

HEALING THE SPIRIT FROM THE EFFECTS OF ABUSE  
SPIRITUALITY AND FEMINIST PRACTICE  
WITH WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN ABUSED

by

Juanita Sauve, B.S.W.

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## *ABSTRACT*

The purpose of this study is to open the field of feminist social work practice to spiritual healing. I conducted interviews with eleven women, from various cultural and spiritual traditions, to see how they integrated spiritual healing into their work with women who have been abused. The findings identified the participants' views on effects of abuse on the spirit, characteristics of healing and harmful spiritualities, and how spiritual healing might be beneficial for women who are healing from abuse. The women shared personal stories, ideas, approaches, and tools which could be helpful in integrating spirituality into practice with abused women. The findings also explored conflict between spirituality and feminism, ways that spirituality could be introduced into the curricula of schools of social work, nursing, or psychology, and ideas for improvement to services for abused women.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

"It begins.....with women telling the truth about their lives" (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:xii)

### 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of my study is to explore ways to incorporate spirituality and spiritual healing into feminist work with women who have been abused. I interviewed feminist counsellors working with women who have experienced abuse, who incorporate spirituality and spiritual healing into their practice. The interviews focused on trying to answer questions I have about how women heal spiritually, and how a spiritually-based practice develops. This work is an attempt to learn how to listen to women's spiritual voice and contribute to the literature on structural and feminist counselling.

### 1.2 Personal Background

Sheila Ruth says that the women's movement has matured. First we needed to discard. "Now we are in a position to create" (1994:4). When a woman deals with the abuse in her life and when she becomes aware of the lies she has been told by her abuser and by a sexist society, she may need to revisit everything she has ever learned.

When I experienced an 'awakening' a few years ago, it was as if I was seeing the world for the first time. I felt

as if I had been set adrift from all that was familiar to me. I became aware that art, literature, politics, religion, advertisements and media, did not reflect my reality. Even though I had been a feminist for many years, there was incongruence between my beliefs and my lived reality. When I first awoke to the fact that my own perceptions were valid, I felt an incredible anger, fearfulness, and vulnerability. For me, the ensuing process of healing involved discarding much of what I had accepted as truth, and re-creating my life.

When did I first become aware that I was on a spiritual journey? Perhaps it was when I realized, with the help of Christina Baldwin's 'a blessing a day' (1991:96), that the joy I felt when I saw a cardinal singing in my birch tree, came from somewhere deep inside - deeper than thought or emotion. Maybe it was when I remembered that, for a long time, even the sight of that beautiful bird could not touch me. Perhaps even during my own "dark night of the soul" (Baldwin, 1991:91), I was aware, on some level, of the transformative possibilities of the experience.

A sketch of the Medicine Wheel on the chalk board in an undergraduate Social Work class, caused me to contemplate the importance of balance in my life. At the time, I was attending to the mental, emotional and physical aspects. But, spiritual? As a dedicated feminist, I had rejected patriarchal religion in the seventies. Contact with



Aboriginal spirituality which was rooted in everyday life, and which emphasized our relationship to all things, helped me to realize that spirituality was indeed a part of my life. In fact, it had been all along. I just had not recognized it.

A 'chance' connection brought me to a small meditation group; another co-incidence and I became part of a feminist spiritual singing group; a chronic illness allowed me to meet a Buddhist woman and attend a Buddhist meditation group; an unexpected change of plans and I found myself in an Aboriginal Social Work class, then a small circle where we explored our spiritual paths. Somewhere along the way, I began to seek out these experiences.

Feminism had enabled me to see that the pain I carried as a woman was caused by patriarchy. The teachings of the Medicine Wheel helped me to release my spirit and give myself permission to experience joy, wonder, and hope. Through the patience and support of my 'teachers', I have begun to search my own traditions and connect to my roots.

In interesting ways, opportunities keep falling into my path, and I find what I need to learn.

### *1.3 Spiritual Healing: A Personal View*

The nature of spirituality makes it difficult to describe in words. Some may argue that the definitions of 'spirit' uncovered in this study refer simply to

psychological processes of uncovering the true self. I would assert that the act of connecting to the authentic self, to self-worth and dignity, and to seeing ourselves as connected all creation, is a spiritual journey.

I believe that to heal spiritually means to become free to dream our dreams, to experience joy, to visualize a world that has meaning for us as women and to know that our visions can be realized in this world. It means knowing that women's words, thoughts and feelings are valuable contributions to the circle of life. It means growth and transformation. It involves shedding the centuries of abuse and oppression which keep us from seeing one another - all shapes, sizes, and colours - as sacred. It means rejecting patriarchy and all its relations - racism, heterosexism, ableism, capitalism, imperialism, and consumerism.

While feminist approaches to social work have emphasized the need to change society, we need to start with a vision. Our vision may involve trusting in something we have never experienced or seen before - in other ways of being. By the very act of healing, individually and in community, we begin to heal the world. Spiritual healing involves both the personal and the political.

To heal spiritually can mean becoming aware of the effect that one woman's story can have and how powerful our combined voices will be. Miriam Greenspan says that when we connect our suffering to the collective pain of the planet,

we feel ourselves part of a larger whole. Individual pain "opens out into the healing energy of compassion for self and world" (Greenspan, 1993:xii). It involves renewing our relationship to all of life, and visualizing our connection to the past and the future.

Healing spiritually is not necessarily free of despair. Many people use despair as an avenue for deepening consciousness, a transformational event which allows us to reach the other side of despair - which is wonder (Baldwin, 1991:95-105).

#### *1.4 Incorporating Spiritual Healing into Practice*

Miriam Greenspan describes how new ways of working evolved out of her personal spiritual awakening upon the loss of her son. She says "I was moved to use my personal experience as the basis of what might be possible for others" (Greenspan, 1993:xxxix). Joan Turner's healing work has also evolved out of a personal healing experience beginning with feeling that her spirit was dying and change was necessary (Turner, 1990:224-225).

Like Greenspan, Turner, and others, I wanted ways to incorporate spiritual healing into my work with women who have experienced abuse. I too believe that a wholistic approach to healing has more chance of creating lasting change both in individual lives and in society (Bopp et al, 1984:23-24; Greenspan, 1993:xii; Hodgson, 1990:35). In

*each small step*, Louise, an Aboriginal woman, says that if we only take care of body and mind there is no balance. Having the spirit in your life provides the balance between them. She says that if she did not have a spiritual way of life, her healing would have taken longer. As a counsellor, she says she has found that if people have a belief then they are easier to work with. Otherwise all you have is "technology" (Mackinnon, 1991:155-56).

Unfortunately, I found little written on the subject of spiritual healing, woman abuse, and feminist practice. How do we make spiritual healing part of a feminist social work practice? Although we do acknowledge the importance of 'emotional work' (for example, dealing with anger or grief), the necessity of filling practical, material needs, and the underlying belief that if we change the conditions of peoples' lives they will be fine often leaves little space for addressing spiritual needs. The underlying premise of this study is to explore the possibility that acknowledging the psychic wounding caused by abuse and oppression, means acknowledging the need for spiritual healing. Beyond the physical, emotional and political, and yet intrinsic to each, lies the spirit.

## 2.0 RATIONALE

### 2.1 *The Absence of Spiritual Healing in Feminist Practice*

In the area of woman abuse, the idea of spiritual healing has seldom been addressed explicitly in the literature by feminist practitioners and social work scholars.

Many agencies and workers in the Ottawa area use the basic feminist principles of *The Framework for Services for Abused Women* for their work with abused women--accountability, accessibility, choice, respect for differences, and woman-positive philosophy--dedicated to providing whatever women need to "live lives free of violence" (Community Framework Committee of Ottawa-Carleton, 1993). It does not exclude the possibility of a woman's need to heal spiritually. Yet, in the day-to-day work of many shelters and agencies (there are exceptions), crisis intervention and practical issues (housing, legal help, financial need) are what most often get dealt with, because these seem the most urgent. Funding seldom includes long-term healing work. As well, agencies seem reluctant to address women's spiritual needs. Spirituality, (or religion as it is often defined), seems to be a taboo subject in the secular agencies of Western society.

Support groups, particularly second-stage groups, sometimes include rituals and celebrations of women's strengths. However, they are seldom recognized explicitly

as spiritual activities.

Popular feminist books on woman abuse have few references to spiritual wounding and the need to heal spiritually (Engel, 1990; Lobel, 1986; MacLeod, 1987; NiCarthy, 1984, 1986; Russell, 1982, 1986; Walker, 1979; White, 1994). Evelyn White does refer to the role of the church in supporting or blaming women (1994:70-71) and Patricia Evans, in her book, *The Verbally-Abusive Relationship*, touches on the importance of connecting verbal abuse with attacks on the spirit (1992:43 and 53). In *Radical Feminist Therapy*, Bonnie Burstow refers to spiritual work in connection with work with Native women and women from non-dominant cultural groups (1992:72, 142). Sanford and Donovan, in *Women and Self-Esteem* include a chapter on spirituality with emphasis on the harm perpetrated by Christianity and Judaism (1984:160-176).

Aside from the work of Joan Kuyek whose community action includes a strongly spiritual element (1990), I found no explicit reference to spirituality in the works of key/founding theorists of the structural approach (Carniol, 1987; Fook, 1993; Lecompte, 1990; Leonard, 1984; Levine, 1982; Moreau, 1979; Wood and Middleman, 1989).

The structural approach, however, does connect the need for personal and social change, and rejects duality (Lecompte, 1990:32 and 37). Helen Levine, who added a feminist perspective into the structural approach at

Carleton University, emphasizes that the 'personal is political' (1982), and Lecompte discusses the need to integrate both into a single, more effective practice (1990:31-33). Ben Carniol refers to the early settlement houses where workers provided a "spiritual and social uplift" (1987:43) to whole neighbourhoods. The roots of modern western social work were tightly bound up with the Social Gospel movement, with its theology of an immanent God (Wills, 1995:4). Emphasis on combining personal and social change with liberation theologies could provide room for the development of spiritual approaches in modern structural social work.

## 2.2 *Signs of Movement*

A shift may be occurring. In the ten years between the first and second printing of *A New Approach to Women and Therapy*, Miriam Greenspan spoke of experiencing a spiritual awakening which has "opened me to undreamed possibilities of healing beyond the narrowly defined realm of psychology" (1993:xxxvii). She says that she did not need to 'go after' spirituality in psychotherapy. "I just had to stop keeping it out" (Greenspan, 1993:xxxviii). Charlotte Davis Kasl links individual healing to oppression, developing an empowerment approach to spiritual healing from addiction and abuse (1992). Michael Lerner describes the value of meaningful ritual for individual and collective empowerment,

communities of compassion, and the power of religion to create alternative vision (1986:302-334).

The 'bible' of incest survivors, *The Courage to Heal*, has a chapter on spirituality (Bass and Davis, 1988) and an anthology called *Healing Voices* (Laidlaw, Malmo and Associates, 1990), focuses on the spiritual healing techniques of several practitioners: Jan Ellis, Maggie Hodgson, Naida Hyde, Bonnelle Lewis Strickling, Joan Turner, and others. In *Sisters of the Yam*, bell hooks explores the need for black women to heal spiritually (1993). An anthology dealing with healing from abuse and addiction, *each small step* includes testimonies of women who have been involved in their own spiritual healing (Mackinnon, 1991).

Several works on women's spirituality include articles on spiritual techniques in women's individual healing and in social activism (Culpepper, 1982; Iglehart, 1982; Laidlaw, Malmo and Associates, 1990; Shaffer, 1982; Starhawk, 1989; Thistlethwaite, 1989; Ywahoo, 1989).

Some attention is being paid to spiritual healing at Carleton's School of Social Work with the inclusion of courses in wholistic Aboriginal approaches to social work, where spirituality is an integral part of the healing process. Kathy Absolon describes Aboriginal healing using the Medicine Wheel as a legitimate assessment and helping tool for social work practice (1993:1).



### 2.3 *Feminist Concerns About Spiritual Approaches*

Feminists voiced several concerns about linking spirituality and women's empowerment. In this section, by addressing these concerns, I will provide a rationale for including spiritual healing in feminist practice.

#### 2.3.1 *Spirituality as Counterproductive/Apolitical*

Charlene Spretnak describes attacks from liberal and socialist/materialist feminists who say that the attention to women's spirituality is counterproductive since it "drew energy away from real feminist issues" (Spretnak, 1994:xix). Hallie Iglehart, who has been leading feminist spiritual groups since 1973, says there is the fear that people will become so involved with their inner selves that they will not want or be able to act in the world (Iglehart, 1982:409).

Seen in a more positive way, spiritual activities like meditation can provide time for reflection, which is often missing from the Western way of life. (See Ywahoo, 1989:276). For counsellors and activists, learning ways to practice meditation can be one way of coping with fatigue and preventing burn-out. Though self-reflection, meditation, and retreats can be a necessary part of one's spiritual life, many feminists link women's spirituality directly to action (Kuyek, 1990; Macy, 1991; Sanchez, 1989; Shaffer, 1982; Starhawk, 1987, 1989; Ywahoo, 1989). "Action is what

manifests that which you perceive in the meditation" (Ywahoo, 1989:279). Starhawk asserts that the idea of immanence present in feminist spirituality (as in the Social Gospel movement that spawned modern social work) works against the passivity attributed to spiritual philosophies (Starhawk, 1989:178). Joan Kuyek advises us that our organizations need to reflect the kind of world we want to create to live our vision (1990:86).

Iglehart warns that by dismissing spirituality as having little political relevance, we fall into the patriarchal trap of dualism: "If it's spiritual, it can't be political" (Iglehart, 1982:406). This way, she says, we can be isolated from our power and spend our time fighting amongst ourselves (Iglehart, 1982:406).

The womanspirit movement seeks to reclaim the spiritual-political powers neglected or suppressed throughout the patriarchal era, to develop a feminist force that attacks patriarchy from all directions, and to create new ways of being and relating. (Iglehart, 1982:405)

### *2.3.2 The Return of the Goddess: A Return to Biology as Destiny?*

The idea of the female as sacred worries some feminists, fearing that a return to spirituality such as Goddess-worship will shackle us once again to our biology, as we worship the 'divine mother'. It is true that in the seventies, women fought hard to escape stereotypical female roles which left us with few choices. Feminists are

understandably wary of role models of the goddess as 'mother' as depicted in much Western 'New Age' material. However limiting the goddess to one image is rather simplistic, and is itself stereotypical. According to several traditions, the ancient goddesses embodied many powerful images and roles (see section 3.3.2).

Ecofeminist philosophies which connect women to nature trigger deep-rooted fears amongst its critics. For instance, Janet Biehl decries the "irrational analogies" which invite women to "take a step backward" (1991:6). It could be beneficial for feminists to question the influence of dualistic patriarchal notions on our own strong reactions. Is it our internalized oppression that causes us to favour rational thought over more heart-centred, intuitive ways of being in the world? As Hallie Iglehart says, the demand by some feminists to justify:

...an extra-rational mode (womanspirit) in rational terms...reflects an ethnocentric attitude that politically valuable tools cannot be developed outside the established political feminist arena. (Iglehart, 1982:407)

Spretnak puts a new twist on the feminist expression that biology is **not** destiny, indicating that men are free to apply this to their lives and see that they too can reject war and embrace a wholistic orientation that emphasizes connection (1989:130). Accepting our connection to nature does not mean that we would no longer have freedom to choose. According to Native teachings, in the centre of the

Medicine Wheel is will or volition (Bopp et al, 1984:30).

### 2.3.3 *Women's Historical Oppression in Organized Religions*

Some feminists equate spirituality with organized religions and are reminded of centuries of religious oppression of women and other marginalized groups (Ruth, 1994:xv). Feminists from many cultures have analyzed organized religions with regards to oppression towards women.

Chatsumain Kabilsingh (1983) of Thailand and Kumiko Uchino (1983) in Japan have critically examined the changing roles of women in Buddhist practice and the influences of paternal societies on these roles. Stephanie Kaza notes both commonalities and potential problems within Buddhism regarding power relations and women's spiritual needs (1993:50-69).

Delores Williams (1995:43-56) and Lorene Cummings (1995:57-66) provide a womanist critique of Afrocentrism and the black church for continuing to ignore women's oppression, and for not taking a stand against harmful practices such as female genital mutilation.

Judith Plaskow and Ellen Umansky examine the inferior position of women in the Jewish faith, and the ways they have been portrayed as the 'other' (Plaskow, 1989:39-50; Umansky, 1989:187-198). Marija Gimbutas, a feminist Archeologist, describes how the rise of patriarchy tried to

erase all reference to a female Goddess in her many forms (1989:63-71). Joan Ohanneson describes her own struggles within the Catholic Church and showed how Catholicism has marginalized women in the Church (1980).

Sharon Welch critically examines Christian religions listing the atrocities of the inquisition, witchburnings, the perpetuation of sexism, racism and anti-semitism, and the silence of most churches in the face of the Nazi holocaust (1985:4). Welch (15), as well as Brown and Bohn (1989:2), describe how a theology of self-sacrifice preached by some Christian faiths leads women to accept rather than resist victimization. As Susan Thistlethwaite says, "the Bible is part of the fabric of the oppression of battered women" (1989:303).

Paula Gunn Allen describes how the Christian church and the state have colluded to suppress traditional egalitarian and woman-positive beliefs of Aboriginal peoples since 'contact' (1986:3,32,191). Linda Jaine exposes the "cultural genocide" of the Christian Church in the residential school experience of generations of Native peoples (1993:x).

Egyptian feminist, Nawal el Saadawi asserts that all religions seem to "have a general human call for equality of people" (1983:266). Unfortunately, she says, when we come to the specifics, we tend to find oppression, including the oppression of women (1983:267).

#### *2.4 Why We Need to Address Spirituality in Feminist Practice*

It can be useful for women to re-evaluate the 'truths' in our spiritual traditions which have been subject to centuries of patriarchal interpretation. It can also be valuable to resurrect prepatriarchal woman-centred traditions that may provide women with meaningful connections to herstory.

Whatever our own personal beliefs, women will bring their religious beliefs to the counselling sessions. Feminist interpretations of patriarchal texts are necessary, particularly when working with abused women (Thistlethwaite, 1989:303-304; Scanzoni, 1984:50). Thistlethwaite worries that strongly-religious women will cease to seek out shelters or groups for abused women if their beliefs are attacked, and believes that permission to critically interpret religious text can raise consciousness for women and help them to sort out the complicated relationships between religion and patriarchy (Thistlethwaite, 1989:303). This can be useful for women from all cultures and religious traditions.

In our work with women from cultures which emphasize a more wholistic approach to healing, a client's needs may include spiritual needs, and it can be important for feminist counsellors to learn how to work wholistically.

Judith Plaskow says that the spiritual life of the Jews

is based on "retelling the story of our past" (1989:40). She says that there is a need for feminists to recover women's history within Judaism (Plaskow, 1989:41). Part of healing from the past is in "building links between the stories of our foremothers and our own joy and pain" (Plaskow, 1989:48).

Not all feminists agree that we can reclaim a meaningful spirituality for women from within traditional religions (see Brown and Bohn, 1989:xiii; Goldenberg, 1979; Hampson, 1983; Rush, 1982; Spretnak, 1994:xx; and Welch, 1985:2-3). For the purposes of this study I will focus instead on how women counsellors and healers, both inside and outside of organized religions, are attempting to create space for women to heal spiritually and to reclaim a personal spirituality that is meaningful to them. Feminist spirituality "assumes each woman knows what is best for her and has the right to make her own decisions" (Shaffer, 1982:464).

