the congregation. Leadership emerges from the longstanding commitment to being a responsible person. With the emphasis on professional education, these sisters developed rationality and mastery in many fields of study. As powerful women, they tempered action by sensitivity and the desire to empower rather than dominate. As leaders, they developed strategies that give freedom to women in the Catholic

Church, even to the encouragement of women to be celebrants of rituals that they create to deepen the appreciation of the traditional Liturgy. Among the elder sisters, there is a variety of reflections on controversial issues including women in the priesthood and married priests. What characterizes their thought however is the freedom as elders to be trusting in the process of change and enjoy more fully the spiritual blessing of letting go of the need to be responsible for the outcome of debate.

The Creative Spirit with the de-stabilizing, evolutionary, and organic characteristics of all creation is very much alive in these women of God. Among my respondents, cognitive and physical changes are challenges to the flowering of spiritual life. Atchley (1999) noted that psychobiological changes do not affect integrated functions. In my work with elders there was commonly a “procedural knowledge” retained by elders into the very late stages of dementia. In this sample, wisdom is an integrated function. Cognitive changes may affect the verbal expression of wisdom. Love, as in the unconditional love of God, continues to manifest in facial appearance, gestures, and the welcoming manner of reaching out to others. Repetition of the patterns of “graceful” living throughout the life course emerged in these persons in refined and dignified presence to others.

Deep spirituality, as a lived experience, integrates the harsh realities of living. In the shift into the aging experience, well-being expressed the ability to transcend physical limitations and chronic disease. A sense of satisfaction with life reflects ego integrity (Erikson et al., 1986). Religious understanding among

these sisters incorporates the insights of psychology. Ego is the capacity to perceive reality in a healthy way. Many psychological frameworks consider healthy adaptation to include acceptance of the dysfunctions in the self and society. Unfortunately for many people, uncritical acceptance may include embracing those dysfunctions.

Further, some interpretations of the traditional concept of *kenosis* or self-emptying have connotations of self-rejection that is unhealthy. Centering prayer, a method of prayer that is reviving the Christian mystical tradition incorporates and clarifies the idea of self-emptying. Emptying, or letting go, is an act of trust that frees a person to perceive the richness, bounty, and beauty of God in the created world. Loss of ego, the acculturated ego includes letting go of the false self-- that is the need for power and control, the need for approval and esteem, and the need for security and survival. These needs are evidence of our wounded self (Keating, 1994). Several of my respondents attend centering prayer on a weekly basis. This form of prayer was one of a number of approaches to prayer that provided the integration between faith and life.

### *Spiritual Maturity*

Among my respondents, there is spiritual growth in later years and aging includes this dynamic spiritual process. The narratives of the sisters reflect the characteristics of universalizing faith described by Fowler (1986). This is a final stage of development and involves a selfless faith, “relinquishing and transcending of the self” (MacKinlay, 2001, p. 122). However, these characteristics of wisdom and spiritual maturity are “works in progress” rather

than accomplishments. Wisdom includes the “letting go” of non-essentials including prejudice. The awareness of interdependence takes shape as an ever deepening realization that, in the words of one respondent, “My life, my spirit, my longing cannot be totally mine.” Although an elder expressed this insight, it is an understanding perceivable at any age and in many traditions. For the women who are followers of Christ, the personal relationship with Jesus is the model of mature faith.

The concept of spiritual maturity and the distinctions between psychological and spiritual maturity emerge in the interviews. The psychological, social, physical, and cognitive ways of being are all aspects of full humanity. There is a distinct spiritual life in the drive to finding and expressing ultimate meaning that includes for these individuals the long-standing practice of a specific faith. The daily praxis of prayer is a way of healing wounds and experiencing the transcendent mystery of God. These experiences are highly subjective. In the trajectories of positive aging outlined by Labouvie Vief (2000), the sisters exemplify *conscious* aging, an awareness of the larger meanings involved in everyday experience. In their understanding of the Christian mystical tradition, the sisters affirm what Jung saw in the religious traditions. In this religious tradition, intensely lived, there is a school for psychic development where the vision of a future is possible with the “hope of eternal life” (Campbell, 1971, p. 19).

MacKinlay (2001) outlines the characteristics of spiritual maturity from her sample of research respondents. They are a “delight to be with” (p. 220). In a

similar way, the respondents for this study display the characteristics of persons in the process of discovering new levels of spiritual maturity. They are open to learning and change, seek ultimate meaning, and have long-standing connections with a spiritual community, friends, and mentors with whom to share spiritual intimacies. They have the resiliency to transcend losses, disappointments, and limitations. They face the future with an attitude of hopefulness and are able to live with uncertainty. They articulate a sense of freedom and capacity for interiority. In addition to these personal qualities, the communal spirituality became clear in the creative and celebratory rituals that bind them to one another and to the larger contexts. Celebration occurs daily in sharing of prayer, meals, birthdays, and feast days for individuals and the Congregation.

#### *Spiritual Needs of Elders*

Exemplary care of elders with attention to spiritual needs is pervasive in the retirement and assisted living residence. Many of the respondents expressed appreciation of a “spiritual environment” in the retirement sister’s residence. Opportunities for celebration, liturgy, shared prayer, friendship, leisure, quiet activities of reading and solitude, communal dining, and recreation offer a tapestry of sustaining spiritual opportunity. Predictability of this social and community setting may activate growth of the deeper levels of the self. Intellectual stimulation and variety in social contacts are sources of gratification for a number of the respondents. The elder sisters are included in the preparations for congregational assemblies and participate in committees of their choosing. They use a democratic process to define the guidelines of functioning in the

smaller communities. As the Sisters of Charity recognize the need for a change in housing, many of the elders patiently wait for the construction of a new residence and eagerly anticipate the formation of new smaller communities and a more accommodating geographical space.

MacKinlay (2001) discusses some important spiritual needs for elders. She begins by recognizing the need for meaning and hope. In her analysis, meaning derived from a sense of self worth and from relationships with others. A relationship with God often depicted as the “vertical” axis of the cross and the “horizontal” axis of social life function in a reciprocal manner. A rich interpersonal life, filled with meaningful human connections enriches the prayer life, and a rich prayer experience enhances interactions with others. For the frail elder, the range of social supports tends to diminish yet the need for social interaction is as great as in younger years. Lack of intimate social contact may lead to spiritual isolation, a sense of meaninglessness. In my experience as a community nurse for elders, I found that the isolation of frail elders did in fact coincide with expressions of depression and despair. The awareness of the human experience of loneliness among my respondents and the number of compensations for loneliness found by these respondents leads me to believe as well that the need for deep human connectedness is a primary spiritual need in the elder population.

One sister who is adjusting to the environment of the retirement residence recognized a danger in the retirement process of becoming too narrow in interests and preoccupations. Another found it very important to retain involvement with the larger communities outside the residence. The experience of loneliness, for

some is not entirely relieved even in this ideal environment. The freedom to share spiritual intimacies is a learned process facilitated by interpersonal relationships where safety and trust have grown through years of dialogue. One sister yearned for the “old times” where common ministry united the household. Another regretted the shift in spiritual symbols and music of her younger days. Another felt the acute loss of close family. Grieving for losses can evoke a strong feeling of isolation and alienation for elders. Multiple losses and vulnerabilities are common among the aged and invite the younger generations to a new level of sharing in the realities of being human. Companionship and the intimacy of family and spiritual friends can ease the pain of loss. In the trusting qualities of spiritual intimacy comes genuine intergenerational dialogue.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I have explored the content of the dialogues with the elder respondents in the light of some of the penetrating questions evoked by the literature on aging, religion, and spirituality. The first impression I experienced in dialogue was the transformative potential of authentic communication with profoundly spiritual persons. I learned from both the deep insight of elder women and the quality of each woman’s personhood, and their words have the power to reach beyond the limits of a research thesis. I addressed ageism as a generational ignorance, resolvable by intergenerational dialogue. The idea of community articulated by the elders transcends discreet categories and includes the relational ontology of Christianity. Because this is a community of women only, I was able to see the “women’s sacred” as a profound sense of interconnectedness, with

characteristics of mutual valuing and respect of the other. Feminist theology and the depth dimension of the Christian mystical tradition articulated by elders enrich the academic disciplines of sociology, psychology, and gerontology. Definitional considerations include the distinctions between faith and spirituality that is partially resolved by the use of the terms understood by the respondents. Insights on the spiritual needs of elders include the holistic body, mind, and spirit approach to enabling elders to live a “vital old age.” A definition of spirituality emerged from my experience of listening with these elders. Spirituality is the life long “way” a person makes choices, the movements from entropy to affirmation of life. This includes but goes beyond perceptions, memories, reasoning or sensory capacities and includes relatedness, the movement from belief to knowing, and participation in shared being (community) while retaining highly individual character.