This resurgence of interest in women's spirituality could be an indication that feminist practitioners may also need to look at women's spiritual needs.

### *2.5 Feminism and Spirituality: Common Ground*

Spiritual healing can find a place within feminist practice. Ursula King sees feminism itself as a "vision quest" (1989:88) which goes beyond empirical evidence.

Sheila Ruth believes that the women's movement has always had a strong, albeit often unacknowledged, spiritual element (1994:xvii).

Morgan McFarland, a feminist witch, believes that feminists and Pagans are heading toward the same goal. Both tell us to trust ourselves, and as women begin to trust our own spiritual experiences, we begin to make our own connections (Adler, 1979:182-183). Iglehart stresses that spiritual and political powers are inseparable (1982:406), while Greenspan believes that the awakening of Goddess-centred spirituality gives the feminist movement new vitality and creativity (1993:xliv).



### 3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 The Literature Search

In reviewing the literature, I looked for material which might contribute to an understanding of the effects of abuse on the spirit, how women heal and grow spiritually, and the role of the social worker in facilitating abused women's spiritual healing. In my literature search of computerized library systems, I used combinations of key words--feminism, womanism, spirituality, religion, pastoral care, therapy, counselling, social work, casework, abuse, violence, women--beginning with a general search of Carleton University Reference System (CUBE).

I searched Current Contents for relevant journal articles, and reviewed *The Alternative Press Index*, *Social Work Research and Abstracts*, and *Sociological and Psychological Abstracts*. I reviewed recent issues of specific journals such as *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, *Hypatia: Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, and *Women and Therapy*.

For books and articles on feminist spirituality, I also referred to Shelley Finson's extensive annotated bibliography of feminist liberation theology (Finson, 1995). Many of the books and articles I reviewed had excellent bibliographies as well.

As I described in chapter two, few authors combine

feminism, spirituality and social work practice. Therefore I focused on literature in the area of feminist theology and feminist spiritualities, reviewing feminist and womanist literature ranging from Judeo-Christian to Pagan, extracting material which may have relevance for women healing from abuse (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Bolen, 1984; Christ, 1982; Christ and Plaskow, 1979; Cummings, 1995; Goldenberg, 1979; hooks, 1993; Plaskow, 1993; Plaskow and Christ, 1989; Ruether, 1983, 1989, 1992; Ruth, 1994; Sanders, 1995; Saussy, 1991; Spretnak, 1982, 1989, 1993; Starhawk, 1987, 1989, 1989; Teish, 1989; Todd, 1982; Umansky, 1989; Walker, 1985, 1987; Williams, 1989, 1995).

I drew on healing materials from wholistic belief systems such as Buddhism and Aboriginal spiritualities, on the premise that healing needs to include all aspects of the individual and society. I explored specific Aboriginal practices to help people and communities to heal from the abuses of colonization and assimilation and the resulting family and community violence. These approaches might benefit both Native and non-Native women who are healing from abuse (Absolon, 1993; Allen, 1986; Bopp et al, 1984; Daily, 1988; Dion Buffalo, 1990; First Nations Health Commission, 1994; Hodgson, 1990; Jaine, 1993; Sanchez, 1989; Ywahoo, 1987, 1989).

I examined works of Buddhist teachers from various countries and sects of Buddhism, including critical analysis

by Buddhist feminists (Chodron, 1991; Dass and Bush, 1992; Dass and Gorman, 1985; Griffin, 1989; Kabilsingh, 1983; Kaza, 1993; Macy, 1991; Nhat Hanh, 1975, 1987, 1990, 1993; Uchino, 1983).

In feminist theory and practice, I have chosen those areas which I believe may be open to the inclusion of women's spiritual needs. I drew particularly from the area of relational therapy and ecofeminist theory such as; Belenky et al, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Jack, 1991; Jordan, 1991; Miller, 1976; and ecofeminists such as; Adams, 1993; Griffin, 1989; Macy, 1991; Orenstein, 1993; Plant, 1989; Riley, 1993; and Starhawk, 1987; 1989.

I drew also from the experiences of feminist therapists, healers, and social activists who have integrated spiritual practices into their work (Greenspan, 1983, 1993; Hodgson, 1990; Hyde, 1990; Macy, 1991; Morell, 1996; Shaffer, 1982; Starhawk, 1989; Thistlethwaite, 1989; Turner, 1990 and others). I was also able to find some pastoral work which connects spirituality, feminism and counselling (Cooper-White, 1995; Clinebell, 1976; DeMarinis, 1993).

In all areas, I have tried to choose material written by women from various cultures, backgrounds and spiritualities, exploring the intersecting roles of race, class, gender and sexuality in spiritual wounding, and how women heal in different ways. For instance, the literature

includes the work of women of colour from several cultures who are womanists, theologians, academics, ecofeminists, and practitioners (Cummings, 1995; hooks, 1993; Hurtado, 1989; Kabilsingh, 1983; Riley, 1993; Uchino, 1983; Williams, 1989, 1995), and Aboriginal women from many nations (Allen, 1986; Daily, 1988; Dion Buffalo, 1990; Hodgson, 1990; Sanchez, 1989; Ywahoo, 1987, 1989).

I reviewed feasibility studies on including spirituality in social work practice and curricula, where spirituality was defined primarily as religion. The articles underscore differences between religious studies versus approaches towards developing a meaningful personal spirituality which may or may not involve a formal religion (Canda, 1988; Cornett, 1992; Sheridan et al., 1994; Joseph, 1988). I included a debate of the question 'Should social work education address religious issues?' (Amato-Von Hemert and Clark, 1994).

As much as possible, I have identified the spiritual theologians, the spiritual therapists, and individuals on their own healing journeys. At times it was difficult to know if a particular theologian was speaking academically or from her experience as a pastoral counsellor, and inevitably all categories overlapped.

To establish a rationale and explore the effects of abuse, I looked at literature on feminist therapy and woman abuse (Bass and Davis, 1988; Blume, 1990; Burstow, 1992;

Community Framework Committee of Ottawa Carleton, 1993; Engel, 1990; Evans, 1992; Greenspan, 1993; Herman, 1992; Jack, 1991; Kasl, 1992; Lobel, 1986; Macleod, 1987; NiCarthy, 1982, 1989; Walker, 1979; White, 1994). I also searched literature on structural social work for references to spirituality (Carniol, 1987; Fook, 1993; Lecompte, 1990; Leonard, 1984; Levine, 1982; Moreau, 1979; Wood and Middleman, 1989).

I could not review all the literature on women's spirituality. Therefore, I chose work which tended to be thoughtful, reflective, practice-based, or arising from some sense of tradition. I avoided those which were based on New Age jargon, pop psychology, quick fixes, or other questionable practices such as non-Natives appropriating sacred Native ceremonies for profit.

I believe that approaches which evolve out of a woman's own healing process are as valid as those grounded in academia, theology, or social work theory, and I have tried to honour that philosophy within the parameters of an academic study.

### *3.2 Defining Spirit and Spirituality*

How do feminists, theologians, and therapists from various cultural groups identify 'spirit' and 'spirituality'? Baldwin and Riley used images of life-giving creative energy (1991:81; 1993:202), and Sheila Ruth, a Pagan philosopher,

calls it "the breath of life" (1994:22)

For many Aboriginal nations, images include a circle or a hoop, of which spirituality is one component of an interconnected wholistic way of life (Allen, 1986; Bopp et al, 1984:23-24; Ywahoo, 1989). Charlene Spretnak, author of *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* also sees spirituality in this way (1982:xvii). Buddhist philosophy views spirituality wholistically as well describing it as 'the Way' or 'the Path' (Nhat Hanh, 1994; Macy, 1991:54; Trungpa, 1973:4). Chogyam Trungpa describes the spiritual path of Buddhism, as "the process of cutting through our confusion" and "uncovering the awakened state of mind" (Trungpa, 1973:4). Like many Native traditions, ecofeminist Judith Plant says that ecofeminist spirituality sees the spiritual as alive in us, and the Creator as part of each person, plant or animal (1989:113).

I found imagery referring to a search or a journey, involving growth, creativity, authenticity and the importance of trusting one's own truth (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Baldwin, 1991:81; hooks, 1993;7-8; Kasl, 1992:341). In their research on individual women's spiritual journeys, Judith Anderson and Patricia Hopkins use the image of a garden to describe what women's spirituality means to them. It is alive and growing, organic and complex, with cycles and variety, each part interdependent and needing cultivation, each coming to maturity "in its own

time, in its own way" (1991:15-16). This metaphor captures the range of life-affirming spiritual images I found in the books I reviewed. The images described movement, connection, and a recognition of the sacredness within.

They described profoundly personal journeys, "learning to value our own experience of the sacred" (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:22), and, at the same time, like the garden image, imply that a connection exists between all things and all journeys, all part of the "Sacred Hoop" (Allen, 1986:1). To these women, the spirit is that part of us that holds creativity, joy, vitality, and growth. It is "the path within the path" (Baldwin, 1991:3).

### *3.3 Woman Abuse and Spirituality*

#### *3.3.1 Effects of Violence on the Spirit*

A number of therapists emphasize the destructive effects of sexual violation, particularly when the victim is a child. Carolyn Shaffer, who works with survivors, calls rape "a brush with death" (1982:463) which threatens a woman's very existence and requires spiritual "re-powering" in order to heal (1982:464).

Herman (1992:34,55) and Hyde (1990:170) describe how trauma destroys the connection between individual and community through a loss of trust, especially when it involves a betrayal of important relationships. Survivors may exist in a state of terror, experiencing post-traumatic

stress akin to that of war veterans (Greenspan, 1993:xxx; Herman, 1992:34, 36, 55; Hyde, 1990:170).

Symptoms of trauma and abuse in childhood or as an adult include; insomnia, nightmares, tension headaches, back pain, gastrointestinal symptoms, environmental illness, tremors, rapid heartbeat, choking sensations, feelings of guilt, shame, or loss of safety, state of dread, hypervigilance, terror, and confusion, lack of self-worth, feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness, hopelessness, dissociation, or psychic numbing (Greenspan, 1994:xliv; Herman, 1992:86; Jack, 1991:117; Shaffer, 1982:464). In the words of one survivor:

I will learn to deny physical pain and smile in frozen terror...To do this I learn to kill my spirit before they do. (Mackinnon, 1991:73)

Several describe how, in order to cope with abuse, women may turn to drugs or alcohol, may be self-destructive or attempt suicide, may develop multiple personalities or become chronically depressed (Herman, 1992:102, 103, and 124; Hyde, 1990:164; Jack, 1991:20-23; Mackinnon, 1991:66; Malmo, 1990:293-295).

### 3.3.2 *Effects of Silencing and Isolation on the Spirit*

If our spiritual journey involves authenticity and connection, the isolation and secrecy imposed on victims of abuse must be spiritually damaging. Silence is gained through threats and through feelings of shame and guilt



projected onto the abused, causing some women to lie in order to survive (Bohn, 1989:111; Herman, 1992:98; hooks, 1993:20-22; Hyde, 1990:163; Women's Research Centre, 1989:66).

Women are isolated and denied a full voice in society. They are often punished for speaking out, or attempting to live fully, as in the witchhunts, the ordeal of Anita Hill, and the Montreal massacre (Steinem, 1992:14; Malette and Chalouh, 1991; Rich, 1979:190; Ruether, 1989:36; White, 1994:xiii; Young-Eisendrath and Wehr, 1989:119). White (1985:xiii) and Herman (1992:71) argue that the silence and denial of abuse increases women's suffering and women find themselves isolated and invisible before the law, when society reinforces the victim's complicity by seeking "an explanation for the perpetrator's crimes in the character of the victim" (Herman, 1992:116).

Prevented from living fully in a patriarchal society may stifle a woman's spiritual growth. Carole Bohn describes how Christian women bringing stories of abuse to their pastors found themselves ignored as those same pastors, in interviews, denied the presence of abuse in their congregations (1989:112).

### *3.3.3 Negative Messages, Objectification, and Internalized Oppression*

Therapists describe how an abused woman or child is

often subjected to a barrage of negative messages from her abuser eventually losing touch with her own sense of truth (Evans, 1992; Herman, 1991; Jack, 1991; Sanford and Donovan, 1984:120). Exposed to constant surveillance or stalking by abusive partners, critical scrutiny by social service agencies, harassment at work and on the street, and objectification in beauty pageants, art, fashion magazines, and pornography, women become further disconnected from themselves and their spirit (Brownmiller, 1984; Cooper-White, 1995:43; Hunter, 1992:9-12; Kostach, 1982:48; Malmo, 1990:288).

The degrading images of black women in rap music and videos also damage women's spirit. Poor women and women of colour often find themselves disproportionately under the scrutiny of social agencies and mainstream society (hooks, 1993:57; Hunter, 1992:12; White, 1985:16). Colonizers' attempts to destroy Aboriginal matrifocal traditions and to undermine women's status, have caused violence against Aboriginal women to increase since contact (Allen, 1986:191-192; Daily, 1988:108; Hodgson, 1990:34). As Jean Baker Miller says, "To be treated like an object is to be threatened with psychic annihilation" (1976:58).

Herman argues that in all situations of captivity or coercion the perpetrator's purpose is to break the will of the captive and create dependency until the captive sees the world from the captor's point of view (1992:76-86). A woman

may internalize the oppressor's point of view, and become an instrument of her own oppression (Hunter, 1992:15; Jack, 1991:133; Kasl, 1992:349). No longer capable of valuing her "own experience of the sacred" (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:22), she loses touch with her feelings and thoughts, seeing herself through the objectifying "male gaze" (Hunter, 1992:18).

If part of a healthy spirituality is to see each of us as sacred, then the way women are conditioned to accept abuse and oppression may be even more harmful than the abuse itself. Traditional Christian values such as suffering, forgiveness, the necessity of being sexually pure, and obedience to authority, may lead to self-blame and self-hatred. The patriarchal assumptions which hold women responsible for rape and abuse and see abuse as punishment for past sins, and the lack of outrage regarding violence against girls and women, reinforces these feelings and leads us to deny our inherent sacredness and the reality of the oppression we endure (Bohn, 1989; Brown and Parker, 1989:2; Fortune, 1989:140; Redmond, 1989:73 and 80; Ruether, 1989:38).

#### 3.3.4 *Psychic Numbing and the Development of the False Self*

Herman argues that, if the abuse is severe enough, individuals "lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God" (1992:56). Forced to be unauthentic,

existing in a state of constant dread, and feeling powerless to make changes may cause a woman to split off from her feelings and become numb, developing a false self in order to survive (Herman, 1992:74; hooks, 1993:105; Jack, 1991:168; Malmo, 1990:288-92). Over time, dissociation impedes growth, "alienating the dominant self from her repressed feelings and the source of her psychic energy" (Malmo, 1990:293). Eventually "the self is severed from the world, from others, and from the life of the spirit" (King, 1989:81).

### 3.3.5 *The Intersection of Oppressions*

The effects of patriarchy intersect with other socially-constructed markers as class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality in women's lives (Hurtado, 1989:843). Colonizers imposed European attitudes on Native people in ways that were both sexist and racist (Allen, 1986:3; Daily, 1988:108). During the conquest of Africa, traditional African culture with its affirmation of women and their roles, was suppressed (Gilkes, 1995:38). Visible minority women are often torn between supporting their men in a racist society and fighting for their rights as women. "What do you do with men of color who menace women of color in a world where people of color are oppressed?" (White, 1983:22).

Authors indicate that women may experience sexism in

different ways. Describing abuse by seduction and rejection, Aida Hurtado says "the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog" (1989:854). The scenario changes but each is objectified and seen as less than human. This can lead to differences in women's response to abuse. Some women of colour argue that white women often respond with passivity resulting in depression, while black women have learned to respond with more active survival strategies because of a history of surviving oppression (Douglas, 1995:68-69; Hurtado, 1989:854). Others caution women of colour against internalizing stereotypes of the 'strong matriarch' which may serve to silence them when they are feeling depressed or unable to cope (Comas-Diaz and Greene, 1994:21; hooks, 1993:104).

Lesbian women may experience spiritual wounding when situations of abuse are trivialized or discounted, when the community sides with the abuser, or when heterosexist imperatives prevent them from seeking help (Rothblum and Cole, 1989:89-105). Further wounding may occur when the spiritual help they seek is denied them because of the heterosexism of some religious institutions.

### *3.3.6 Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Spirit of the Oppressor*

The act of oppressing others harms the spirit of the oppressor in different ways, and is often itself a sign of

spiritual wounding; "to oppress and devalue the Other is to lose one's hope and spirit" (Young-Eisendrath and Wehr, 1989:136). In order to maintain the social order, and ensure continued exploitation and competition for scarce goods, capitalism and patriarchy have a stake in keeping people separate from their inner selves, from each other, and from the earth (Griffin, 1989; Iglehart, 1982; Kasl, 1992; Keller, 1986,1989; Lerner, 1986; Warren, 1989). The separate self, in positions of power, is able to exploit, abuse, and objectify others, and disconnect from the effects of nuclear proliferation and environmental degradation. This is an atmosphere which allows woman abuse to flourish (Griffin, 1989:11-12; Kasl, 1992:68; Keller, 1986:26; Lerner, 1986:188-206; Scanzoni, 1984:48; Warren, 1989:128). The suppression of compassion helps maintain 'power over' relationships, and sexual, racial, class, and other oppressions (Iglehart, 1982:408). The pornographer creates images of a woman without spirit out of his own self-loathing and spiritual emptiness (Griffin, 1989:11). Allen attributes the colonizers' patriarchal fear of gynocracy as the cause of the physical and cultural genocide of American Indian tribes. She and Judith Todd argue that the egalitarian ways of Native people were a threat to patriarchy and colonization (Allen, 1986:3; Todd, 1989:435-436).

Several ecofeminists see connections between women's

oppression and environmental and nuclear destruction (Griffin, 1989; Starhawk, 1982:173; Warren, 1989:119-132; Williams, 1993:24-29). Delores Williams connects the exploitation of black women's bodies to the abuse of nature, and refers to 'spirit breakers' who were hired to break the spirit of slaves, and slave masters who broke the spirit of black women by raping them (1993:29).

In this section I concentrated on how abuse harms the spirit. Several authors also describe how a meaningful spirituality can help people to survive in spite of oppression, slavery, or war, often inspiring them to work for peace and justice (Douglas, 1995:147-155; Cooper-White, 1995:204; hooks, 1993:8; Nhat Hanh, 1993:56; Sanders, 1995:121-143; Smith, 1993:169; White, 1985:70).

there was a profound unshaken belief in the spiritual power of black people to transform our world and live with integrity and oneness despite oppressive social realities. (hooks, 1993:8)

### 3.3.7 *Shedding Patriarchy*

Feminist philosophy asserts the importance of connecting the personal to the political. From my own experience, the key to spiritual healing also lay in making the connections. Healing our spirit may involve a process of shedding the patriarchal messages which are buried deeply in our unconscious. We can shut them out by numbing ourselves but that will not facilitate our healing process which, I believe, requires an opening rather than a closing

off.

We might want to distance ourselves from the 'propaganda' for a time. As Alice Walker's Shug says in *The Color Purple*, you have to "git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (1982:179). What it meant for me was avoiding exposure to television and newspapers until I was able to clear my head of the patriarchal conditioning and create space for silence and reflection. I replaced words that wear down the spirit with women's words of affirmation and support.