## Chapter Seven: Discussion

### *Challenges for Practice and Research*

#### *Reflections from the Field*

Studies of this kind prepare the way for research into denominational and inter-faith distinctions. Long-standing attitudes among the respondents to make choices that enhance well-being and the capacity to serve is the norm in the Congregation and in each individual. The faith perspective nourishes these choices. One gift to society of these elders is the capacity for genuine relatedness. At the intersection of studies of religion, health, and psychological well-being there are many studies that attempt to support the hypotheses that the greater the religious/spiritual content, the greater the well-being.

Content of belief varies among individuals and groups and what is spiritual or religious to some persons may not be healthy or life affirming. Deficits in one or more of the necessary ingredients for a healthy life, such as poverty, oppressive political environments, lack of education, the burdens of abuse and neglect, crime and violence may understandably shape a cynical perspective on belief. In the final analysis, the words of my respondents show that spiritual maturity allows for a suspension of judgments and prejudices. At the same time, encounters with persons who offer non-judgmental acceptance and compassionate understanding fuels trust and opening of the heart. Spirituality and spiritual maturity are not necessarily goals, but rather processes of integration of human experience, always on a continuum with the unique experience of any individual's history and culture.

In the fields of health care, there are many levels of intervention to optimize quality of life. Collaboration among disciplines is a movement that currently fosters openness and sharing of divergent capabilities. It is important for health care practitioners to be educated on the spiritual needs of elders. Pastoral care is very often a neglected concern in the problem solving approach to geriatric intervention. At a team level, the pastoral care worker attending all conferences can contribute insight, focus the goals of treatment, and educate caregivers. A pastoral care worker invited to interviews of prospective employees would permit early assessment of the candidate's capacity to enter into spiritual dialogue with patients and residents of facilities.

Education in attentive listening is a priority over "having answers." It is a requirement of pastoral care training. The pastoral care worker is a vital member of any health care team that recognizes the importance of spirituality in aging elders. Interactions between elders and their spiritual resources are private but collaborative professionalism offers respect for the integrity of the disciplines. The interdisciplinary team very often functions as a community of belonging for elders. The community is inclusive: all institutional levels foster well-being. Although the theoretical models of caregivers may diverge, there is often a common solution to the suffering of elders. As an example, the remedy for social isolation includes visits from family, clergy, and significant others. Spiritual isolation may be resolved with facilitation of church attendance and visits from the church and spiritual community.

Differentiation of spiritual and psychological needs is a continuing research challenge. MacKinlay (2001) sees a need for a spiritual needs assessment tool or inventory. I believe the criterion she will use for assessment will be valuable as an educational resource for professionals and caregivers. I have found, however, that the use of assessment tools is an imposition on elders themselves. Instead, I advocate for use of natural processes such as reminiscence because it fosters the important bonding functions that assist elders to know they are valued and appreciated. On the practical level, among inter-disciplinary team members there are often overlapping concerns between mental health and spiritual health.

A model for education of service providers is the palliative care approach. Many of the hospice principles are applicable at earlier stages of aging and loss. Countering of the tendency toward religious sectarianism requires education in the use of the more generic term spirituality although the term lacks specificity. Spirituality includes concerns with ultimate meaning, fosters inclusivity with acceptance of unique and idiosyncratic philosophical understanding. The hermeneutic and dialogic approach to communication used in this study supports learning in the language of elders themselves. In educational and clinical practice settings, this is a valuable asset.

As it is often the case, care providers complain that they do not have the time to listen. Educational focus on interpersonal skills and prioritizing of care needs according to the elders' expressed discomfort is helpful in supporting the caregiver in a less task-oriented approach. It does take time to listen but the rewards are great for both caregiver and elder. It is also a shared responsibility

within the community. Intuition and emotional relatedness flow unimpeded among elders, peers, and caregivers who find those gifts in one another.

Professional roles that create distance need critical evaluation in the light of elders' need for belonging. Support and counsel to non-professional caregivers including family, home support workers, and long-term care assistants is essential, as these are the most intimate contacts in an elder person's context.

The communication gaps with elders that I witnessed in the family and clinical realm included younger person's habit of distancing themselves from the challenges of engaging with elders. Younger persons sometimes employed platitudes that deny the elder's individual truth. In this climate, elders may feel used and misunderstood. I believe that one area of education for caregivers of family and their older members would be to facilitate deeper levels of communication, moving from platitudes into exchange of ideas and feelings and ultimately to the peak communication of shared appreciation of nature and arts. This method used in "family" art therapy assisted the family group to collaborate in an art project. It is also a suitable method for small communities who desire communication that is more intimate. Although this method of art to facilitate communication was not a research approach for this thesis, I believe it holds possibilities for an enjoyable and effective intervention to facilitate more intimate communication within any small community. Whether an elder is living with family or in a care facility, feelings of isolation are a primary therapeutic concern.

An important question for caregivers is whether an elder can learn spiritual maturity. The respondents in this study continue on a daily basis to move

toward an elusive feeling of maturity. A metaphor for spirituality one sister used was the tree that starts as a seed and grows over a long period to the stage of bearing fruit. Among my patients who were commonly experiencing despair, the value of attentive listening cannot be underestimated. In the depths of private memories lies the transformative movement. It is wise not to expect spiritual maturity.

There is a skill involved in transformative listening and a hazard for caregivers who are isolated while hearing stories of tragic life histories. I very often heard a quality of supplication among my patients that I understood as “soulful,” that is, very like a prayer. There is a need for “soulful” listening on the part of caregivers. This is a way of being present and cannot be taught by a list of “do’s and don’ts” of effective communication. Simply expressed, the willing listener must travel with the distressed person through their memories, allow expressions of sadness and regret, counter self-defeating evaluations of the events in the history, and select the transformative insights for affirmation and celebration. It can be a painstaking process and best supported in a community environment of collateral caregivers. A caregiver team, including family, needs to be vigilant for the signs of emotional fatigue.

Professional caregivers are also giving attention to the treatable aspects of illness, managing pain, facilitating interventions with family and significant others, and offering support and guidance as necessary. In the community of elders there often is a natural process of interaction in which there is sharing among persons at various levels of spiritual maturity. For many elders, caring for

others is simply the natural way of being present. Professional caregivers need to respect that they may not have all the answers and support peer interventions in a climate of compassion and validation of the person. The team concept suggests working together with a common purpose. A community concept is inclusive of family, friends, peers, and many levels of formal and informal people who care.

Policy makers and administrators commonly present an argument on cost effectiveness of approaches used in hospital and nursing care settings. Sadly, health care for profit can inhibit sharing much needed services for elders. Interestingly, the sisters were able to manage efficient and cost effective management of institutions earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the by-products of the hospitals operated by the sisters was a sense of community created through everyday experiences of recognition and care for staff and patients. Their goals were non-profit. Many successful businesses in the private sector have now recognized that healthy and happy employees are productive. It is well to consider human resources, those of elders and their caregivers, as real resources. A well-managed institution requires a larger vision of the mission and spirit of the organization. I have often seen this spirit buried in dusty manuals, long lost as symbols of hope and healing for the consumer of health services. The original impetus of women who gathered to serve the suffering members of society in the tradition of St. Vincent de Paul and the Daughters of Charity can nourish proactive health care.

*Research Horizons.* During my time of employment in health care for elders and the beginnings of my exploration of gerontology, I was impressed with

the predominantly positivist orientation of the research that guided practice. The received view of science powerfully influences health care to the extent that agendas of status and political advantage may permeate the motivations of all levels of institutional functioning. Quantification of data as is the ideal in positivist research is often the criteria for decision-making regarding funding and support of the viability of any intervention.

However, there are significant limitations to this approach. For example, in the studies of pharmacology and pathologies of the body, it is admirable to pursue precision, dependability, prediction of cause and effect relationships and control over natural processes of decline. However, the biological/pharmaceutical approach to mental health is now a favoured and expedient method of intervention that neglects the multi-factorial influences on well-being. Social problems of poverty, homelessness, poor nutrition, abuse of substances, emotional isolation influence many elders in their failure to thrive. The non-profit agencies of family, church, and spiritual community are in the “care-giver” categories who seldom receive recompense, acknowledgement, or credibility among established institutions. A thriving family and faith community retains the ancient and priceless capacity to heal and nourish. Institutional leaders in Canadian health need to challenge the paradigm on an ongoing basis with the question “In whose interest are you making those decisions?”