I explored the literature to find out if this was true for others as well. Women described how we need to distance ourselves from patriarchal images in order to escape from "the bleakness of patriarchal thinking" (Ruth, 1994:5) and reclaim our power from its "women-subduing imagery" (Cooper-White, 1995:60). Feminists, therapists, and theologians described ways to shed negative images, creating space for an alternative vision. They referred to the importance of reducing our exposure to hurtful, destructive messages and images in the media (Cooper-White, 1995:60; Nhat Hanh, 1993:69; hooks, 1993:81-84) so we can step outside expected roles, see for ourselves, and begin the process of self-invention (Bass and Davis, 1988:184; Cooper-White, 1995:60; Jack, 1991:199; Kitchen, 1990:114; White, 1985:86; Williams, 1984:140-141). What is needed is a cognitive shift (Jack, 1991:199).



Some authors described how 'leaving home' may be necessary for spiritual healing, sometimes physically, as in leaving an abusive relationship: other times leaving figuratively, going deep within oneself and embracing silence, leaving behind what we have been taught to believe and journeying into the unknown (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:48,49,54; Baldwin, 1991:47-63; Bopp et al, 1984:56; Nouwen, 1972:38). Authors point to the need to embrace silence in order to find clarity of vision, and provide a place for reflection. Constant noise makes it difficult to achieve inner silence, and may point to a reluctance to face and love ourselves (Bass and Davis, 1988:157; Bopp et al, 1984:56; Nouwen, 1972:38).

Anderson and Hopkins spoke to women who found it difficult to grow spiritually and remain in their relationships, and also found women who never left home physically but grew through healthy connection with others. They wonder if this reflects both the value of relationship in women's lives, and the demands placed on women in relationships with men (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:180-188).

Another step in ridding our spirit of patriarchy may involve connecting to alternatives by listening to women's words, writing our words, reclaiming the power to name, creating our own media, and finding new ways to heal using sources of power and energy that are deeper than patriarchy (Gearhart, 1982:195; Kasl, 1992:332-356; Kuyek, 1990:75 and

78; Rich, 1979:185-194; Shannon, 1990:18 and 25; Walker, 1983:231-243). Therapist Charlotte Kasl describes the difficulties she encountered trying to fit women's healing from alcohol addiction into a male model of recovery (Alcoholics Anonymous) which led her to develop her sixteen steps for discovery and empowerment for women (1992:137-185, 305-356).

These movements away from patriarchy may free us to begin to create our own vision of life, help us to gather strength, and lead us to action. The authors describe results which may include restructured communities, alternative workplaces, different ways of relating to each other and the earth, and new theologies where we see the sacred in our image (Coston, 1984:342; Kuhns, 1990:37; Kuyek, 1990:70; Rose, 1990:109; Ruether, 1984:325; Ruth, 1994:5, 6 and 18; Starrett, 1982:188). Plaskow and Christ describe feminist 'theologies' as theology created in the voice of women, often outside of any institutional context (1989:8). Ruth say: "What I have to say is already a part of me. I need only to access it" (1994:xx).

### *3.3.8 Affirmation of the Sacred in Women*

In working with oppressed groups, feminist therapists realize the importance of replacing negative stereotypes with a more realistic, balanced picture of ourselves. To heal and grow spiritually women need to see ourselves

reflected in our belief systems and traditions. Feminist theologians, healers, theorists, activists, historians, and archaeologists discuss reasons for recreating and reclaiming women's spiritual heritage.

Some argue that male images of God tend to reflect the values of patriarchy, where humanness is identified with narrowly-defined views of maleness, accompanied by negative images of women who are either impure, subordinate, objectified or invisible (Goldenberg, 1979:22; King, 1989:45; Ruether, 1992:140; Walker, 1982:177). Identifying God with male rulership and control "drained the life out of the image" (Keller, 1986:249) for many women.

Goddess images expand our idea of God to include women (McFague, 1989:139; Ruether, 1989:158) and render positive those qualities more often associated with women's ways of knowing and being, values which have often been demeaned and trivialized under patriarchy. Feminist theologians say that we need a heritage that reflects women's contributions to life, and we need alternatives to hierarchical power (Fiorenza, 1989:35; Goldenberg, 1979; Morton, 1989:116; Plaskow, 1989:39; Ruether, 1989:151).

At the same time, Sally McFague believes that Goddess images need to include, but not be limited to maternal images (1989:140). We also need images of women as powerful, assertive, heroic, wise, or wrathful. Others also cite Goddess images which attribute a full range of

activities to both male and female deities and help women to explore unknown dimensions of themselves, discover new capabilities, and exercise our own conscious choice (Bolen, 1984; Downing, 1989:119-127; Falk, 1989:129; McFague, 1989:140; Ruether, 1983:52; 1989:160; Spretnak, 1982:xxxiii; Stone, 1982:94-95). The teachings of the Medicine Wheel also emphasize a balance of traits within each individual (Bopp et al, 1984:39).

...images of God/ess must be transformative pointing us back to our authentic potential and forward to new redeemed possibilities (Ruether, 1989:160).

We need images to help us celebrate our transitions and rites of passage, and value all stages of women's lives. Christ describes Wicca which celebrates woman in youth, maturity, and age (1982:79). These images become the mentors, warriors, guides, healers, and role models helping us to expand our possibilities and our vision (Bolen, 1984; Christ, 1982:78-80; Goldenberg, 1979:97; Ruth, 1994:57; Teish, 1989:87). A woman who has been abused may need to call upon the strength of Artemis to leave the relationship and the nurturance of Demeter to heal (Bolen, 1984:266). Learning to value our lives at all stages may help women to reclaim a self-esteem and self-worth weakened by abuse.

Ruether says that we need to be able to relate to images of women who are valued in their own right, not simply as mother, wife or daughter (1983:60-61).

Theologians (Morton, 1989:112; Stone, 1982:66) agree with

Naomi Goldenberg (1979:37-49), who says that with the death of the 'father-gods' we turn inward, learning to rely on our own judgment and we begin to realize that "a life without a man controlling it was all right" (Goldenberg, 1979:38). This is especially important for a woman healing from an abusive relationship, made to feel by her partner, her religion, and by society, that her only value lies in her relation to a male; father, husband, or God.

Feminists have explored attitudes toward lesbianism in various traditions, examining poems, letters, and other historical documents, tribal life and customs (Allen, 1986:245-261; Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:94; Curb and Monahan, 1985; Griffin, 1989:105; Matter, 1989:51-60). Through this research, they have uncovered spiritual role models which reflect women's loving relationships with other women.

For cultures such as Aboriginal and African nations who have been robbed of their traditional ways by colonization, reclaiming matrifocal traditions may mean a return to a way of life which honours women and helps heal whole communities (Allen, 1986, 1989; Chesler, 1982:101; Gilkes, 1995:38). This can be a crucial step in helping women to heal from the combined effects of racism and sexism, which often shows itself in negative stereotypes and treatment of women of colour. Seeing oneself in and of the sacred may provide the positive role models women (and men) need to replace these

internalized images (Allen, 1986:42-45; Gilkes, 1995:37; hooks, 1993:82; White, 1985:86).

Earth-based and woman-centred traditions tended to value harmony, peace, and co-operation, and see all life as sacred and interconnected (Allen, 1989:28; Debrida, 1982:147; Ruether, 1989:161; Sojourner, 1982:57-63). Rediscovering these traditions may contribute to healing our world and provide new directions for old theologies such as Christianity and Judaism.

By proclaiming the Goddess is alive, we are proclaiming "that woman is alive, that being female is divine" (Goldenberg, 1979:92). Feminist theologians argue that when we see the sacred in female form we can more easily identify ourselves with the sacred and find God in ourselves, with positive effects on our self-esteem and our search for selfhood (Christ, 1982:71-86; Debrida, 1982:138; Downing, 1989:120; Goldenberg, 1979:92; Morton, 1989:115; Stone, 1982:91).

The liberating encounter with God(ess) is always an encounter with our authentic selves resurrected from underneath the alienated self (Ruether, 1989:161).

Teish says that African traditions believe that those who go before us make us what we are (1989:87). Many feminist historians and theologians believe that exploring women's heritage, unearthing or recreating positive women symbols, or connecting to the ancient views of the Goddess, can be a source for women's power and energy, and that

metaphors possess powers of transformation which shatter patriarchal idols (Christ, 1982:74 and 76; Debrida, 1982:146; Downing, 1989:120; Falk, 1989:132; Fiorenza, 1989:34; Morton, 1989:116; Sojourner, 1982:59). Sabrina Sojourner tells the story of Songi, the Great Mother of the Bantu, who notched a woman's teeth which then sprung forth with trees, houses, and livestock. When the men beat their wives, she notched all the women's teeth, and the men were not allowed to rejoin them until they promised to treat them with respect (Sojourner, 1982:59).

Carol Christ asserts that through celebrating in Goddess circles, we can learn to value our will and believe that we can achieve our will in the world instead of having to wait for others to take the initiative (Christ, 1982:81).

### *3.3.9 Growing into a Personal Spirituality*

Is it enough to simply resurrect female images of the sacred? How do we find a spirituality that resonates for us personally? As long as I equated spirituality with religion, I avoided it. Making the connections between my love of the natural world with belief systems which see the sacred in all things, freed me to accept myself as a spiritual being.

I looked to the literature to see what other women have to say about questions like 'how does a woman begin to heal and grow spiritually? Is there a singular women's

spirituality? If there were, what would it look like?' I found more questions. Is it necessary to worship a God outside of ourselves? Can traditional religion be salvaged or must we forsake our beliefs and follow Goddess religions in order to heal? Does there need to have been a Goddess, or does simply acknowledging the possibility help us to heal and grow? Can we create new theologies? Are there advantages to a feminist-based spirituality? Are there dangers involved in straying from our spiritual roots? Answers to these questions are explored at length in the literature (Allen, 1986; Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Nakashima Brock, 1989:240; Cooper-White, 1995:45; Daly, 1979:53-62; Goldenberg, 1979; King, 1989:91, 118,189; Christ and Plaskow, 1979:193-197; Ruth, 1994:xvi-xviii, Spretnak, 1982:xxvii-xxix).

Though some controversy exists, several authors conclude that **which** belief system we choose is not important. In fact, they point to a growing respect for difference among feminist theologians in the area of women's spirituality (Kalven and Buckley, 1984:xvii-xxi; King, 1993:170; Plaskow and Christ, 1989:4; Spretnak, 1982:xx). A woman may search in places where she feels rooted (Brock, 1989:240) or she may "simply make it up, trusting herself to include anything she needs, allowing her own inner voice to guide her" (Ellis, 1990:260).

What emerged as most important is that each woman needs



to live her own relationship with the divine or the sacred as she defines it (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:10) (See also section 3.2). Theology need only be a "naming toward God" (Daly, 1979:212). As healers, we need to remember that "there are ten thousand gates to the sacred" (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:72) and we need to value a woman's own spiritual insights (Spretnak, 1982:xxxv).

### *3.3.10 Harmful Spiritualities*

Some authors indicate that certain belief systems may inhibit personal spiritual growth. These insights are particularly meaningful for women in the context of the spiritual wounding which occurs during abuse (See sections 3.3.1 to 3.3.6). Counsellors, theorists, and theologians criticized spiritualities which support inequality (racism, sexism, heterosexism), which value beings hierarchically and promote separation based on dualisms, and ones which are rigidly-based on an external authority, or use manipulation and control (Allen, 1986:59; Clinebell, 1976:56; Enroth, 1992; Keller, 1986:39; King, 1989:47; Plaskow and Christ, 1989:2; Ruth, 1994:184; Sanchez, 1989:346; Spretnak, 1982:161).

Equally harmful are those which stress sin and punishment, promote premature forgiveness, encourage guilt and shame, glorify victimhood, and ask us to accept injustice or abuse. They suggest that women avoid religions

or spiritual groups which attempt to provide quick fixes, try to rescue us, or keep us dependent (Bass and Davis, 1988:159; Cooper-White, 1995:250; DeMarinis, 1993:37-47; Bohn, 1989:112; Enroth, 1992; King, 1989:34).

The authors are suspicious of any religion which believes itself to be the only route to salvation, discourages questioning, or increases alienation. Also harmful for women healing from abuse is a religious community which ignores our contributions, silences us, and accepts images of God in the male form only (Bass and Davis, 1988:159; Clinebell, 1976:50-52; Enroth, 1992).

I found some criticism of practices and individuals who co-opt bits of other belief systems without a true understanding of the cultural meanings of various traditions and beliefs. Authors describe new age practices, particularly regarding the theft of Native sacred objects, rituals, and traditions for profit, and warn of the dangers involved in 'playing around' with the spiritual (Allen, 1986:204; Orenstein, 1993:172-190; Shaw, 1995:84-89,92; Smith, 1993:168-171). Some Native people indicate their willingness to share those aspects of their spirituality which may be shared, with those who come to them with honour, respect, and concern for their traditions. Sharing is not, however, a requirement but is a choice (Sanchez, 1989:350; Shaw, 1995:84-89,92; Smith, 1993:171). On the other hand, Shaw argues it is preferable that people search

for their own spiritual roots rather than trying to appropriate Native spirituality (1995:89).

### *3.3.11 Healing Spiritualities*

Part of that search may lead us to seek a supportive spiritual community. How do we know when we have found it? The authors describe some characteristics of a healing spirituality. They say that women need recognition, support, and understanding of the way we are experiencing the world in order to heal spiritually. Therefore we need a spirituality which reflects or places primary emphasis on our experience of the self, and encourages us to interpret the sacred in our own way, honour our own vision, and act authentically. This includes the need to challenge racist, sexist, and heterosexist myths (Christ and Plaskow, 1979:193; Gilkes, 1995:32-42; Kasl, 1992:341; Keller, 1986:111; King, 1989:36,78,111,191).

We need a spirituality that provides space and silence, and a place of safety for us to explore our elemental power and develop images of strength and wholeness. Such a spirituality leads us to our true self, animates us, enriches our healing, and opens us to our feelings (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:173-74,204; Christ and Plaskow, 1979:197; Cooper-White, 1995:250; DeMarinis, 1993:54; King, 1989:12, 112-113; Spretnak, 1982:xxxiii).

Women who have experienced abuse particularly need a

spirituality which does not blame the victim, a life-affirming spirituality which opens the heart to compassion and renewal, one which bears hope and is the voice of freedom and choice, and which provides room for transformation, celebration, and wonder (Baldwin, 1991:103,179,187; Clinebell, 1976:246-248; Cooper-White, 1995:250; King, 1989:78,190,191,196; Macy, 1991:119-124).

To facilitate healing authors argue that a spirituality needs to be rooted in the idea of immanence where the sacred is part of, not separate from, life. It needs to be embodied and wholistic, connecting us to all living things. A healthy spirituality involves connection to a caring community which accepts challenge and fights for social justice, connecting spirituality and social power (Allen, 1986:59; Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:91,177; Bass and Davis, 1988:156; Christ and Plaskow, 1979:194; Cooper-White, 1995:248,250; DeMarinis, 1993:47,147; Greenspan, 1991:xlii-xlv; Keller, 1986; King, 1989:36,88-111,190-196; Ruth, 1994:49,66; Sanchez, 1989:344-46; Spretnak, 1982:xiv-xviii).

In other words, these authors say that we need a liberated and liberating spirituality, which recognizes us as unique individuals living interdependently. These are some of the same characteristics we could use to describe feminist practice which supports a woman's spiritual choices.

So where do we find our spirituality? According to the

literature, it seems that we find it in silence and seclusion, and in the midst of everyday life, in separation and in connection, in leaving home and in coming home, in our joys and in our sorrows, in nature, in caring and compassion, in transformation, inside and outside of organized religions, in our own creativity, in old traditions and in new theologies. And we find it when we listen to our inner voice and reconnect with our authentic self (Allen, 1986; Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:149,204,205; Baldwin, 1991:47-51,313-325; Keller, 1986:3; King, 1989:81, 96, 97,112,167,190-191; Walker, 1983:178).

### 3.3.12 *Connection and Relationship*

This section looks at some discussions of the complexities around women's need for separateness and her need for relationship. While it may seem contradictory, Margaret Miles says that these are not "absolutely opposite conditions" (1982:85). Indeed, definitions of 'spirituality' reflect this (Section 3.2).

A relatively new area of feminist therapy--relational theory--may hold promise for women's healing. Along with feminist therapists working out of the Stone Center at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, Carol Gilligan looks at women's relationships in new ways. She has postulated theories regarding women's moral development based on the premise that studies in the past referred to the male

experience (Gilligan, 1982). These theorists and practitioners believe that men are socialized to value separation and women are socialized to value connection, and then, in a patriarchal society, women's need for relationship and connection is denigrated. They believe that we need to look at women's desire for connection outside of patriarchal, capitalistic assumptions which promote the separate self (Belenky et al, 1986; Jack, 1991:182; Gilligan, 1982:24-63, 170; Jordan, 1991; Miller, 1976:83-97).

In fact, the work of several researchers and theorists seems to indicate that it is in connection that the healthy human self develops for females and males, and that attachment can be a source of strength and growth, and a movement towards equity and respect for differences (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Crowley Jack, 1991:205; Gilligan, 1982:172; Greenspan, 1993:xxiii; Lerner, 1986:198; Miller, 1976:95; Ruether, 1989:161).

The idea of relationship, nevertheless, can be problematic for a woman healing from abuse, whose sense of self has been eroded in relationships based on power and control. Several theorists refer to the dangers involved for women in relationship, how its demands can swallow up the self, stunt creativity, and drain our energy, as we subordinate our needs to those of others, or act out the negative side of relationship, and how other-centredness is

both our greatest strength and the cause of our lack of spiritual autonomy, leading to deprivation of spirit. Relationships can be especially destructive when a woman is lacking an empowering world or an inner relation to herself (Jack, 1991:20; Keller, 1986:223; King, 1989:108-112).

Some authors discuss how a separation from others can lead one to personal and spiritual transformation, and how separateness can lead to stronger relationships (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:200-223; Baldwin, 1991,91,309,317; King, 1989:109; Miles, 1982:97). Miles says that only when we gather our most insightful self-knowledge and dwell in it, in our aloneness, can we recognize our connectedness (1982:97). These authors seem to be saying that the first connection we need to make is with the self.

On the other hand, for some this connection can only begin in relationship with others. Ruether states that the resurrection of our authentic self:

is not experienced against, but in and through relationship, healing our broken relations with our bodies, with other people, with nature (1989:161)

To those who say that the last thing women need or want is more relationship, Keller argues that women seek, not "disconnection" but "connection that counts" (1986:3). In the end, separation and connectedness are interwoven in our spiritual lives.

Structural and feminist social work practice includes the importance of experiential knowledge and sharing

stories. The efforts of the perpetrator to discredit her thoughts and feelings can lead a woman to question her own perceptions (Evans, 1992:73-97; Herman, 1991:74-86).

Validation of her experiences by others can help a woman to reconnect to her own truths.

Several theologians and healers discuss the importance of connecting to a supportive community, gaining power and strength in relationships that are based on mutuality, or joining in meaningful rituals to mourn, celebrate, heal from abuse and oppression, and create change (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:214-223; Christ, 1982:83; Cooper-White, 1995:248-250; Douglas, 1995:77; First Nations Health Commission, 1994:112; Jordan, 1991:8-9; Williams, 1989:182).