Creative and divergent thinking often appears “abnormal” and is ignored or silenced by those with a utilitarian or political agenda. In the medical model of care, I experienced the suspicion and rejection of insights that emerged in the self-

expression in visual art from my clients. I also heard pejorative evaluations of elders who could no longer articulate their reality in a coherent and logical manner. One health care provider in the powerful leadership position of medicine summarized the entire field of geriatric psychiatry with a reductionist label, the “organic brain syndromes.” His statement expresses the distancing quality of the “received view” of science. Although statistically there is a high percentage of dementia in the geriatric psychiatry population, his summary was a generalization in one of its most toxic forms. All behaviour including speech is meaningful when personhood is considered. The contexts and motivations for any activity require exploration. Cognition is more than a rational or logical process; memory includes intuitive, sensory, and feeling capacities.

As suggested in the research of Labouvie-Vief (2000) metaphorical knowledge is an avenue to the deeper meanings that the western methods of research science may overlook. Interpretation is an art in both research and practice. Neurolinguistic studies have suggested that every person has a favoured sensory way of receiving information, processing, or representing that new data in their own map of reality, and expressing new understanding. This theory supports diversity of self-expression. The ability of the listener to pay attention to the sensory model used by each person fosters communication. In addition, the narratives of elders who have a long life history and are in a meaning making process of life review are replete with anecdotes, tangents, humorous asides and connections that are obscure. One nonagenarian in this study describes a lengthy and at times disjointed narrative of her intricate sense of connection between her



life events and the covenantal relationship with God. As I reviewed her transcript, I was able to recognize that the connections were in fact present in a most astounding and awe-inspiring way. How easy it would have been to dismiss her story for its rambling quality and leave her and myself less than satisfied in the communication of very important truths.

Research into the area of spirituality requires liberation from the disciplines of hard science. The rigors of science in the constructivist model require attentive presence to elders and respectful reticence of judgments and criticism. Elder spirituality in particular, requires a quest for freedom from exactitude. In addition, studies of cultures and faiths require the same openness to the uniquely self-expressive. Interestingly, many of my friends who are aboriginal illustrate a story with visual images. The coupling of story and image is a very rich manner of communication. Research with aboriginal peoples is a fertile avenue to appreciating spirituality. An obstacle for research is the history of exploitation and domination of the culture. The dignity of aboriginal peoples expresses very perceptively the metaphors of visual art and narrative.

Aboriginal cultures have art forms that may be foreign to western ideals, particularly of geometric perspective. The mathematical accuracy extolled in western art is culture bound, as is research with the functional and utilitarian agenda. In a similar manner, art as therapy only receives acknowledgement in health care circles when the therapist embraces a model of psychopathology. Art therapy expresses the individual struggles for personal growth. The works may not reach communal consensus as aesthetic art form, however, it is deeply

meaningful to the client and a message to the caregiver. In my experience, many unjust evaluations are the product of lack of attention to the deep truths that emerge only in a trusting environment between client and therapist. In research among aboriginal peoples, lack of trust between cultures may be the key factor prohibiting fluent communication. Visual art and story shared to enrich all who participate is the doorway to discovery. The role of elder as spiritual guide provides our western culture with a model for the creation of community.

Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) are interested in research with women among various Christian denominations. A study of the spiritual needs and concerns of aging women who practice from non-Christian faith perspectives could highlight the “relational” factor without the Trinitarian theology. This may support the idea of intrinsic relatedness as a women’s way of knowing and being regardless of ideology. Future qualitative research might include comparison of the aging experience among elder male religious who follow the same ontology as the elders in this sample. Further, idiosyncratic spiritual beliefs expressed by marginalized and impoverished elder women and men may offer the opportunities to distil some “universal” characteristics of spirituality. This interesting research agenda could be to compare the findings from samples of less privileged persons with the themes expressed in the great faith traditions. Material poverty and the life-long suffering of social rejection may not inhibit spiritual growth. A resource for this research is available in Canada among our first nation’s people. Finally, qualitative research into the very old, including those who are experiencing

cognitive changes, would support illumination of the on-going question of whether there is a “ninth” stage of human development.

### *Conclusion*

Researchers and clinicians are attending to many aspects of aging, which holds both declines in physical status with chronological age as well as the intangible emergent of human life lived with fullness of meaning. Themes for study of the aging phenomenon include issues concerning health, longevity, and quality of life. The expanded concept of health includes a holistic orientation toward physical, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual well-being. Topics of religion, spirituality, and transcendence are expressions of the quest to look beyond the facts of decline and death to uncover deeper sources of meaning.

In this thesis, I have explored contemporary academic issues on the topics of aging, religion, and spirituality from a variety of perspectives in keeping with the pluralistic manner of understanding human spiritual needs in a therapeutic context. I chose an ethnographic approach to research and a qualitative method to study the spiritual lives of highly functioning elders. From the narratives of nine elder women religious, I found the vitality and depth of understanding that counters stereotypes of aging as decline. In elder Christian women, I was able to appreciate the authenticity of personhood that is a characteristic of a life-span commitment to a “call.” Spiritual maturity appeared as an on-going process based upon the deep knowledge of a personal and communal call that is “real”. The findings of this study require reflection and revisiting of the paradigms

influencing health care for elders. There are insights suitable for exploration in the “hidden health care” of family, church, and spiritual community.

The interpretive paradigm outlined in Guba and Lincoln (1992) was ideally suited to this study of spirituality. The entry point of discovery was in acceptance of the ontology of faith, belief without need for proof. The belief in a compassionate God, a Trinitarian relational perception of persons in God and recognition of the God spirit that emerges as the gift to create community according to the abilities of each individual under girds all interaction. In the relationship between the faith community and me, I had the vicarious experience of appreciating the elder vision of profound dependence on God and interconnectedness within community. My goal has been understanding and reconstruction. This method has required immersion in the culture. The reconstruction has many levels, a more sophisticated and informed intellectual understanding of Christian theology, an appreciation of womens’ ways to God and most importantly a glimpse at the quality of hopefulness and joy expressed by women who have lived with a praxis of prayer, contemplation, community, and ethical living. This quality of this spirituality is visible in each person as a lived expression of compassion and a passion for justice. Celebration of ritual is binding factor in fostering community. The ethnographic method has brought me to new insights on the beauty of story and leads to imaginative possibilities for research into the reminiscences of aged people in a variety of cultures.

From within this cultural context of women religious, the description of spirituality, the religious corollaries, the paths to a spiritual life and important

characteristics of lived spirituality are visible. The expression of this spirituality is varied, diverse, and full of color and metaphor. It is the opinions of the elders themselves. The central Christian metaphor is a “call”. It suggests a voice, a sound that beckons to greater individuation. Individuation includes the ever-expanding capacity to relate with the “numinous” in self, others and the whole of the created world. Multiple “calls” are everyday awakenings that lead to greater and greater consciousness. Consciousness is timeless, stretching toward an ever-receding horizon. If belief in God is an illusion, what a beautiful illusion this is! I share the dream as I reflect, appreciate, and to the best of my ability offer the reader the experience of privileged dialogue with elder women who give “joyful witness to love”.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Introduction

Rose Mewhort

150 Bedford Highway Apt. #4165

Halifax, N.S. B3M 3J5

Dear Sisters,

As you may know, I am a Mount Saint Vincent University Student planning to begin a research thesis for a Master of Arts Degree in the Family Studies and Gerontology Department. The purpose of the study is to examine elder sisters' understanding of religion and spirituality as it has developed in the later years of life. Of particular interest are the spiritual/religious resources that provide support during difficult adjustments to physical, mental, social and community changes. I hope to uncover the richness of a spiritual life available to elders in their systems of belief, community and social contexts and church settings. Ultimately, I hope the value of this study will illuminate ways a religious/spiritual worldview can offer elders and their caregivers a dimension of support familiar but often neglected in applied settings.

Within medical and church contexts, I have often found there is a neglect of the spiritual and religious needs of elders. From my experiential background as a mental health nurse for seniors, I recognize the need for solace and understanding of the religious/spiritual context of aging persons. While Pastoral care is a valued and central issue in the overall care of those who can no longer benefit from medical intervention, in assisted living and long-term care settings there is often little attention paid to the spiritual dimension. In addition, Church settings provide

minimally for those elders who are unable to participate in formal religious services. In part, this is due to lack of understanding and recognition of the importance of a spiritual and religious dimension to the elder person.

In the academic context, research on religion and spirituality is now an accepted endeavour. Spirituality and religion have become important topics to consider in providing optimum support to people who are adjusting to aging. Qualitative studies provide insights from elders themselves. This study will be a qualitative exploration of religious and spiritual dimension as understood by elder women in religious life.

This research will include my observation and reflection on the culture of religious life and the understanding of religious life as it has assisted those who participate in experiencing a sense of well being. For the understanding of the culture, I will observe the everyday life of the sisters and compose field notes as appropriate to the setting. I will be maintaining a research journal to assist me in reflection and understanding of my observations. I will welcome spontaneous conversations from any sisters and may ask you to sign an informed consent that gives me permission to audio record these events and use the information in my thesis.