Some women of colour say that they are cautious about making the feminist/womanist connection. Bonding across cultures requires a commitment from white women to drop ethnocentric beliefs, foster respect for diversity, recognize the different interpretations of our problems and solutions, and actively fight racism, developing a consciousness that can perceive multiple realities (Phelps, 1984:73-74; Hurtado, 1989:855; Williams, 1989:182).

It seems that women are seeking the opportunity to be authentic in all their relationships, to connect at the soul level, reaching deeply and consistently for their true, core sense of self, and connecting their inner and outer worlds. Finding a supportive, caring community where women can begin



to relate in authentic ways, helps them to begin healing the split between the inner and outer self, and reclaim parts of the self which have been suppressed by abuse (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:210; Jack, 1991:192; Spretnak, 1982:350).

When women emerge from solitude and seclusion, it is often to forge new relationships, to seek new kinds of community, to change the way they relate to others, and create a balance of aloneness and community in their lives (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:200, 210, 215; Miles, 1982:97).

Acknowledging our interrelationship with all things is part of the belief systems of Aboriginal spirituality, Buddhism, Gaia spirituality, Wicca, and other wholistic philosophies. In the literature, theologians, therapists, and ecofeminists from many cultural groups and faiths, viewed all oppressions, including the exploitation of the earth itself, as interconnected, seeing them as part a crisis that is global, theological, and psychological (See sections 3.3.5 and 3.3.6). They describe how abuse and exploitation happen when we are alienated from each other and from knowing our connection to all things, how it is imperative for the future of the planet that women not emulate the stereotypical male, and how spirituality offers us a path away from destruction, towards co-operation, celebration of diversity, and connection, restoring balance and harmony with all creation (Bishop, 1994:9; Collins, 1982:363; Greenspan, 1992:xlii-xlv; Griffin, 1989:5-17;

Hagan, 1990:119; Iglehart, 1982:406; Kalven and Buckley, 1984:39-40; Keller, 1986:46; King, 1989:198-211; King, 1984:56; Lerner, 1986:188-206; Ruether, 1993:13-23; Sanchez, 1993:208,227; Scanzoni, 1984:41-55).

Authors suggested that connecting ourselves to creation, connecting our pain to the collective pain of the planet, and practising compassion for all things, can facilitate healing on a personal and global level. Believing in the spirit in all things, allows us to discover another mode of consciousness which facilitates images from dreams, the imagination, and the unconscious. Spirituality itself affirms the interrelatedness of all things, where nature can be seen as actively supporting life rather than devoid of intention or care (Absolon, 1993:5,11; Allen, 1986:60; Anzaldua, 1989:84; Christ, 1989:320-324; Davis and Weaver, 1982:370; Falk, 1989:132; Greenspan, 1994:xli-xlv; Kaza, 1993:50-69; King, 1989:199, 206-208; Lerner, 1986:339-350; Macy, 1991:33,135,183; Brock, 1989:241; Sanchez, 1989:345; Starhawk, 1989:178; Ywahoo, 1989:275). Buddhist Jina van Hengel says that when we are connected with everything "we feel at home wherever we are. There is a place of rest right inside us" (van Hengel, 1994:57).

At the same time, some authors point to the negative aspects of recognizing a connection between women and nature. Riley warns of the dangers of this connection within a patriarchy, citing how objectification of black

women is rooted in the belief that they are closer to nature (1993:94), where nature is seen as something to be debased and controlled. Scanzoni describes how all women are identified with nature and seen as subordinate to men, ranked according to race, class and other values imposed by those who hold power (1984:41-55). Several others refer to this issue as well (Christ, 1989:314-325; Griffin, 1978; Goldenberg, 1979:247; King, 1984:56-66; Williams, 1993:24-29). Griffin emphasizes the importance of seeing all things as part of nature, not just women (1978:1).

A logical extension of creating community is the goal of social transformation. Feminist author and publisher, Ann Kent Rush says that women's spiritual groups can become birth centres for social change (1982:384). If politics is the 'what' of change, then spirituality is 'how' we use our power for change (Baldwin, 1991:327-337; Riddle, 1982:374). Following such traditions as the social gospel movement, liberation theology and engaged Buddhism, spiritual groups everywhere are becoming involved in social action, often struggling for survival (Bam, 1983:45-49; Baried, 1983:203-209; Cooper-White, 1995:261-62; Esquivel, 1983:22-32; Foglian and Wolffberg, 1982:450-459; Kabilsingh, 1982:148-158; Koenig, 1983:61-69; Macy, 1991; Nhat Hanh, 1975, 1987, 1993, 1994; Todd, 1982:438-440; Wills, 1995:4; Zaru, 1983:55-60).

The activists and theologians I reviewed believe that

when women join together for social justice, we may create new possibilities to hear fresh perspectives on the issues, examine how we are affected as women, and question our role in social change. They describe how the churches can be both part of the problem and part of the solution for women. Listening to the voices of the marginalized, women can hear how we oppress each other, learn from this, and try to find common ground. By looking at social action wholistically, they believe that we can link our struggles for social justice to include the rights of women and men of all cultures, and challenge woman abuse at a societal and global level (Eck and Jain, 1983:1-15; El Saadawin, 1983:268-274; Jain, 1983:275-291; Shaffer, 1982:462, 469; Todd, 1982:430-445; Welch, 1985:341).

Beginning with inner change and approaching our own healing wholistically, several authors see a potential for discovering alternative ways of being both in our social action groups and in the world (Baldwin, 1991:331-337; Bok, 1983:251-257; Coston, 1984:336-343; Kuyek, 1990:64-172; Jain, 1983:275-291; Marcos, 1983:260-265; Riddle, 1982:377-380; Ruether, 1984:334; Rush, 1982:382; Sanchez, 1989:344-356; Shinell, 1982:510-511; Welch, 1985:ix-x; Ywahoo, 1989:274-280). We can uncover what Riddle calls the "third alternative" (1982:375). Instead of viewing solutions dualistically as either 'right' or 'wrong', we can learn to open ourselves to new possibilities based on "a delight in,

rather than a fear of, uniqueness or difference" (Riddle, 1982:375) by listening to everyone's voice.

We can include the spiritual in our social action groups, with song, ceremony, celebration, and rituals, to visualize, reflect, empower, mourn, and create social change (Iglehart, 1982:294-304, 409; Macy, 1991:39-49; Shaffer, 1982:469; Starhawk, 1989:326-335; Todd, 1982:438-469; Ywahoo, 1989:279).

### 3.4 *Healing Approaches*

When a feminist therapist decides to work wholistically with women who have been abused, many of the basic feminist practices remain a part of her work. What is different is that there seems to be a shift towards finding a balance between the head and the heart. It may show up in the language used, the questions asked, and the practices and tools offered (Greenspan, 1993:xxxvii). The healer may see the process as one of transformation involving a fundamental shift in focus (Malmo, Laidlaw et al, 1990:xiv). Goals include helping the client reconnect to her authentic self and rekindle a sense of hope, joy and wonder, and a belief in her sacredness. Feminist counselling which widens to include the spiritual may be a key to more effective healing from woman abuse.

Greenspan suggests that, at the appropriate time, we may need to ask questions that reach women spiritually--

questions about life, death, and the sacred (1993:xxxviii).

Healers described the deep connection between client and therapist, saying that, in an alliance based on mutuality and a 'moving towards', we need to be willing to open ourselves with compassion to the pain of our clients, helping her create a place of safety - both physically and in her mind - in which to explore the journey toward awareness and wholeness. As guide, supporter, advocate, role model, warrior, resource and catalyst, our role is to help the client to access her inner knowledge and use her resources for healing and repowering herself (Cooper-White, 1995:229-251; DeMarinis, 1993:6-19; Ellis, 1990:246; Greenspan, 1993:xxxvi-xxlv; Hyde, 1990:169; Jordan, 1991:8; Malmo, 1990:202; Malmo, Laidlaw et al, 1990:321; Shaffer, 1982:464).

More than simply employing skills, they speak of trusting one's intuition, and helping the client to connect to her intuitive and spiritual powers (Baldwin, 1991:151-161; Hagan, 1988:61-79; Greenspan, 1993:xli; Shaffer, 1982:464) One client described the relationship between herself and therapist as the therapist's own self engaging with hers with vitality, warmth, and intense concentration, responding with "her whole mind and heart" (Malmo, 1990:313).

Therapists and healers describe the importance of living consciously and authentically, suspending judgment,

and practising compassion, ensuring that we will be fully present in the helping relationship (Brock, 1989:239; Greenspan, 1993:xxxviii-xxxix; Kaza, 1993:50-69; Macy, 1991:39, 119).

The teachings of the Medicine Wheel are described by several Aboriginal authors as a way of approaching healing of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual, in a movement towards wholeness and balance for individual and community (Absolon, 1993; Allen, 1986:60; Bopp et al, 1984; First Nations Health Commission, 1994; Hodgson, 1990:38). "The time has come for First Nations peoples to begin to claim our own healing as an ethical, rightful and valuable practice" (Absolon, 1993:1).

#### *3.4.1 Healing the Healer*

In such an intense relationship, the importance of the healer doing her own healing work is crucial. We need to avoid carrying our wounds with us into our work, revictimizing clients, and sabotaging social action (Cooper-White, 1995:195-205; Hodgson, 1988:127-131; Kuyek, 1990:86-115; Turner, 1990:222-224).

They say that when deep feelings unleashed in sessions cause us to be triggered, we need to find appropriate ways to release them (on our own time). Creating community in our lives and drawing on our own spirituality, can help us to release the pain. Spiritual exercises such as individual

and group meditations may help us prevent burnout and provide the energy to allow us to continue in the work (Cooper-White, 1995:196-202; Hodgson, 1988:129-131; Macy, 1991:39-49).

Several spiritual feminist counsellors emphasize that we must be clear to self and client regarding ethics, boundaries, and issues of transference and counter-transference (Cooper-White, 1995:199-200; Malmo, 1990:313; Strickling, 1990:147-148).

#### 3.4.2 *Practices to Heal the Spirit*

While the basis of wholistic healing is in the approach, healers may use a variety of practices to help their clients access the spirit. These practices have the power to move an individual to a deeper level of consciousness. At the same time, deep healing practices can have powerful results, and we need to proceed cautiously and with gentleness. Karen Signell says that in working with the unconscious, "deeper is not always better" (1991:131). She says that we need to take into account a person's vulnerability and remember that defences serve a purpose and healing takes time (Signell, 1991:131).

Practices include visualization, prayer, ritual, meditation, mindfulness, and compassion, despair work, dream interpretation, breathwork, art, journalling, storytelling, accessing intuition, working with issues like forgiveness,



working with myth, imagery and metaphors, liberating archetypes, and creating sacred spaces for silence and retreat (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:218; Baldwin, 1991; Bass and Davis, 1988:188; Bolen, 1984; Brock, 1989:238; Cooper-White, 1995:250; Dion Buffalo, 1990:118-142; Downing, 1989:120; Greenspan, 1993:xli; Hagan, 1988; Hyde, 1990:163; Kasl, 1992:357-371; Macy, 1991; 15, 39-49, 226; Shaffer, 1982:469; Signell, 1990; Starhawk, 1989:326-335; Turner, 1990:221-239; Ywahoo, 1989:274-280; Williams, 1984:139-145). I looked at some of these in more detail.

### *Journalling*

If I needed to describe the moment my healing process began, it would be the day I wrote down my feelings for the first time. In the next few years, I amassed hundreds of pages of journal entries, poems, and recently, songs. The literature describes how writing bears witness to our experience, creates consciousness or awareness, marks our passage by providing a benchmark, keeps track of our dialogue with the self, connects our inner and outer worlds, connects action and reflection, helps us sort our thoughts, access our intuition, reconnect to our cultural roots, and re-invent our self (Allen, 1986:42,50; Baldwin, 1991; Hagan, 1988; hooks, 1993:2; Walker, 1983:231-243; Williams, 1984:139-141).

For an abused woman, breaking the silence by writing is a powerful acknowledgment that the abuse occurred. When we

dare to write our pain, we are beginning to recreate our selves outside of patriarchal expectations (Hagan, 1988:117; Williams, 1984:140-142). Hagan calls journalling "a revolutionary act" (1988:117).

We need to find alternatives when literacy is an issue or with women who are still in abusive relationships and may be afraid to write in case the abuser sees her journal. In abuse groups, we often created files for women to keep material that they could not bring home safely. Finding a trusted person to hold the journal may work as well. Some Cambodian and Vietnamese people have experienced being forced by government officials to write their stories as a method of control. So journalling may not be an appropriate outlet for them (Kuoch et al, 1992:196).

#### *Storytelling, Metaphor, Imagery, and Myth*

Delores Williams says that the importance of storytelling is one thing that black people and feminists agree on (1984:139). The storyteller may speak to the spirit through imagery, myth or metaphor and the woman can recreate her own story (Allen, 1986:105; Dion Buffalo, 1990:119-120; Hyde, 1990:163-193). Through myth, unconscious conflict can be brought to the surface. We can create myths to describe how we feel about a specific problem and create new endings for ourselves (Dion Buffalo, 1990:123; Downing, 1989:119-120). Myth "guides our attention toward a view of ourselves, a possibility, that we

might not otherwise encounter" (Allen, 1986:116).

Imagery, the world's most ancient and potent healing resource, invokes the senses and speaks to the spirit (Achterberg, 1985:3; Weaver, 1982:250). I found a number of healers who discussed the use of imagery in healing work and the role of the therapist in the process (Achterberg, 1985; Baldwin, 1991; Ellis, 1990; Herman, 1992:202-203; Hyde, 1990; Malmo, 1990; Turner, 1990).

*Spirit Guides, Liberating Archetypes, and Dreamwork*

Therapists described how a spirit guide can help women to integrate the feelings and needs of the child into the adult self, provide comfort, protection, wisdom, joy and companionship, and reframe negative attitudes about themselves leading to a healing transformation. The client needs to determine the form it will take--a separate being, a part of themselves, an animal, an angel, or whatever the client perceives as comforting and non-threatening (Ellis, 1990:249; Hyde, 1990:182-183; Malmo, 1990:203, 299-300; Malmo and Laidlaw, 1990:321; Turner, 1990:237). It could be another name for our intuition or "the still small voice within" (Baldwin, 1991:151). Karen Signell describes it as an empathic witness helping us to deal with the daily barbs, teasing and belittling remarks directed towards us as women (1990:84).

Signell and Bolen discuss liberating archetypes which free women to explore parts of themselves which have been

suppressed by patriarchy, and draw on newly-discovered strengths (Bolen, 1984; Signell, 1990:28).

Feminist dreamwork as a form of spiritual guidance adds to Jungian dream analysis, empowering women to interpret our own symbols and use our dreams to access our own inner wisdom, provide a new point of view, or help us reconnect with the wounded abused child (Baldwin, 1991:149; Downing, 1989:120; Signell, 1990:xi; Strickling, 1990:145). Active dreaming can be used to rewrite the script and create a different ending (Signell, 1990:108; Shaffer, 1982:465-66). Exercises help women to remember and question the symbolism of dreams, and use our dreams for problem-solving, to see where we are being empowered or victimized, to indicate choices, connect us to our unconscious needs or buried anger, and help us to debunk stereotypes (Baldwin, 1991:136-149; Signell, 1990:xiv, 87, 117, 120; Weaver, 1982:254).

#### *Ritual and Visualization*

Rituals such as a celebratory meal, a name-changing ritual, or visualizations such as Joanna Macy's exercises for social activists, can create attunement with our ancestors, bind a culture together, create community, acknowledge women's abuse, express shared meanings, establish trust, revitalize us, help us to access our power, focus energy, mark our transitions, and solidify change, facilitate compassion, grieving, and celebration, and become

a powerful tool for unity to create change (Bass and Davis, 1988:188; Cooper-White, 1995:250-251; Ellis, 1990:259; Kalven and Buckley, 1984:345-346; Kasl, 1992:362-364; Lerner, 1986:302; Macy, 1991:39-49; Neu and Upton, 1984:347-350; Starhawk, 1989:326-27; Teish, 1989:87-92; Umansky, 1984:351; Ywahoo, 1989:277). Individual rituals may include creating a personal altar, lighting a candle, symbolic cleansing of our wounds, or making our everyday life sacred (Teish, 1989:87-92; Sanchez, 1989:345).

Empowering ritual is authentic, reflecting the thoughts and feelings of the participants and providing space for spontaneous expression as well as the familiarity of being rooted in a tradition. It challenges and energizes us, reminding us of our humanity, moving us towards transformation and social change (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:162; Kalven and Buckley, 1984:345-46; Lerner, 1986:305; Shaffer, 1982:467-68; Umansky, 1984:351).

Starhawk emphasizes the importance of being grounded before, during, and after the ritual (1989:327). I believe that we need to be aware that, for survivors of ritual abuse, even the word 'ritual' can be triggering. In work with abuse survivors, Carolyn Shaffer warns that group ritual may not be appropriate for all women (1982:465).

#### *Compassion, Mindfulness, and Meditation*

Some Buddhists believe that experiencing another's compassion, even if we cannot emulate it, lets us know that

it is within our human capacity (Macy, 1991:124; Nhat Hanh, 1987:30-31). Several authors connect compassion to healing and define compassion as the understanding and love which helps people to change, connects us to people's pain, creates acceptance, and recognizes the sacredness of all beings (Dass and Bush, 1992; Greenspan, 1993:xli; Kaza, 1993:50-69; Lerner, 1986:339-391; Macy, 1991:119-124, 180, 186; Nhat Hanh, 1990:91-97; 1993:13-19). Feminist Buddhist Stephanie Kaza says that both Buddhism and feminism are based on experiencing compassion as a strength (1993:60).

The Buddhist practice of mindfulness can help client and therapist, keeping us fully present in the moment with heart and mind, helping us to see what is healing for us and what is not, and leading to concentration, wisdom, joy, and happiness, allowing us to see deeply into the nature of reality and the wonders of nature (Kaza, 1993:54; Nhat Hanh, 1975, 1987:33-34; 1990). Kaza says that the experiential knowing of feminism is based on embodied mindfulness (1993:54).

Several authors say that meditation increases our capacity for loving kindness and compassion, brings us to a place of peace, calm, and silence, helps us to uncover our deepest thoughts and feelings, develop clarity and self-authority, conserve energy, and gather and direct power, leading to action. It can help us to discover, trust, and express our inner wisdom, and prevent burnout (Iglehart,

1982:294-304,409-410; Macy, 1991:23; Nhat Hanh, 1987; 1990:91-97; Ywahoo, 1989:279). Iglehart, Macy, and Ywahoo describe meditations for social activists and social action (1982:302; 1991:39-49; 1989:279).

Meditation begins with breathing deeply together to ground and to connect us. Breathing allows deep feelings to arise and can help us to release and transform fear and pain. (Hyde, 1990:176; Iglehart, 1982:411; Laity, 1994:87; Sanchez, 1989:356; Starhawk, 1989:327).

#### *Working with Despair*

Therapists describe the importance of facing our deep despair before we can be fully alive. They stress that this is different from the martyrdom of traditional Christian theology (Baldwin, 1991:91-101; Brock, 1989:237-238; Cooper-White, 1995:235; Greenspan, 1993:xxxix; Macy, 1991:15-29; Williams, 1984:141-142).