For my in-depth understanding of elder sister's experiences, I would like to invite 10 - 12 sisters who have celebrated their 60th Jubilee to volunteer for private conversations with me about some of the spiritual themes that have been important to each sister. If you are willing to participate, I will schedule and conduct interviews in keeping with your needs.

Prior to the interview, I will give you a list of questions for reflection and discussion. At the beginning of the interview, I will review an informed consent with you and request your signature. I will ask for minimal identifying information, a pseudonym, number of years in the Congregation, and primary ministry. You may choose to respond to any or all of the questions at your discretion. I will audio record the conversations. You may request the audio taping stop at any time. To protect your confidentiality, I will type the contents of conversation on to my computer using a pseudonym rather than your name. I will use a password protected coding index on my personal computer to identify the person with the pseudonym. I will delete this index upon completion of the thesis.

In the completed thesis, I may use direct quotations from the interview. With your permission, I would like to retain the contents of interviews without identifying information for later research. The study does not require medical information but I welcome information on aspects of aging that involve physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual changes as these are important features of the aging process.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and for considering granting consent to participate in my research.

Sincerely,

Rose Mewhort

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Twilight of Joy: The Spirituality of Elder Women Religious

Author: Rose Mewhort

I am a graduate student in the Department of Family Studies and Gerontology at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). As a requirement for a Master of Arts in Family Studies and Gerontology, I am conducting a research thesis under the supervision of Dr. Deborah Norris. I am inviting you to participate in my thesis, Twilight of Joy: The Spirituality of Elder Women Religious.

The purpose of the study is to examine elder sisters' understanding of religion and spirituality as it has developed in the later years of life. Of particular interest are the spiritual/religious resources that provide support during difficult adjustments to physical, mental, emotional, social, and community changes. The two methods I will use are individual interviews and observation of the culture of religious life. I hope to uncover the richness of a spiritual life available to elders in their systems of belief, community and social contexts and church settings. Ultimately, I hope the value of this study will illuminate ways a religious/spiritual worldview can offer elders and their caregivers a dimension of support familiar but often neglected in applied settings.

I will keep field notes as appropriate to various settings and a research journal to facilitate my interpretation of religious life as it has assisted you in experiencing your sense of well being. I will welcome spontaneous conversations



with any elder sister expressing interest. If a sister wishes to communicate in-depth, I will ask if you will consent to be included as a participant and ask for your signature on the informed consent

For an in-depth understanding of aging and religious life, I will invite 10 - 12 volunteer sisters who have celebrated their 60th Jubilee to reflect upon and discuss a list of questions I have composed. Interview frequency and length and will be at the discretion of individual participants. I expect the interviews to last 15-30 minutes. I will audio tape conversations with individual sisters and turn off the tape recorder at your request at any time in the conversation. In transcribing to my computer, I will use a pseudonym and minimally identifying information such as primary ministry and number of years in the congregation. In the completed thesis, I may use direct quotes from the interviews. I will not identify any individual person in the thesis nor will I use any other identifying information.

To protect confidentiality, I will not discuss any shared information except with my advisors and I will identify each person with a pseudonym. In case I need clarification of data, I will use a password protected coding index on my computer to identify each respondent. I will delete this index at the completion of my thesis. I will erase any audiotape information after transcription. With your permission, I would like to retain non-identifying interview data for later research.

If a participant withdraws from the study, any data collected from this participant will not be used in the study.

The completed thesis will be available for all interested sisters and part of the thesis collection at Mount Saint Vincent University Library. I will offer a presentation to the sisters on the results of the study when the thesis is complete.

Discussion of the difficulties elders experience during aging may evoke some distress. Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Support from Sister Ann Woodford is available should you request assistance.

You will not directly benefit from this study.

Non-participation will not affect your primary care in any way.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact

Rose Mewhort, [REDACTED]

Halifax [REDACTED]

Galiano Island BC [REDACTED]

Dr. Deborah Norris, [deborah.norris@msvu.ca](mailto:deborah.norris@msvu.ca)

Sister Marie Gillen, [archives@schalifax.ca](mailto:archives@schalifax.ca)

This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by phone at 902-457-6350 or by e-mail at [research@msvu.ca](mailto:research@msvu.ca).

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

By signing below, you are indicating that you consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Participant's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

One signed copy to be kept by the researcher, one signed copy to the participant.