Fear of feeling despair can keep a woman in denial by filtering out anxiety-provoking data. It can keep us from addressing our own oppression and prevent us from cultivating an awareness that can lead to personal transformation and social change (Macy, 1991:16; Williams, 1984:140). For the counsellor, suppressing feelings of despair takes valuable energy, can lead to burnout, and interferes with our ability to feel empathy as we suppress all feeling (Cooper-White, 1995:196; Macy, 1991:15-16). To acknowledge despair is to let go of the assumption that we

are personally responsible and can control all events, and allows us to release our grief, making room for hope and joy. Yet we live in a society where acknowledging despair or depression can appear as a lapse of faith (Baldwin, 1991:91-115; Macy, 1991:18-21; Williams, 1984:140-145).

Baldwin sees the dark night of the soul as a positive event. This was my experience as well. Because it is risky, it is crucial that we do our despair work in community (Macy, 1991:28). Disintegrating defenses and ideas, this plunge into the unknown can open the doors to new perceptions and new responses and lead to spiritual transformation (Baldwin, 1991:91-115).

It seems that wholistic healers use a variety of practices to help women heal but the literature emphasizes that these are more than simply techniques. They are part of an overall approach to healing and transformation touching both client and therapist, and whose effects may spread to the community and the world.



#### 4.0 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study is to open the area of feminist spiritual practice, by examining some of the variables that we might need to think about when embarking on spiritually-based work with women who have been abused. As this is a relatively new area of practice, and I am working with a small sample, the goal of this work is not to make definitive conclusions about spiritually-based practice nor is it to generalize from the information uncovered in this work.

I conducted ten interviews with therapists or pastoral counsellors who work with abused women, to find out what it means for them and their female clients to heal spiritually, and how they have integrated spirituality and spiritual healing into their practice. I asked them where spiritual practices and feminist practice complemented each other as well as potential problem areas and conflicts. I also asked them which spiritual philosophies embodied feminist ideals such as empowerment, personal growth, and social change, and those which might be considered harmful to women.

##### 4.1 Assumptions

I approach this topic with specific beliefs, values, and ways of seeing the world which stem from my background as a white, educated, English-speaking, heterosexual woman. My assumptions are rooted in my feminism, as well as in my

personal experiences of abuse, in the direction my own healing journey has taken, my group work with women who have been abused, and my work in women's shelters.

My upbringing was a rather eclectic mix of Christian beliefs. I am not a member of any particular organized religion. I am drawn towards spiritual beliefs which emphasize connection, compassion, and social justice.

The assumptions I wanted to test were:

- 1) that living in patriarchal society wounds women's spirit;
- 2) that healing from these wounds involves spiritual (as well as emotional, intellectual, physical, and political) approaches;
- 3) that patriarchal approaches to religion may not meet women's spiritual needs adequately and;
- 4) that spiritual healing can enrich feminist practice.

#### *4.2 Research Questions*

My three research questions are: 1) In what way can spiritual healing help women who have been abused? 2) What are some characteristics of a healing spirituality? Are there spiritual beliefs and practices which could be considered harmful to women? and 3) How can spirituality and spiritual healing be integrated into feminist social work practice with women who have experienced abuse?

### 4.3 *Criteria For Sample Selection*

I decided that the best way to find answers to my questions would be to interview women who have included spiritual healing in work with women who have been abused. I planned to interview ten women. My primary criteria for participant selection included: 1) that the woman is a self-identified feminist healer, therapist, or pastoral counsellor; 2) that she includes a spiritual element in her work; and 3) that she works or has worked as a healer or counsellor with women who have experienced abuse.

The interview process quickly uncovered a bias in the criteria concerning self-identification as a feminist. I soon realized that this requirement did not take into account cultural differences. For instance, the Inuit woman I interviewed told me that she was not very familiar with feminist practice although, after some discussion, we concluded that her work reflected feminist philosophies. As well, one of the Aboriginal women did not consider herself a feminist. Coming from a matrifocal tradition, one which encourages community-based healing, she found some feminist practices to be counterproductive. During our discussion, I had to examine the roots of feminism as primarily a white middle class way to address patriarchal society. I needed to be aware that in cultures where men and women have worked together to fight a common oppression, women may see feminism in a different light. In addition, some women of

colour whom I referred to in my literature review, prefer to define themselves according to Alice Walker's definition of 'womanist' rather than call themselves 'feminist' (Douglas, 1995; Cummings, 1995; Walker, 1983; Williams, 1995).

Those women whom I had approached, and who did not consider themselves feminists, nevertheless had a great deal to offer on this topic. At this point, I decided to widen my criteria to become more culturally inclusive. I still wanted to know how feminists integrated spirituality into practice but I wanted to include women who may not call themselves 'feminists' but who were working from a spiritual perspective to help women heal their spirit from abuse. My selection of participants still contains a value choice. For example, I did not choose to interview women who held fundamentalist Christian beliefs.

Having formal credentials was not a necessary criterion for inclusion. One of my curiosities involved looking at the routes that women take to a spiritually-based practice. Imposing educational restrictions would only serve to invalidate informal education, experience, and spiritual growth. I also decided not to choose participants by particular categories of belief systems (for example, Pagan, Jewish, Buddhist) for fear of overlooking healers who work from a combination of approaches or traditions.

My object was to include women with a variety of experience, those working in private practice as well as

agencies such as shelters or community resource centres.

#### *4.4 Selection of Sample*

Beginning with a snowball technique to recruit participants, I began my search for ten women who include spirituality in their work with women who have been abused. I networked within communities of women who work in the area of abuse, approaching women who work in shelters, community resource centres, volunteer committees, and support groups for abused women, and asking for referrals. I networked with fellow students, members of religious communities, individuals involved in meditations, reiki, and other forms of bodywork. I wrote or called various organizations such as Immigrant and Visible Minority Women Against Abuse, The Aboriginal Women's Support Centre, Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre, and Tungasuvvingatinuit Inuit. Upon connecting with potential participants, I asked for further referrals. I looked in *Tone*, a local spiritual magazine, for names of wholistic and spiritually-based therapists and healers. I was looking for participants with a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices, work settings and cultural backgrounds.

#### *4.5 Description of Participants*

Out of a list of at least thirty names, I chose ten women who had been influenced by such diverse spiritual

traditions as: Goddess spirituality, a variety of Christian traditions, Judaism, Aboriginal tradition, Buddhism, Wicca, and other nature-based spiritualities and liberation theologies, as well as their own personal healing experiences. Some women had been influenced by several spiritual philosophies. I chose my sample on the basis of cultural diversity, as well as diversity of spiritual beliefs. I also based my choice on the actual work the women did, in order to include women both in private practice and agency work, who focused on work within different cultural groups and with a variety of client issues. I did not ask specific questions about cultural background, age or sexual orientation. I was aware that two of the women were Aboriginal, one was Inuit, one was Vietnamese, and six were white women from various cultural backgrounds.

Please note that while I conducted ten interviews, my time at the Aboriginal Women's Support Centre was shared by two women, which is why the data refers to eleven women, while I have indicated ten interviews.

As stated, my object had been to include women who worked in private practice and women who worked in agencies. I encountered some difficulty in securing interviews with women working solely within agencies. Several of the women I eventually chose to interview had worked in agencies but had left to pursue private practice, or combined contracts,

agency work, massage therapy, and groupwork with private counselling practice. Of those still employed by agencies, three of the women told me that they were supported in their spiritual work by the agency who employed them. Another woman, a United Church minister, also experienced support in her ministry work with abused women.

The women worked with a range of clients; survivors of partner abuse, child sexual abuse, and religious abuse. They saw clients who were dealing with a range of issues and symptoms such as flashbacks, post traumatic stress, dissociation, multiple personalities, grief and loss, depression, the effects of racism and cultural issues, prenatal and postnatal trauma, eating disorders, core issues such as self esteem, relationship issues, physical illness, job-related issues, and spiritual growth. Some worked with children and men as well. The United Church minister said her work is part of an ongoing pastoral connection with her congregation. Some of the women worked primarily within their own cultural group; others served women from a diversity of cultures.

Though many no longer worked in agencies, the women presented an astounding range of experience in rather diverse areas; working/having worked in social services, hospitals, sexual assault support centres, community resource centres, and rape crisis centres; with immigrant services, in a university, in the United Church, as a

volunteer in a refugee camp, with abuse groups, meditation groups, and workshops; and in bodywork, nursing, the midwifery movement, women's health issues, journal editing, and consulting on issues such as professional development and support, organizational development, and conflict resolution.

Though not a criterion for inclusion in this study, seven women referred to experiences of abuse, oppression, or violence which had occurred in their own lives, and which had led them on their own healing journeys.

#### *4.6 Interview Method*

I conducted individual interviews with the women, each lasting between one and two hours, at a mutually acceptable location. Five interviews took place in the women's homes where they conducted a private practice. The other five took place in an office setting (two in agencies, one in a church, one in a medical centre where the woman had a private practice, and one in a university).

The participants' responses were recorded on audio cassette with the exception of one woman who preferred not to be taped. All data were transcribed for analysis. Because I was conducting exploratory research, I used an interview guide consisting of a series of open-ended questions, centering around the following areas; the women's descriptions of spirituality and how abuse affects a woman's



spirit, their particular attitudes, approaches, and practices, the role of spirituality in their own healing, any cautions regarding spiritual work, and suggestions for changes in school curricula, and services for abused women (see Appendix One).

#### 4.7 *Ethical Considerations*

I provided participants with a letter of introduction (see Appendix Two) and a letter of consent (see Appendix Three) for their signature, detailing the interview process, how confidentiality would be protected, and the rights of the participants to refuse to answer a question, stop the interview, or ask to have the tape turned off at any time, without censure. One interview was conducted without taping at the request of the participant. For purposes of confidentiality, I agreed to use a pseudonym (N.) for one participant who wished to remain anonymous. I informed participants of my plan to include quotable phrases, and some descriptions of common themes and differences. I respected the wishes of some participants to protect confidentiality around certain issues and areas, especially around client confidentiality. I informed participants that all tapes would be destroyed or returned to them after the work was completed.

#### *4.8 Data Analysis*

The interviews yielded ten ninety-minute tapes, which I transcribed. Because this thesis was an exploratory study, I employed an inductive method of analysis, approaching the literature and the interviews in search of themes, commonalities, and differences in approaches to spiritual healing.

#### *4.9 Strengths, Limitations, and Biases*

##### *4.9.1 Biases*

In chapter two, I listed some assumptions which could lead to bias in the research. Throughout the process, I remained conscious of these assumptions and how they might affect my interpretations of the data.

As previously indicated, I uncovered a cultural bias in the criteria for choosing participants, involving use of the word 'feminist'.

During the interviewing, I became aware that the wording of question number two in the interview guide (see Appendix One) made the assumption that abuse harmed the spirit. This bias was pointed out to me when some of the women challenged my assumption by recounting instances when spiritual beliefs were able to affect an individual's experience of abuse or violence in a positive manner.

Since I am approaching this work as a white, educated feminist, my research reflects certain biases I have

regarding the effects of patriarchy on the prevalence of woman abuse, and the choice of situating this work firmly in the area of feminist spiritual philosophies, and conducting a feminist analysis.

#### 4.9.2 *Limitations*

The interviews yielded little information regarding healing spiritually in community, indicating that I needed to ask specific questions in this area.

The use of broad open-ended questions can lead to results that are not comparable, as women interpret and answer the questions in very different ways.

#### 4.9.3 *Strengths*

What can be a limitation, however, can also be a strength. The use of a lengthy, in-depth interview and open-ended questions provided the women with space to explore their beliefs and practices. The guide covered several areas, including both the personal and the professional realms of the women's lives, as well as addressing curricula issues and changes to services for abused women. The findings, while not generalizable or comparable, provides a rich exploration of the area of spiritual work with women who have been abused.

The fact that several women had experienced abuse and trauma themselves, and were involved in their own healing,

gave strength to the data. Their wide range of work experience, their enthusiasm, and articulate responses were also a strength.

Eliminating some potential biases early in the process, further strengthened the results.

## 5.0 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

### 5.1 Introduction

Speaking to women of such diverse cultures and spiritual beliefs, I was surprised to find some striking commonalities of opinion which echoed many of the themes in the literature I reviewed. Due to the nature of the interview guide--consisting of broad open-ended questions--the women were able to comment on whatever aspect of a question resonated for them. There were times when women went in different ways and a specific item might only be discussed by two or three women. Of course, I was unable to return to earlier interviews to ask the other women how they felt about this item. As a result, it may seem that there is more unanimity than actually exists. In examining the findings, it is necessary to keep in mind that, because two women agreed with a certain premise, it does not mean that the others agreed or disagreed, only that it may not have come up for them.

Because of the nature of the study and the size of the sample, it would be a mistake to try to generalize the results. Future researchers may question, for example, if the opinions of the Buddhist woman, Aboriginal women, or the Christian minister, are representative. It is not my intent to generalize in this way. In this work, I was more interested in exploring the range of themes which I extrapolated from interviews with spiritual practitioners.

## 5.2 *Descriptions of Spirit and Spirituality*

### 5.2.1 *Images of 'Spirit'*

I asked the women I interviewed what the word 'spirituality' means to them. As in the literature, the images that the women presented were those of fundamental energy, breath, or wind of creation, the act of being in tune with their deepest selves, their connection with the divine, and the presence of the spirit or the sacred in all of creation. Sharon called spirit;

Ruah...the breathing wind of creation that created life, the breath of God that is at the centre and core and heart of everything that has been created, and that helps us connect.

Spirituality for some women implied movement and action, like Anderson and Hopkin's garden (1991:15-16). One woman called it "the driving force behind my endeavours...the part that keeps me going forward." Spirituality brought her strength, courage, and hope. Another described spirituality as the process of bringing forth the spirit or energy that is within us, into our lives. One emphasized that spirituality is constantly evolving and changing, and another said that spirituality draws us towards our higher selves.

### 5.2.2 *Spirituality as a Unique Personal Journey*

In keeping with the 'garden' image (see section 3.2), two women emphasized that there is no general definition of

spirituality but that it is a personal thing for every woman. Another said that a healing spirituality is one that is right for each person. One woman described it as coming from "a deep inner sense of self, of who I am."

### 5.2.3 *Spirituality as Connection*

At the same time, in different ways, spirituality involved connection for most of the women. For Sharon, spirituality was something embodied, not compartmentalized. Another woman said that we live our spirituality as we connect to "to each other and to nature." Another said it involved connecting to the good in the universe. One woman said that it was a wholistic way of "bringing together the whole of you" and another believed that if one's spirit is not healthy, one is not healthy wholistically. For a follower of Buddhism, there was no separation between the spiritual and the non-spiritual. It was "the Way or the Path."

### 5.2.4 *Finding Common Ground*

In the interviews, definitions included those which emphasized how spirituality is unique for each woman, and others which suggested a connection to all things. I expected that women from wholistically-based cultures would emphasize the connectedness of all things in relationship to spirituality. What was interesting was that at least three

'Western' women also shared this wholistic understanding of spirituality.

The women's definitions of spirituality included life-giving images of breath, energy, and creation, implying movement and action. Spirituality was seen as a personal journey yet images also included connection to self, others, and the universe.

### 5.3 *Abuse and the Spirit*

I asked the women to describe how abuse harms the spirit. At one extreme were those who said that, in the long run, it kills the spirit or at least separates it from the self to such an extent that in some cases it is never recovered. At the other were those who believe that abuse cannot touch the spirit, that it is the spirit that keeps an abused woman going and "That's what is going to get you out!" Some argue that abuse even strengthens the spirit. Two women said that abuse can kill the spirit, but one of these women also said that abuse can also serve to deepen our awareness. At least four women used the words 'wound' or 'damage' , and one woman said abuse diminishes the spirit. Two of the women believe that abuse cannot touch the spirit, one suggesting that it remains safely tucked away somewhere. They were inclined to believe that perhaps the spirit is suppressed rather than damaged. One said that what abuse does is cut us off from our inner self where our



spirit lies. I found that women tended to use these descriptive words interchangeably.

Sharon emphatically stated that abuse is everywhere! "I don't know a woman who's not been abused. I really don't!" She echoes the words of Jan Ellis, who says that her basic premise in working with women is that "all of us have been abused" (1990:243).

Three of the women echoed the points raised, for example, by Baldwin (1991:95) that adversity and despair can deepen our consciousness. Deborah emphasized how spiritual growth often results from pain and struggle. Madeline says "those desperate and really dark times are part of that [spiritual] journey." Of the awareness that comes out of being subjected to abuse, Dorilyn says "I don't know whether you can get it any other way."

Sharon described abuse as one of the most destructive things to the soul of women, damaging "a sense of self-worth, and the joy and sense of being a sacred beloved person." Other vivid descriptions of the harm of abuse reported by the women included causing a person to be unable to experience joy, sorrow, pain or anger, perverting the goodness and taking the safety and joy out of childhood, and causing a person to be dead while they are alive. The descriptions of spiritual wounding included: that abuse wounds the core spirit; destroys a person's sense of identity; is de-energizing and anti-life; and fractures a

woman's relationship with herself and other people. One woman described how survivors are left always trying to find themselves.

Two women said that abuse suppresses our spirit so that we become mechanical, often resulting in self-destructive behaviours like slashing, addictions, or getting into abusive situations. Dorothy said that the experience of abuse in her life caused her emotions to shut down, and she became automated. Madeline noted that whenever any kind of wounding causes the person to withdraw and feel diminished, "the life force or energy or spirit, that dwells in that person gets diminished at the same time." The literature I reviewed supports these observations (see section 3.3).

Jean looked at harm to the spirit from another vantage point, saying that it sets us up to hurt, to hate, to see ourselves as victims, or to be revictimized. "What is more harmful than getting us out of touch with our goodness and setting us up to do harm to others?" The complicated relationship between being oppressed and oppressing others was also explored in the literature by therapists, ecofeminists, and activists (see section 3.3.6).

### 5.3.1 *Religion and Patriarchy*

Religions can support survivors or they can reinforce the victim's sense of complicity in their own abuse, and thereby deepen their guilt. The literature refers to

religious practice which keeps women in abusive situations by emphasizing obedience and submission (Cooper-White, 1995:114, 250 and 253; Thistlethwaite, 1989:302-313).

Four women in this study described experiences with this spirit-damaging side of religion. Describing years in an abusive marriage, Dorothy says that the influence of Catholicism and the mainstream view that there are "certain things you do when you enter into marriage," caused her to keep trying to make the marriage work. She says that at some point she had confused spirituality with religion. Eventually she said "Hold it! The Creator didn't make me to be an endurer of life. He made me a participant of life." What seemed to be implicit in Dorothy's situation was her struggle between the conflicting messages of an 'outer' religion and an 'inner' spirituality.

Sharon said that, as minister at First United, she often sees people who are healing from religious abuses, and there are many churches where woman abuse is not acknowledged or discussed. She believes nevertheless that Christian religions can be salvaged from patriarchy, and become a transformational, faith-filled resource.

Jean described how she needed to untangle the mixed messages she had absorbed over the years, and release the hurtful feelings. She began to realize how she had connected 'God' with 'man' and 'man' with 'father', a person who had the power of life and death over her. Only after

sorting out these messages was she able to sever the connections and define what spirituality meant for her.

When mainstream secular and spiritual society collude to rob people of their own spirituality, the results can be devastating. Colleen referred to the effects of residential schools and colonization on the spirit of Aboriginal people, damage which has led to a great deal of intergenerational violence. Colleen and Dorothy described the difficulties and the pain faced by Aboriginal children adopted and raised in white families, or raised in the city without the benefit of a strong spiritual base. Having grown up in an Aboriginal environment where the spirit was powerful, Dorothy worries about young people raised without this gift; "These are the lost people that I see...they were the ones who are struggling with addictions...with abuse."

Aboriginal writers also describe the pain and loss experienced by people whose language, beliefs and way of life were stolen from them (First Nations Health Commission, 1994; Jaine, 1993:30; Pelletier, 1971:6; Sanchez, 1989:345). In the words of one survivor of residential schools:

My spirit was broken by the age of nine. I didn't know where I belonged. I had no home or family left. I was ashamed of who I was" (FNHC, 1994:30).

#### *5.4 The Healing Power of Spirituality*

On the other side of the coin however, several of the women had found spiritual and religious practices that were

spirituality-enhancing, for instance, N. in Buddhist practice, Reepa and Sharon with Christianity, Jean in Judaism, and Dorothy and Colleen in Aboriginal traditions. In this section, the women described how spirituality can help women who have been abused. They also related their own healing stories.

#### *5.4.1 Spiritual Healing: Helping Women Who Have Been Abused*

I asked the women how healing spiritually helps women who have been abused. They said it can restore pride and self-worth, connect us to our sacred process and to a power that supports our healing, and help us find what was lost, lived balanced lives, and make sense of what happened to us. As Sharon said: "Spiritual healing is like taking away the big rocks that have got in the way, that blocks the stream from flowing."

##### *Restoring Pride and Self-Worth*

N. said that social prejudices in an Asian culture where virginity is valued, can cause a woman who is raped to be seen as worthless. She believes that having a strong belief system like Buddhism, which recognizes the intrinsic value of all beings, can protect her from internalizing those feelings of worthlessness.

Colleen described how Native people are still healing from the effects of residential schools and colonization, resulting in intergenerational violence which can keep

people repeating patterns of abuse as victim or perpetrator. She says that "people will continue to be involved in abusive relationships until they heal that spirit inside." She described how recovering spiritual traditions helps Aboriginal women to find their identity and their strengths, and recover self-esteem, pride, and dignity.

The literature also suggests that reconnecting Aboriginal people to traditional spiritual beliefs can be a powerful part of the healing process (Absolon, 1993; Allen, 1986:42-45; First Nations Health Commission, 1994).

#### *A Deeper Place of Love*

Two women emphasize the role spirituality plays in putting the abuse into a much deeper context. Reepa says that for those people who have welcomed spirituality into the healing process, "there is an incredible difference that starts happening because they're drawing on something that's stronger than them at that time." Sharon describes how spirituality connects women to a "deeper place of love" that is energizing, and that lets them know that "they are loved by something far deeper than any man who has abused them." She says that the process of healing is a sacred path.

Even when I don't know exactly what's going on, and she doesn't know what's going on, I trust that there's something bigger than both of us operating in this process, and that it is heading towards healing, and it is heading towards life.

Tuning into this, she believes, helps women to know that they are not alone.

### *Connecting To Our Own Sacred Process*

Several practitioners made comments relating to how spiritual healing helps us to trust our own experience, and connect to our own sacred process. As a result, one woman said, we can decide what it is we need in order to heal. Deborah suggested that "spiritual healing helps us to reclaim ourselves and our creativity, and get in touch with our anger, and the connectedness of other women." Other comments included how spirituality helps us to connect to our identity as individuals, as women, and as members of a particular cultural group. One woman said that it helps us to become more alive!

### *Creating Balance in Our Lives*

Peni, Dorothy, and N. described how spiritual healing involves reconnecting the spirit with the body, mind, and emotions to find balance. Peni says that "until a woman aligns with body, ego, and spirit, complete healing cannot occur." Dorothy notes that:

the physical, mental and emotional are important parts of the human wheel but it's the spirit that will pull you forward. If these are broke, they'll give you a bumpy ride but if your spirit is broken, you ain't going anywhere!

Kathy Absolon and Judie and Michael Bopp describe finding balance through the teachings of the Medicine Wheel (Absolon, 1993; Bopp et al, 1984).

*Finding What Was Lost*

At the heart of spiritual healing is what Patricia describes as connecting people with a moment in their lives--"a second, an inkling, an intuiting of a really good feeling or a sense of who they are"--which can encourage them to recreate that moment when they felt hope. Jean describes this feeling as a yearning to go back to another time to find what has been lost. Dorilyn calls it a "window," and describes how some people have been so abused that they have never had that window of hope in their lives. In that case, the healing process involves helping the person to imagine such a place and try to find a way to connect to something, like Christina Baldwin's descriptions of reconnecting with wonder in the depths of despair (1991).

*Helping Us to Make Sense of What Happened*

Abuse is a deeply confusing experience. Three of the women saw spirituality as a key to making sense of the experience. N. says that healing the spirit can help women to see the abuse or violence in a different light and not continue to be victimized by it. Madeline and Dorilyn said that spirituality can help us to an understanding of why things happen. Dorilyn pointed out that she does not mean to say that these things are "ordained," but that we can become aware that we have the choice to use our experiences to become an abuser, to remain in this fix forever, or to say;



This is really hell--the stuff that I've experienced--and it isn't fair, and I can't possibly understand a lot of it, but what I can choose is to take this, and use it for my soul's growth.

#### 5.4.2 *Personal Healing Journeys*

"It speaks to our human and our spiritual resiliency that people can heal and find joy and purpose in life beyond the wounding that most people experience." (Madeline) The personal stories that the women related to me testify to the healing power of spirituality. They variously described how spirituality helped them to heal from child abuse, partner abuse, the effects of war and other forms of violence, personal, societal, and cultural oppression, and other life experiences. For one woman, the Buddha and Kuan Yin offered physical protection from pirates, and meditation provided emotional protection from the pain around her. For another, imagery of the sacred Mother God holding her was like "God speaking right to my soul."

One woman believed that, as an abused child, her connection to nature was her soul's way of protecting the most fundamental part of herself. For Jean, music fed her spirit. Dorothy said that her spiritual connection was the force that got her out of an abusive relationship. Their descriptions of spiritual help ranged from providing strength and hope, offering unconditional acceptance, restoring pride and dignity, to helping them to accept that there is a place for them in the world.

Colleen said that the traditional medicines - sage, sweetgrass, tobacco and cedar - were very important to her healing process. Deciding to take part in traditional dancing, she described her struggles with self-esteem and self-worth around getting her outfit together, and how the wounded child surfaced, saying "I can't sew. I can't do this. I can't do that." To be able to break through it all and to dance is all part of the healing. "Once you get out there dancing in your regalia, that's where a lot of your crying and your real healing begins." It is all part of "regaining and reclaiming the pride and dignity."

N. described how her Buddhist beliefs and the support of her Buddhist friends sustained her when she was arrested, imprisoned, and tortured for calling for peace in Vietnam. Shocked at the treatment she experienced for trying to tell the truth, her beliefs helped her to survive. Later, as a volunteer in a refugee camp, meditation practices helped her to endure the pain of women who were suffering so much that they went into the mountains at night "screaming and howling like a wolf." She described how, during her escape from Vietnam, Thai pirates boarded their boat brandishing knives, searching for gold and valuables, and how they feared being raped. Upon finding pictures of Buddha and Kuan Yin on the boat, the pirates returned some of their possessions and hastily departed, touched in some way by the presence of the Buddha. N. described how practicing Buddhist precepts

helped her to understand and forgive the pirates. It does not negate the abuse but it helps us "in terms of looking at people you can hate as someone you can feel compassion for," and helps you to grow stronger as a result. She says:

Through those moments that I feel the most isolated, most fearful, and most loved, when I think of it, that I have that tradition, it's just like a gem that I forgot, and then, when I look into it and I listen to it, I see...then I recover like a sick person recovers.

Dorilyn stated that her healing would not have happened without her spirituality. As a child, maintaining a connection with nature was what sustained her and gave her a willingness to continue in her life. She believes that it was her soul's way of protecting "that part of myself that was most fundamental...it established that connection with everything around me in the most fundamental way even when I was at the worst." Although lost to her for some time as an adult, she has been able to reclaim "the wonder of the world and that sense of peace...and the sense that the universe is a teacher." I am reminded of the process of reconnection that Patricia described in the previous section.

Towards the end of her own healing process, spirituality became very important in Deborah's life. After struggling with religion, and being 'adopted' by Aboriginal spirituality, she began work in university on spirituality. She described how she needed to recognize the role of patriarchy in organized religions, begin a tracing of history, and go through a process of questioning, in order

to realize what was important to her.

Sharon described her own healing as "a very embodied spiritual journey." "Like a lot of women, I grew up disconnected from my body, partly because of the culture, partly because of abuse." Healing included reconnecting to her body through breathwork, dance, and body therapy, guided meditation, and imagery.

In crisis one night, she experienced some powerful imagery as the mother in her reached out and held the angry wounded child. The mother became Mother God, holding her and "rocking me to her breast." Putting on a tape a friend had just given her, she heard the song *Rest in My Wings*. "Don't be afraid, I'm holding you close in the darkness." She experienced a powerful, core kind of healing. Calling her friend, she discovered that this person was also just beginning to deal with memories of abuse. The next day another friend called, saying that her spirit had come to him in the sweat lodge. Sharon says "This was deep spiritual stuff. So how has spirituality affected my healing? Profoundly!"

Jean spoke of growing up with a lot of mixed messages about religion that she got from her family. Her dad wanted them to go to church but her mother was "wildly against religion" so they usually ended up not going. Jean said, "I grew up with this hole, not even knowing that it was a hole." One way she filled this empty space was with music.

She said that for her "to sing was to connect to the divine."

She said that one thing abuse will do is make you feel like you do not belong anywhere. For her, healing spiritually brought her to the point in her spiritual growth where she could think about religion, and she has recently converted to Judaism. She has reached a point where she can "accept that there is a place for me in the world."

Reepa, an Inuit woman, grew up in a home with spirituality in it. Part of her healing involved getting to a point where she felt ready to accept the spiritual back into her life. "The love I get and the peace I get...just helps me to grow and get stronger."

Dorothy credits her escape from abuse to the presence of the spirit in her life. Through years of abuse, the spirit sustained her, kept her connected to her own values and ethics, gave her strength, kept her from giving in to addictions, and, in the end, moved her to leave her abuser. She says that she needed that step of faith to say "No more!" and to trust the spirit would be there. Today, knowledge of the inner spirit, helps her to be able to say "This happened to me but I'll not let it have power over me. It did not touch my spirit."

Madeline and Patricia acknowledged their spirituality as part of an ongoing healing process. Madeline described how learning to accept and love clients with whom she might

feel conflicts or judgments, offers her ongoing opportunities to deal with her own woundedness. Patricia said it was part of a path she has chosen, and she works through a lot of her own issues through this spiritual path.

As in the literature (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Cooper-White, 1995:204; Douglas, 1995:147-155; First Nations Health Commission, 1994; hooks, 1991:8; Nhat Hanh, 1993:56; Sanders, 1995:121-143; Smith, 1993:169; White, 1985:70), these healing stories underscore the intricate relationship between abuse and spirituality. Abuse may wound or suppress the spirit; yet the spirit may protect the individual from the worst effects of abuse. The spirit may need healing, yet spirituality can help us to heal. These results suggest that we need to take a 'both/and' approach rather than a dualistic 'either/or' stance.

So while abuse may wound or suppress the spirit, several women who draw their spirituality both from organized religions, other traditions, and from inner voices, argued that spirituality can also protect us from abuse and oppression. While opinions on the effects of abuse range from killing the spirit, causing people to disconnect from spirit, cutting them off from their inner selves where the spirit lies, or causing the spirit to retreat or be suppressed, two women argue that the spirit is able to stay safely tucked away somewhere and remains intact.

Though personal experience of abuse was not a criterion for inclusion in this study, the presence of so many personal stories of abuse and oppression seems to reaffirm the views expressed by Sharon in the interviews, and Jan Ellis in the literature (1990:243), that few women escape abuse and violence in today's society. It may also be a reflection of the kinds of experiences that lead us to the spirit and to healing professions, an idea that is supported in the literature by Cooper-White (1995:195).

#### *5.5 Applying the Personal to the Professional: Factors Affecting Growth of a Spiritual Practice*

From what the women told me, I believe that it would be fair to say that, for each of the women, experiences of personal healing and growth have contributed in some way to the way they work. Several indicated that they were influenced by a variety of factors: at least four of the women were building upon spiritual traditions which were a part of their lives and their heritage; at least two were exploring ancient and new ways for women to connect to the spiritual; one woman had returned to the religion of her childhood for ways to help other women heal; four women said that they recognized that spirituality provided a deeper kind of healing; and three women referred to their work as part of their spiritual task, or a necessary extension of their personal healing process.

### *5.5.1 Linking Personal Healing and Spiritual Growth to Practice*

Five women told me how their personal healing directly affected their work. Two women indicated that their practice continues to deepen their spirituality, and two women said that spirituality, or thinking holistically, had always been a part of their lives. These dual aspects are also echoed by two therapists in the literature (Greenspan, 1993:xxxix; Turner, 1990:223).

For example, as Deborah found her own spiritual direction, she says that her work began to evolve to include her spirituality. N. told me how practicing meditation to help her endure the pain of the refugees, led to her believing more in meditation and "in relying on Buddhism in terms of helping those I was working with," seeing it as a resource for helping abused women to heal. Reepa also described how she began to recognize that the strength and confidence she gained from her spirituality was there for everyone, so she began to offer it to her clients.

Sharon and Dorilyn found that, as they healed and grew in awareness, women seemed to feel safe to bring up issues. They could feel the difference in their work.

### *5.5.2 Spiritual Traditions*

At least seven of the women were influenced by a diverse range of traditions--Christianity, Judaism, Native



spirituality, Buddhism, and Goddess traditions--which they incorporate into their counselling. For example, Colleen and Dorothy said their Aboriginal traditions emphasize the presence of the spiritual in everyday life, and so it is naturally a part of their practice. Deborah was also influenced by Native spirituality. N. said that applying the precepts to her work with women who have been abused was a natural extension of putting Buddhist practices to work in the world.

Reepa and Sharon both work from a Christian tradition. Sharon's work comes out of a Christian liberation theology which emphasizes a transformational relationship with God. When she started her practice, Madeline was involved in the Goddess tradition - ancient ways of women's spirituality - so this orientation became part of her practice with clients who came to her with an interest in working with Goddess tradition.

The fact that these women are able to work in healing, life-enhancing ways indicates that the potential for healing exists within many traditions.

### *5.5.3 Spirituality: A Deeper Kind of Healing*

Five women commented upon how spirituality added another dimension to their practice. For example, Patricia began to realize that, "at different stages and for different reasons, people need different types of therapy"

and Deborah knew that the medical model of labelling and pathologizing did not work for her. Madeline said that "psychological theory takes me only so far." She noted that, at one point in their healing, people may be looking for something more "around their own really creative expression in the world." She said that if she did not add a spiritual element, "they would maybe finish and feel good about themselves and would be well-functioning...but there's a lot more after that." This resonates with Miriam Greenspan's views (1993:xxxvii-xxxviii).

Dorothy believes that this applies to Aboriginal people as well. "You can counsel an Aboriginal person for years and years...you can give them all the therapy you want" but you'll only get them so far, because Aboriginal people are "spiritual beings," so healing needs to start with the spirit. Psychologists refer clients, saying "I've worked with them for three years, and I get them this far, and they backslide." She says: "So we start up where they left off and take them to the next level of healing," adding, "until health and psychology acknowledge the power of the spirit, they'll never truly heal anybody."

#### 5.5.4. *Healed to be a Healer*

Four of the women felt a deep compulsion to pass on their own healing experience to others. "I had an actual experience of the bleeding womb of God inviting me to heal

the bleeding womb of God!" Sharon believes that "we are blessed to be a blessing." Not everyone is going to work hands-on with abuse, but she believes that whatever we are given is to be shared. "So my healing is for me but it's not for me [alone]. It is God's healing me so that I can be a healer." She says "I didn't set out to do this kind of work. It found me." As she has healed and grown, it has become the next step in her spiritual path. "I really feel it's part of my calling."

Involved in spiritual activity even as a teenager, Peni describes how including spirituality in her work is part of her own spiritual growth. She says "I do this for me...I believe that spiritual growth is the reason why I'm here in this body." In another example, Madeline says, "Over the years, I've come to see that my own spiritual task and, I think, most people's spiritual task, is to learn how to love...to learn to see the divine in every individual."

Spirituality-based practices have also evolved from the particular work the women are doing, for example, Patricia's work with early trauma, N.'s experience in the refugee camp and with immigrant women, Reepa's belief that she can offer her clients something that helped her in similar circumstances, and Colleen and Dorothy's work to connect Aboriginal women to traditions which can support their healing process. Patricia described how feelings which came up in her work seemed to open things up and she began to

have a new understanding of how certain experiences affect our own "god self." Madeline says that the things we go through in being a therapist may naturally lead us in a spiritual direction. "Help! This is bigger than I am!"

### *5.6 Spirituality and Practice: The Healer*

The women had a wealth of insights into the specific ways they incorporate spirituality into their practice: the role of the therapist in spiritual healing; the nature of the therapeutic relationship; making the spiritual connection; the importance of doing our own work; how spirituality affects our attitudes towards our clients, and the ways that spirituality can support us in our work and help prevent burnout.

#### *5.6.1 The Role of the Therapist*

A variety of comments regarding the role of the therapist seemed to consist mainly of applying basic feminist counselling principles to spiritual issues: establishing trust and safety; connecting women to their own experience; validating; applying an analysis around oppression; acknowledging religious trauma; building a healing community; and connecting the personal to the professional.

Dorilyn described how we need to help establish trust and physical and emotional safety, and four women referred

to the importance of moving at a pace the client is comfortable with. Dorilyn believes that we need to recognize where a woman's "window of consciousness" lies, so that anything that we say or suggest to her is inside her paradigms. Reepa says; "time and the healing process all have to unfold." For people who are not yet connected to Aboriginal tradition, Colleen says that she would introduce the teachings slowly, at a very basic level.

At least five women said that we need to help women connect to their own experience. For example, Dorilyn notes that her role is to "help her client reconnect to self...to her own understanding," and Sharon says that women need to be able to "connect to their own sacred process." Most of the women emphasized that spiritual healing comes from within, and Sharon says that women need to learn to trust their own experience of the sacred. For instance, she says that she encourages women to image the sacred in whatever form they need "in female form...light...breath...I don't presume!"

#### *Validating Beliefs*

One woman said that we need to learn enough about women's beliefs and their culture to be able to support them. Madeline says "It's my responsibility as a therapist not to make them conform with my framework but for me to be able to understand enough about theirs to be able to support them in that." She says:

I think it's really disrespectful to people if you don't know about their cultures, and it's hard to work with people who come from a very different culture or religious background if you're not open to learning about how that cosmology works.

At least five women stated that they were willing to work from the client's own belief system.

#### *Validating Feelings*

Jean urges practitioners not to be afraid when feelings surface, and N. said that it is important to acknowledge the pain and anger, and then, according to Buddhist practice, "when the anger comes out, we stop and reflect about it."

#### *Respectfully Challenging Patriarchal Assumptions*

Seven women indicated that their work includes some analysis around gender issues, or the relationship between abuse and patriarchy. One commented that we need to be able to name the abuse, while two others referred to the value of respectfully encouraging questioning of assumptions. Sharon says that part of her job as a minister is to "unhook people from destructive spiritualities." Like her, Jean says that we need to look for patterned culturally-held hurts. But she cautions that we walk a fine line because "it is very tricky to be able to point those out without actually doing violence to the culture and the basic beliefs." Madeline also spoke about the need to be sensitive to the ways women have been traumatized by religion, to give the woman room to sort it out, and to try not to get caught up in semantics.