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### Life Review: Individual Spiritual Themes

Bring a favourite picture, hymn, icon, or album of your choosing to stimulate a story.

#### Call

“Then Peter spoke. ‘What about us?’ he said to him. ‘We have left everything and followed you. What are we to have, then?’” Matthew 19:27-28

Question: Many years ago, you made that choice also. Will you share with me your ideas on your journey into new life?

#### Emotional changes in aging

“If I asked darkness to cover me, and light to become night around me, that darkness would not be dark to you, night would be light as day.” Psalm 139: 11-12.

Question: Darkness as a human experience calls us to new levels of understanding. Will you describe how you understand feeling “in the dark”?

#### Physical changes of aging

“Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent.” Psalm 71:9.

Question: This old man’s prayer of the psalms tells us of his need as he faces aging. How does your experience compare with that of the psalmist?

#### Changes in family and community

“Even to your old age I am (God), even when you turn grey I will carry you.” Isaiah. 46:4

Question: As you have grieved for your loved ones, how have you known blessing?

Prayer and solitude

“All of us, gazing on the Lord’s glory with unveiled faces, are being transformed from glory to glory into His very image by the Lord who is spirit.” 2 Cor. 3: 18

Question: The Sisters of Charity are contemplatives in action. How have you balanced these needs for both activity and quiet time?

Abandonment

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why do you refuse to help me or even to listen to my groans?” Ps 22: 1-2

Question: This time the psalmist has reached a powerful experience of loss even of the sure knowledge of help from God. Does his experience sound an echo to times in your life?

Forgiveness

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Matthew 6:14

Question: Daily we pray the “Our Father” as part of the liturgy. Is there a change in your understanding of forgiveness in your later years?

### Letting go

“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me” Matthew 19:21.

Question: Possession may include less tangible aspects of what a person values. As you reflect on unhappy times and encounters that have left you feeling depleted, how has letting go nourished you in hopefulness and joy?

### Mortality/Premonitions of immortality

“All things work together for those who love God” Romans 8:28

Question: One researcher who is studying elders has been describing a natural process in aging people where elders come to terms with dying as an acceptable and very natural process. Are you finding you reflect on this topic? And if so, how?

### Transcendence

“Springs will burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The parched ground will become a pool, with springs of water in the thirsty land.”

Isaiah 35: 6-8

Question: This quotation shows the prophet’s hopefulness in the future of Israel. You have been able to rise above difficult situations and find new levels of meaning in your life. Is there a difference in your understanding of God, the Universe, Others, and Yourself now that you were unable to see in earlier years?

### Creativity

“Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.” Psalm 50:2

Question: Creativity may include many ways of self-expression and giving to others. How do you express your creativity now?

#### Blessings

“Is that a joyous choir I hear? No, it is the Lord Himself exulting over you in happy song.” Zephaniah 3:18

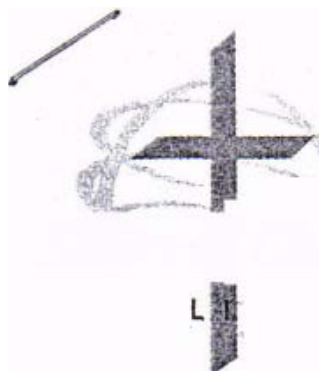
Question: As an elder, you have had many years to enjoy life’s blessings. Will you tell me about the moments of great joy you are able to recall?

#### Wisdom

“You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Ps.51:6

Question: As I have reflected with elders over the years, I have also enjoyed wise counsel. Is wisdom important to you as a way of passing on the richness of your life to future generations?

## Appendix D: Letter of Permission from Congregational Leadership



Sisters of Charity

August 13, 2004

150 Bedford Highway

Halifax, Nova Scotia

B3M 3J5

[www.schalifax.ca](http://www.schalifax.ca)

Rose Mewhort

Mount Saint Vincent Motherhouse

150 Bedford Highway

Halifax, NS B3M3J5

Dear Rose:

Thank you for your letter of August 7, 2004. As indicated in our earlier conversations, I have checked with Sister Marguerite Hagarty, Community Leader of the Mount Saint Vincent Retirement Centre, and she is in agreement - in fact, welcomes - the project. In this context, I am happy to approve your request and will inform the members of the Leadership Team of your proposal.



I hope that the research goes well and that the thesis proceeds according to plan.

Best wishes,

Donna Geernaert, SC Congregational Leader

DG:cdr