### *Recognizing the Strengths of Survivors*

A few healers indicated that we need to believe in women's strengths. Sharon describes women who have survived abuse as "the strongest, most resilient, most creative, most amazing women I know."

### *Building Healing Communities*

Sharon emphasizes the importance of building a healing community. "I've also realized I can't do it alone and that one of the greatest gifts I have is a healing community" (in her congregation at First United). She says that people who have been traumatized need to know that there are people who care about them.

### *Connecting to the Divine*

Three women said that part of their spiritual work is to: help women to bring forth the spirit within (Madeline); help them "plug into the sacred source for the work that they're doing" and invite them "into a transforming relationship with the holy" (Sharon), and help them to reconnect "to their own goodness, to that spark of the divine" (Jean).

#### *5.6.2 The Therapeutic Relationship: A Deep Connection*

The women repeatedly said that it is the connection to the heart that makes spiritually-based work different from mainstream counselling. Rather than just employing skills and formal training, the emphasis is on the depth of the

therapeutic relationship. "What the client is buying is your consciousness more than anything else" (Dorilyn). In fact, while some acknowledged the importance of a knowledge base, many of them believed that we need to unlearn much of what we have been taught in terms of intervention. Regarding education and training, Peni suggested that you need to "get it then drop it!"

N. says:

you don't really have to intervene in terms of the 'intervention'...and you don't have to talk...you don't have to act. Just be there with a person...in your silence and respecting the other person's silence, then suddenly you are connected, and you feel like the bond is...you and I, we're not separated anymore!

Sharon described the process as an accompaniment rather than an intervention. She says that she needs to be "willing to enter into the dark cave, the really deep hole, with her and willing to go there into the very, very, dark night of the soul."

Three women said that they work on more of an intuitive level, rather than with a fixed plan of intervention. Even beyond intuition, "it goes to a place of being able to still your own self and listen, and actually experience to some level what another is feeling, and what their experience is of the world" (Dorilyn). She says that sensing another's soul on an energy level, is "almost like a soul connection."

In view of the depth of the relationship, three women warn that we need to have our own act together. Sharon describes how healers have to be strongly connected to their



own spirituality and to be careful to hold their own soul intact when they accompany someone into the "dark cave." She says that spirituality is very connected with sexuality so healers need to be very aware of their own sexuality and their boundaries around sexuality. She says; "You are journeying in a soul place that's incredibly intimate, and so you have to really have your sexuality shit together or you can do danger!" Dorilyn also describes how the clear, firm boundaries around the work she does, allow her to continue her work. Jean says that we need to be careful not to confuse our issues with client issues or take on "somebody else's stuff."

Madeline says; "as the relationship begins to be established, I begin to carry them in my consciousness." Practices described by the women like praying for the client, breathing together, being together in silence, holding hands at the beginning of a session, and working with energy and touch, illustrate not only the depth of the relationship, but the level of trust that needs to develop, and the need for clear boundaries.

Individuals who have experienced abuse often become numb, self-destructive, unable to trust, and disconnected from self, others, and spirit (Herman, 1992:56,74,102,103, and 124; Hyde, 1990:164; Jack, 1991:168; King, 1989:81; Malmo, 1990:288-293). The women I interviewed seemed to be saying that the process of reconnecting abused women to self

and spirit is a deeply spiritual one, requiring the therapist to make an emotional and spiritual commitment to be fully present for her client.

### *5.6.3 Making the Spiritual Connection*

When practitioners decide to include spirituality in their work, many of the women emphasize the absolute necessity of beginning by dealing with their own spiritual issues. As Sharon said; "you can't do the work till you've done the work!" They advised them to start by going "within themselves!"

Two women spoke of the importance of connecting the personal to the professional, and putting our own values into practice. Jean says "I'm not asking anyone to go where I haven't gone." N. says that we need to use our experiences to help others. She describes having had to sew piece work to earn money, and how she used that experience to become more conscious: "I feel like this brings me to connection to the heart work because this brings me to how people are oppressed and suffering."

Colleen says; "If you've walked certain paths then you can provide support to women that have walked a bit of the same path as you." Sharon and Dorilyn agreed, believing that as they healed, it somehow made them more approachable. Sharon's spiritual practice as a minister has broadened to include work with abuse. As she began to deal with her own

issues, she noticed that people started to feel safe talking to her about their abuse issues. Dorilyn also noticed that as her own understanding increased, she felt a difference in the way people responded. "It's not what I say or what I do...but I feel the difference."

Several women were adamant that you cannot look outside yourself for your spirituality. For example, N. says that she has learned from Sister Annabelle, a Buddhist nun, that it is important to explore our roots, whatever they may be, from our woman's perspective, to look at how we see our mothers and grandmothers, how it has all evolved, what has been lost and why, and "why we end up to be like we are now - being abused." We need to discover the links, find the patterns, and make political and societal connections.

Dorothy also encouraged women to search for their own roots. She said that the Aboriginal community does not have a cornerstone on spirituality. She described how Jewish people have incorporated their spirituality into everyday life and pointed to the phenomenal spiritual history of the Celtic community that has been dishonoured by not being acknowledged for so long. Dorothy's sentiments echo those of Shaw (1995) and Smith (1993) who point out that it is preferable for people to search for their own roots than appropriate Native spirituality.

Dorilyn believes that we cannot learn spirituality, we need to experience it. Otherwise, in the therapy session,

"You'll be able to handle it in form. You won't be able to handle it in essence." Madeline agrees, saying that it needs to be "an organic process." Just taking a workshop or reading a book is not enough. "It has to be something that's lived."

Dorilyn suggests that practitioners start by doing research, looking at different traditions to "see which one appeals to you, that touches something inside of you." She notes that the ones we react to negatively and positively are probably the ones we need to look at "for perhaps different reasons."

The women suggest that interested counsellors talk to people, look at good magazines such as *Common Boundary*, do some inner work, and "be humble enough to hear what your own soul is saying" (Dorilyn).

#### 5.6.4 *Limitations and Cautions*

The women wanted other practitioners to be aware of the power of spirituality and the importance of observing some precautions. Acknowledging that many traditions have been distorted by patriarchy, Sharon nevertheless warns of the dangers involved if your spiritual beliefs are not grounded in some sort of meaningful tradition. She says;

don't do anything above where you are yourself...don't ever play with spiritual stuff that you don't know for yourself because you can do a terrific amount of damage. You're dealing with people's souls.

She stated emphatically that spirituality may be essential,

but it is also an incredible power,

like a shamanic power, and you don't get to be a shaman overnight, or because you run off to some kinky workshop and take something from another tradition! That's not how it works!

Gloria Orenstein also warns of the dangers of playing around with the spiritual. She spoke of how she understood 'spirit' as a metaphor until she "had first-hand experience of the reality of the spirit world" (Orenstein, 1993:181). Now Orenstein believes that "The spirit world is no more benign than the material world" (1993:182).

Sharon cautions around the use of practices such as meditation with people who dissociate. She says that you need to be very careful and aware of that because you could be triggering. Her observation does point out the value of knowing your client and proceeding slowly and carefully with spiritual work.

Dorilyn has some concern around twelve step programs although she acknowledges that they have helped many people. Unless a person has a traditional sense of spirituality,

you're gonna be in a lot of trouble particularly if you are a survivor of incest...having to relinquish all control to this unseen force...that's exactly what survivors have been forced to do with the abuse.

Patricia and Madeline caution against presenting spirituality when a person is operating at the head level, and may be using spirituality to avoid the feeling work. Madeline says that the woman needs to be grounded. She says that when a person is ungrounded, without "a substantial

sense of who they are," they may "grab unto spiritual stuff" at an intellectual or cognitive level.

Limitations of a spiritually-based practice can have as much to do with the healer as the client. Jean says that

the limitation is with me, not with the goodness...the limitation is any place where I haven't done enough of my own work.

Reepa felt that any limitations lay in the way she has presented spirituality to the client, or perhaps the person was not ready.

N. warns that we need to be careful about our interpretations of various beliefs. She says that sometimes people who do not understand a tradition such as Buddhism or Islam, may interpret it wrongly or look at it as a superstition. Reepa also has concerns about assumptions that Inuit and Native spiritualities are the same. She says that Inuit people who are led to Native spirituality may become more confused, especially if the person they are working with does not understand their history.

One personal limitation that Sharon refers to in working as a minister, is that she feels that she needs to work in conjunction with other professionals. She sees herself as a spiritual ally, helping women to find out what is going on, but she never presumes to be their psychotherapist or sole counsellor. The reverse may also be true. As counsellors, we may need to have an awareness of when our knowledge of a culture or spiritual belief is

limited, and be prepared to refer our client to a spiritual advisor who has more understanding of the culture or tradition.

#### *5.6.5 Why Do Your Own Spiritual Work?*

Referring to the ways our spirituality can affect our attitudes and judgments, and our authenticity, women described reasons for doing our own work. Their reasons included the observations that a strong spirituality can: support us in our work; help us to stay clear and grounded when dealing with the client's despair so we do not take on the client's issues; and prevent burnout.

#### *Authenticity*

Two women emphasized that authenticity is a key prerequisite to doing spiritual work. Madeline says that either healers need to deeply engage in their own spiritual process or not do spiritual work at all. If they do not have a spiritual orientation in their work, she says it is important that they "don't pretend that they do...If it's not something that's intrinsic to the person, it's not going to come across to the client as authentic." Reepa agrees, saying; "It's a very personal individual decision you have to make." She believes that clients can sense when a therapist is open and authentic. She noted that "the people that we say are vulnerable, the people that we say are really hurting, they're also very sensitive and they pick up

when a person is not coming from within."

### *Attitudes and Judgments*

I asked the women to describe the ways that spirituality affected their attitudes, interpretations, and judgments towards their clients. Their answers included: helping them to be more accepting, more loving, more accessible, and less judgmental; opening their heart and their mind to the sacred in each person; and enabling them to feel more hopeful, and less attached to results.

Dorilyn says that her spirituality helps her to see people as "part of the web of life." She is able to accept people because she believes that "life is a process that we all take on in our own way and in our own time." She says that most survivors already have a huge critical internal voice, and they do not need someone else criticizing them.

Reepa says that her spirituality has helped her "not to close doors on people, because every human being counts." Madeline says; "No matter who they are, or what they've done, or who they might present on the outer, they are spiritual beings." According to Sharon,

When a woman comes to me, I see the sacred person that's there...I see beyond the piece of garbage they might feel like...to the sacred person they are, and that's important.

N. says that she is more accepting about what she is unable to do to help women, and knows that if she is calmer, and if she lives a healthy and peaceful life, she will be more open, stronger, and more ready to help. Patricia also



noted that:

the broader the understanding and experience of my spirituality, the easier and more accessible and helpful I am to my clients. Remembering when I didn't have that experience, I would be wondering in the background where is the person at, or headed, and that's not there anymore.

Peni says it simply: "Spirituality opens up my loving heart."

#### 5.6.6 *Spirituality and Burnout*

Cooper-White says that we are all wounded, and believes that "Many of us are drawn to the work of healing because we understand being wounded from inside the experience"

(1995:195). While this can be an advantage, she says that we need to be aware of how our issues can be triggered by our work, and how the stresses of the work can lead to burnout (1995:196).

The women agreed that a strong spirituality plays a crucial role in supporting them in their work and helping them avoid burnout. Peni declares that "spirituality is what feeds my work." Dorilyn says:

to remain calm in the face of strong feelings requires tremendous presence and strength. That is what I need from my own spirituality to do the work. If I didn't have that what I would have to do is block and not listen because what I was receiving would be too overwhelming.

Colleen describes how bringing in Elders can help "to calm things down" at the Centre where she works. Women can spend time together eating and sharing in a lodge downstairs.

Patricia describes how learning to trust the process helps her to carry on. "Whenever I've arrived at a point where you just don't get it anymore, I trust that now, and I spend time with that alone." In a few days, she usually notices some tiny change which reminds her that "the process is still working."

Madeline says that it is hard work to figure out what a person is doing, to decide on the appropriate response, and to be able to carry 'x' number of people and the things they are going through. "My spirituality is really nourishing me in terms of having resources and having a way to take care of myself."

N. emphasizes the need to protect the space in which our spirituality lives. "We have to take a stand in looking after ourselves." Otherwise, she said, we face "the worst, literally, burnout!" She struggled with her need to take a break from the issues by turning off the television and avoiding the daily newspaper for a time. Sister Annabelle, a Buddhist nun, gave her a different perspective on the issue, saying that it is not healthy to be open to all the suffering in the world every day if you are limited in your capacity to help. Sometimes you need to "close the door for a while. Then you are sheltered." She found that cutting off the news had a positive effect on her, leaving some space to develop healthy attitudes. N. also pointed out that the media is controlled by men, and much of what we

hear puts us on the defensive. All that we see is the violence, and never the connections, such as our need to "heal the whole earth."

The literature supports N.'s observations about the need to take a break from negative messages (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:23; Cooper-White, 1995:60; hooks, 1993; Nhat Hanh, 1993:69; Ruth, 1994:5, 19). As I have indicated, my own healing process involved protecting myself for a time from sexist messages that harmed my spirit.

Several women emphasized that we also need to take time to celebrate and feed our spirit. "We cannot have that angry mood all the time...we owe it to ourselves." (N.) The women engaged in many practices to help feed their spirits, for example; journalling, meditation, imagery work, kinesiology, prayer, yoga, staying in tune with natural cycles, and learning to accept that not everything needs an answer. The literature also describes many ideas, spiritual practices, and celebratory rituals which can feed our spirit (Cooper-White, 1995:196-202; Kalven and Buckley, 1984:345-355; Macy, 1991:39-49; Starhawk, 1989:326-335).

To continue their own spiritual growth, the women see their own counsellors, bodyworkers, and homeopaths. They describe their connection to women's spirituality groups, to their peers, and to healing communities, which provide support in their work and in their lives. In the literature, Pamela Cooper-White warns professionals not to

use the therapy session to do their own work but to find their own support people, and create community in their own lives (1995:200). Jean agrees. Not mixing up our issues with our client's issues, and staying clear in being able to think about a client, ensures that we don't "end up taking on someone else's stuff...if you do that, you end up exhausted and sunk, confused and rescuing."

Peni said that burnout is still a factor because she is busy; "I need to work at a pace that doesn't fry me!" So she practices yoga and meditation, takes time off, and attends retreats.

Sharon describes how she could not do the work without her spirituality and her garden. She said:

I'm on the scorched side of burnout right now...I couldn't survive without my spiritual connection, but right now ...my spiritual bank account is overdrawn.

When I interviewed Sharon, she was about to leave for a few days of solitude at a cottage. Patricia also described how she takes the time to go away for a quiet weekend in a prayerful setting, always in nature, every two or three months. Colleen said that healing the spirit inside takes being alone for a while "and if you don't take that time alone for yourself as an individual, and find yourself, then you're going to continue being damaged in your spirit."

"Contact with the sacred occurs in the stillness of the heart and mind" (Baldwin, 1991:47). In the interviews, as well as in the literature, I found the women saying that we

need both solitude and community to be able to connect with our deepest selves - to our spirit (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Baldwin, 1991:47-63; Bass and Davis, 1988:157; Bopp et al., 1984:56; Keller, 1986:3; Miles, 1982:85; Nouwen, 1972:38; Ruether, 1989:161).

### *5.7 Introducing Spirituality Into The Counselling Session*

The women began introducing spirituality in a variety of ways; by stating their philosophy, or asking specific spiritual questions, taking their cues from the client, and moving slowly and respectfully.

#### *5.7.1 A Direct Approach*

Four women said that they state their philosophy up front. Dorilyn believes that it is the clients' right to know. She said that she tries to be respectful of their spiritual process as well as her own. At least four women begin by asking direct questions about the woman's spiritual orientation. For some, this may take place in the first session; for others "when the time is right." Jean states her assumption, usually in the first interview, that "every human being is good." She says that she doesn't put it out as spiritual work but that is what it is. Sharon said that she has the privilege, as a United Church minister, of having people come in already knowing her perspective. She might ask "Do you want to be healed?" aware that all of us

have parts that are resistant to healing. The person is asked to take their experience of "where they are right now" to the holy.

With Aboriginal clients, Dorothy uses the Medicine Wheel to ask where people are at mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. She said that usually when she reaches the spiritual, there will be silence and sometimes tears. With mainstream clients, she will use the Medicine Wheel more informally. She may ask "What kind of spiritual guidance do you have?" "Where are you at in your spiritual healing?"

#### *5.7.2 Beginning With The Client's Experience*

Most of the women emphasized that they work within the context of the client's belief system. For example, Jean says that when working with people around death, she may ask people about their particular beliefs regarding an afterlife. Sharon says "I start from the person's experience and from where I hear the Holy working in their life." Madeline says that on the basis of a client's spiritual orientation, she looks at what would be workable for them and what they would find compatible with their spiritual outlook, "so how I bring it to practice might be fairly wide-ranging."

If a client states clearly that she has no beliefs, Patricia says that unless there is something that needs to

be worked on, for instance, something that has been projected onto spirit or God, she will let it be. She may nudge them in certain directions, for example towards nature, to help open up that area. Madeline too said that, if a person is spiritual, she uses spiritual language. Otherwise, she may name it 'enlivenment' rather than 'spirit', use meditation or visualization rather than prayer, and be flexible over naming God. Reepa said that she always asked permission before praying for a client.

The ways in which the women introduced spirituality showed respect for their clients' beliefs and individual healing processes.

### 5.7.3 *Timing*

Several women emphasized the importance of knowing your clients and moving at a pace they are comfortable with. Madeline warns that clients who embrace the spiritual too soon in their process may intellectualize and philosophize, remaining in the head and avoiding the feeling work. She described women who come in and "they're already very very spiritual...but they haven't quite landed on earth yet" or women who get caught up in the drama, pomp, and ceremony of Goddess spirituality, and tend to skip over the material which could help them in their emotional work. Patricia agrees, and says that she has also experienced difficulties working with abuse issues:

where you can see that everything's moving so the time would be ripe for the person to work on it, and there's a hold on what God wants, holding on to that so we don't need to go into the feelings.

In working with Aboriginal clients who have been raised in foster families without access to Native spirituality, Colleen says it is important to go slowly, providing guidance so they will not be overwhelmed "once they discover the whole world of where they come from."

There are different levels of our spirituality in our teachings and for the new ones coming in we try to just provide the very basic teachings and just give them resources like the elders' lodge (Kumik).

Several women pointed out that there are times when it is not appropriate to introduce spirituality. N. said, for example, that when a woman is in crisis, we need to deal with her safety and material needs first before introducing practices like meditation. Spirituality is not a replacement for material assistance.

### 5.8 *Spiritual Practices*

The women shared a wide array of ideas, approaches and techniques for doing spiritual work. Their approaches included imagery work, ceremony and ritual, journalling, art, meditation, prayer, the Medicine Wheel, vision quests, breathwork, bodywork, dance, music, archetypes, dreamwork, silence, and accessing healing communities. Their goals were to help women to find a place of safety, to work with despair, to heal their hurts, to connect with compassion,



hope, and enlivenment, to question, to search for their roots, to recover self-esteem, pride, and dignity, to explore their own sacred path, and to find a meaningful spirituality. Since I could not hope to include all these approaches in detail, I have chosen to describe a few particularly interesting practices.

#### *5.8.1 Establishing Safety*

Dorilyn says that, for a survivor, the first step in reconnecting to the lost part of yourself is to find a place of rest and peace inside. Looking back at how the literature describes rape as "a brush with death" (Shaffer, 1982:463), at the terror, dread, and loss of trust that accompanies child sexual abuse, and at the disconnection with self that often occurs, finding a place of safety can be crucial (Herman, 1992:34,36,55,74; hooks, 1993:105; Hyde, 1990:170; Jack, 1991:168; Malmo, 1990:288-92).

After establishing some sort of external safety, she encourages clients to go inside themselves using visualization, art, music, relaxation, whatever it takes to imagine a place where they make all the rules. She says that people come up with a many beautiful images, often in nature. She notes that it is important that this not be an actual place, because of the danger of discovering in the future that it was the site of abuse.

Dorilyn uses magic for women who have been so abused

that feeling hope is outside of their experience. She might ask "If you had magic right now what would you do to make your life safe?" For one woman who could not visualize a single image that was safe, she asked her to rate things from unsafe to safe on a scale of one to ten. It was a long process of constructing a structure that was relatively safe for her.

This place can provide the safety that people need to uncover traumatic memories. It is a place for their inner child to retreat to, or, if they have multiple personalities, a place to store their alters. Once they find a place of safety, Dorilyn says, they begin to ask questions like "What is this all about? What do I need to be whole...to be peaceful?" "Once they've sensed what that is, there is a willingness on the part of the soul to explore that path."

While we need to provide safety, Dorilyn says that it is important to work with those things that are most triggering because "what is triggering us, is what we need to heal."

Other healers also used imagery or hypnotherapy to create a safe place or container to deposit disturbing feelings, reconstruct the past, and give the woman some control over her process (Ellis, 1990:249; Hyde, 1990;169-182; Malmo, 1990:202). Several described how imagery enables a deeper healing to occur, and speaks to the spirit

(Achterberg, 1985:3; Hyde, 1990:173-75; Weaver, 1982:250).

Rather than creating an imaginary safe place, Jean spoke of helping survivors to recognize that "they are safe right now even if they don't feel safe," and that the feelings of fear are "old triggered feelings." She helps clients to notice that nothing dangerous or abusive is happening now.

#### 5.8.2 *Depression and Despair Work*

When people are going through the depths of their despair, Madeline says:

I don't name that as necessarily an awful thing. You know that they're on a spiritual journey and those really desperate and dark times are part of that journey and it's not necessarily something to be erased or gotten rid of.

Indeed, Jean finds that it is the wall around the feelings that is the most difficult to work with. "This facade is like cement." She has a drawing that she shows women, which consists of three layers. At the centre is "the divine spark, your true self...the inherent part of you" which contains your goodness, intelligence, ability to give and receive love. Around it is a layer of "slime and sludge" containing "all the terrible things, all the bad feelings." On the outside is the facade which says "everything's fine." Part of Jean's work is to go through the facade and pretense to reach the feelings inside - the shame, anger, self-hatred and deep grief - and to help the

client to reconnect to her goodness.

Dorilyn says that we have a construction in our mind about how the world works. She described a situation where a Shamanic teacher pushed her client "off the web...We're not talking about gently influencing here, we're talking about taking the big nosedive off the edge," where our whole reasoning gets "blown up." While she would not advocate doing this to clients, she compared it to what happens to us when we experience "some of the negative parts of life" like abuse or trauma.

This story reminded me of Dorothy's remark about the "step in faith" that it took for her to leave an abusive relationship, and the message in Christina Baldwin's book which stated "When you come to the edge of all you know, you must believe one of two things: There will be earth to stand on, or you will be given wings to fly" (1991:96).

For clients who are in despair, Madeline says that her own spirituality helps her "to maintain my optimism and hope and belief, and hopefully they can ride on that too, and use it to allow them to live through it."

For several women, the work seems to involve connecting women to the deep feelings, staying with those feelings for as long as it takes to work through them, and, at the same time, connecting the client to a reason to go on. These themes are also discussed in the literature I reviewed (see section 3.4.2).

### 5.8.3 *Finding Hope In Despair*

Jean warns that hope can be as much a false pattern as despair, and emphasizes the necessity of working through our despair to release it in a meaningful way. We may need to be careful that clients not get stuck in either place.

Nevertheless, as clients begin to work through the feelings, some of the women felt that making that connection with life and hope, can be crucial. Sharon says that there are often parts of us that are resistant to healing. Those parts may want to "run away to suicide." When she asks "Do you want to be healed?" she is inviting people to take their experience "to the holy," helping them "plug into the sacred source for the work that they're doing," and to take their resistance, anger, and hatred to God as well. She is inviting them into a transforming relationship with the sacred, facilitating their connection with life-giving messages. The process may involve prayer, lighting candles, accompanying people to graves, or whatever else they need to do.

To reconnect women with a moment in their lives when they may have felt that "intuiting of a really good feeling or a sense of who they are," Patricia names that feeling or longing as their divinity, or their spirit. She says that if we keep nourishing that longing, and focusing on it by working with the heart, a person may be willing to go

through the pain and hardship because of this longing for the spirit. It can be used as an anchor.

Three of the women indicate that, in the end, it is the clients who decide whether to choose life. Sharon says that all she can do is accompany her clients into "the very, very, dark night of the soul." They need to make the connection themselves, and she is aware that they may not, "so I have to let go." Dorilyn said that women can choose to use what they're going through for their soul's growth. She says, for example, that though poverty causes hardship, it can also give people "an opportunity to look at different things in a different way." Her words remind me of the way N. viewed her experience of doing piecework as a way to help her to understand her clients' oppression.

#### 5.8.4 *Meditation*

N. says that Buddhist practices such as meditation can help women to see their suffering in a different way. She says: "It doesn't mean that you deny that you have suffering...but you look into something that is enriching your life as well...It's just like we turned a page."

In N.'s meditation group, women from all cultures come to be together, sit and meditate quietly, and learn how to breathe. Sometimes, she says, women really cry, "and we see crying as a good sense of the letting go of the fear, or the letting go of the anger." The group members respect each

other's tears and "gradually you would see that person coming out and telling her story." She says the richness of the meditation is that it comes from the physical. The more she uses it with women, the more she realizes that we do not need to ask questions or give advice, "all we need to do is listen and learn," and the more she sees meditation as a resource for work with abused women. "Some people have suffering that goes on and on, but as soon as we invite them into the group and practice for a while, they feel better." Several authors support N.'s observations about the benefits of meditation (see section 3.4.2).

#### 5.8.5 *Breathwork*

N. speaks of the value of breathwork, saying that when a

woman comes in, and we ask her to sit and breathe, at first we may feel that we are not helping:

but as soon as the breathing is practiced, then you release your anger...when you are breathing, then you recognize you are angry, and just recognizing that you are angry, just recognizing that you are suffering pain, is already a step in healing.

She says breathing, and following the breath, can help a woman to feel refreshed and stable.

Madeline uses a breathwork technique where the clients work with deep, full breathing "which puts them into an altered state of consciousness." Clients enter the session with "a chosen question or an intention, something they want

to retrieve from the unconscious," and may work through some very primal issues.

Other healers discuss how breathwork assists in the healing process (Hyde, 1990:176; Iglehart, 1982:411; Laity, 1994:87; Sanchez, 1989:356; Starhawk, 1989:327).

#### 5.8.6 *Spirit Guides*

Madeline describes how, in these altered states, spiritual archetypes may come up. The client may experience spirit guides or angels, or may talk with God. She says;

Who knows what it's actually about except that they do have the experience of feeling that they receive really profound answers to some questions that they've been struggling with very hard. So I don't really care if it's coming from the wise part inside of them that they...externalize...or if it's the actual intervention of another entity.

She says that it comes up all the time in breathwork, and that she has experienced it herself.

Other therapists believe that a spirit guide may assist women in identifying, reinforcing, or developing the accepting, self-nurturing parts of themselves, reframe negative messages, provide wisdom and comfort, and lead to a healing transformation. This can be important for abused women who may feel responsible for the abuse and undeserving of self-care (Ellis, 1990:249; Hyde, 1990:182; Malmo, 1990:203,299; Malmo and Laidlaw, 1990:321; Turner, 1990:237).



### 5.8.7 Prayer

Another way to access support and comfort is through prayer. Although Reepa willingly advocates for clients in the community, there are times when she feels limited in how she can help them with their pain. She tells them this, and offers to pray for them, saying that it is something that has brought her comfort.

Madeline says that as the relationship to her clients begin to be established, "I begin to...carry them in my consciousness," including a portion of time in her routine of prayer and meditation to pray for them. "I'm not praying for anything particular to happen to them but just praying to invite whatever benevolent forces in the universe might want to support them."

Patricia also prays for clients each morning both in her massage therapy practice and her counselling practice. While massaging, "if I sense something going on, then I might start praying, " asking that "whatever needs to happen, let it happen." She may begin a counselling session by holding hands with the client, and "we'll do a little breathing together, and whatever insight I get around the session or prayer, then I share that." She admits it has taken her a while to get to be very straightforward about this. If the time is right, she may suggest ways for them to meditate, pray, seek guidance, or even do drawings "around how spirituality is manifested in their body."

### *5.8.8 Working With Energy*

Dorilyn says that "we exist in an energy field that belongs more to the realm of the soul than it does with the body." In a way that seems similar to Patricia's practice with prayer, she says that "you can begin to sense another's soul on an energetic level." She gives an example of a client who experienced recurring pain in a certain part of her body. Dorilyn had a sense that the woman needed to ask that part of the body why it was hurting. When the woman did this, she was able to retrieve a memory of abuse associated to that part of the body. Asking her body what it needed to be better, provided a solution and the pain disappeared. Dorilyn says that there is no rational explanation for her insights. She believes it has "something to do with her energy connecting to mine."

Peni always works with the body "where we're holding the stuff" and uses breath and sound to move energy through the body. There may be an energy exchange. She says "I allow energy to move through, and be extended to my client."

### *5.8.9 Seasons and Life Cycles*

Throughout her work, Madeline noticed the recurrence of the birth/death/rebirth cycles that people go through. She says that she works with the symbols of the four directions or the four seasons, and she finds it "an exceedingly healthy framework to put all the comings and goings that

happen in people's lives - losses, all the births...the creative life cycle." She uses it to frame events in people's lives such as divorce or menopause, "the time of letting go of an old phase, and something coming into being."

Several authors also encourage the use of symbols to help us celebrate our transitions and rites of passage, and to help us value all stages of our lives, in youth, maturity, and age (Christ, 1982:78-80; Goldenberg, 1979:97; Ruth, 1994:57; Teish, 1989:87; Walker, 1985; and others).

#### 5.8.10 *Ritual*

At First United, Sharon's healing services include Christian rituals involving prayer, communion, healing waters, anointing oil, Christian laments. She says;

The ritual actually creates reality, so using ritual is a way of helping certain women...it's not specifically for abuse...but a ton of people who come are there because of abuse, and so ritual is a very powerful way of helping folks...group spiritual healing!

Acknowledging abuse in a church "sends a clear message that abuse is something you can talk about here...Once you can talk about it, you have to respond!" Cooper-White also discusses the need within Christian churches for meaningful ritual which acknowledges women's abuse (1995:250-251).

Madeline uses rituals especially "when people meet really hard places in their process" or where there is a transition happening, such as a significant life event like

marriage or pregnancy. Sometimes, women speak of a lack of spirituality in their lives, and wonder how they can integrate it if they've decided not to participate in a religion. In these situations, Madeline might introduce ways for people to "integrate ritual into their lives" by teaching about using ritual, prayer, and meditation, and "seeing the sacred in everyday life." She says, "The whole thing around ritual is really powerful imagery. It's the imagery that comes out of ritual that creates the effect."

Other authors too see ritual as a powerful tool for women to mark our transitions, help us access our power, and create new ways of coming together as women who have been cut off from our heritage (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:222; Baldwin, 1991:163-175; Kasl, 1992:362-364; Lerner, 1986:302; Macy, 1991:39-49; Teish, 1989:87-92).

#### *5.8.11 Aboriginal Healing*

The Aboriginal women I interviewed described the healing that can occur for Aboriginal people when they connect to their traditions and ceremonies. Dorothy says that Aboriginal people have known all along the connection between the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. She and Colleen work with Aboriginal women, helping them to heal from abuse. Colleen says that each Aboriginal nation has its own teachings so they try to bring in Elders from the different nations. Much of their work involves the Medicine

Wheel teachings, which look at healing wholistically. Echoing the words of Michael and Judie Bopp (Bopp et al, 1984), Colleen described the many levels of teaching of the Medicine Wheel. Many Aboriginal people have been raised in white families and are not familiar with their traditions, so they need to gear the teachings to the individual.

Colleen and Dorothy believe that the Aboriginal people who come to them, need to spend time becoming familiar with the healing circles, the medicines, attending Kumik, listening to the Elders, and discovering about themselves. They may attend traditional events and ceremonies such as powwows. Eventually, they may feel ready for the vision quest, where they go on a three-day fast and go into nature and "sit with themselves for three days." She says "that's where the main issues come out." She also described the struggle women may have (as she did), when they decide to dance, trying to put together their regalia, but also the value of researching their particular background, and the pride and self-confidence that returns as they actually take part in the dancing. She says that some people may think powwows are a big show, but Native people know what it's all about. "There's a lot of strong energy going on, and it's because of that regaining and reclaiming the pride and dignity."

Connecting with pride in their Nativeness can be an important part of the healing process for Aboriginal people

(Absolon, 1993; Allen, 1986:60; First Nations Health Commission, 1994:134).

Colleen says that in addition to using mainstream materials like *The Courage to Heal* books, and journalling, Aboriginal women can benefit from bringing in Elders who deal with specific issues like sexual abuse. Their work emphasizes healing the family and community as well, although she states that "there's gotta be a fine line too," indicating that their primary responsibility is to the abused women who seek their help. She feels that things are coming full circle as they work to develop an Aboriginal Health Centre in the city.

#### 5.8.12 *Reframing Negative Images*

For any oppressed or abused group, healing often involves shedding the negative images that we hold about ourselves, and which are present in mainstream society in the form of stereotypes and false information.

In section 5.6.6, I described how N. felt the need to shelter herself from the daily barrage of negative and hurtful messages of the media, and from events which she felt powerless to change. In their research on women's spiritual unfolding, Anderson and Hopkins warn that "stripping away the layers of encultured patriarchal values and beliefs is a profoundly disruptive process" (1991:18) because we are left with great uncertainty. Yet the women

they interviewed said that this process led them to cultivate their own roots, find wisdom within themselves, and trust in their own sacred process (1991:18-19).

The women I interviewed described the harm caused by hurtful images, and the healing that can occur when we replace them with life-giving, positive images. Jean describes the false information carried by survivors of abuse which labels us as bad or defective, and how these messages "override any attempts that we make to connect with goodness." Deborah says:

We're conditioned to believe that anything--any patriarchal institution--is right, and we are wrong...so we suppress ourselves and our creativity...and it's not until we go through that period of questioning and shedding that we realize what's important, or start to reclaim ourselves.

The Aboriginal women spoke of how healing the hurts of residential schools, intergenerational abuse, and colonization, involves reclaiming traditions. Deborah's work also involves encouraging women to reclaim their history as women, to help them to heal. It is a concept shared by N. who spoke of the importance of women going back to their personal roots as well as to their common heritage as women. She says that many traditions started with peaceful agricultural societies, and that they were prosperous times, "and those times were really created by women."

### 5.8.13 *Positive Images of the Sacred*

For a woman alienated from her self by abuse, identifying with the sacred can help her to uncover her authentic self (see section 3.3.8). In her work with an abused woman who had been dominated by both father, husband, and fundamentalist beliefs, Sharon said that her job was to "help her connect with God as God is, rather than the image of the very patriarchal, domineering, bastard/God/father!" She says that as long as women are operating out of that image of an abusive God, "God becomes a big abuser too," and they remain out of touch "with their own spiritual sources and their own spiritual will." She encourages women to image God as female "to break them out of that, and let God be who God's going to be."

N. speaks of the presence of Kuan Yin in Buddhist tradition as Buddha appearing in female form. She says that, for many women in her country, "they may not know about the Buddha but they know about Kuan Yin." Stephanie Kaza describes Kuan Yin as "a feminine gender form of a realized Bodhisattva as the embodiment of compassion for all beings" (1993:52).

Patricia says that she uses a lot of symbolism of the womb with women as "containing spirit, containing life, the breath, and using the body to focus it all on spirit." I noticed that imagery in the literature on spiritual healing also focused on container images (Allen, 1989:27; Ellis,



1990, Hyde, 1990; Malmo, 1990).

Positive imagery used in accessing spirit guides, interpreting dreams, and creating liberating archetypes, is explored by several authors (Hyde, 1990:182; Malmo, 1990;299; Bolen, 1984; Signell, 1990:28,108). Karen Signell defines archetypes as "the unconscious images and feelings that are the basis for our most meaningful and moving experiences in life " (1990:28). Madeline related an experience of working with a client to integrate three archetypes into her life. She notices that;

people are born with certain archetypes that are strong, and those archetypes get us to a certain point in our lives, but if we stay really rigidly within that...by a certain point in our life, we are going to feel really limited.

She says that we need to broaden them to create "the balance that women need to feel they've lived their lives fully." Other authors support the view that women need to be able to draw on a range of images and role models to fulfill our potential (McFague, 1989:140; Bolen, 1984; Falk, 1989:129; Ruether, 1989:160; and others).

## *5.9 Conflicts and Harmful Spiritualities*

### *5.9.1 Conflicts*

The women described some areas where they have encountered, or were apt to encounter conflicts in spiritual beliefs when working with women. There can be conflicts around rigid patriarchal belief systems, ritual abuse

issues, and culturally-patterned hurts. The women also mentioned clients who come with no beliefs, a belief in their own badness, a religiosity which is based in form rather than essence, or with a spirituality that lies in the head instead of the heart. Unless there was danger involved, often the healers felt it was necessary for the women to sort out the conflicts in her own way and time.

According to her Buddhist beliefs, N. says that when people come to her, there needs to be "some sense of acceptance." She tries not to judge other religious traditions. She said that one of the Buddhist teachings is to not become too entrenched or self-satisfied within one's own beliefs.

Dorothy, Dorilyn, and Peni said that they are never in conflict with a person's spiritual belief because "any spiritual belief is life-enhancing" (Dorilyn), and because they respect a woman's spirit and beliefs. Peni says that "true spiritual belief comes from the source. It's all pure!" She says that she has never worked with strict patriarchal belief systems ("That would be interesting") but adds that "we are all shedding patriarchy." She believes that the women's own conflicts with previously accepted beliefs will come up as they work on their issues.

Dorilyn says that she has encountered people with a sense of religiosity based on form and function, which is serving as a coping mechanism. She treats it as she does

any coping mechanism, by not focusing on it, but on the underlying issue, and, like Peni, leaving it to the woman's judgment to make the connections. She says:

you just can't rip something apart that has been a fundamental part of someone's life. You have to be able to give her the tools to replace it herself with something that works for her...It would be therapeutic madness!

Sharon finds herself in conflict with the 'devil stuff' and anti-life spiritualities that some ritual abuse survivors are still locked into. She said that usually they come to her because they want to deal with it, so she is able to approach it "head on." Like Peni, she has no problems with people who have different spiritual beliefs from her own. She says "They're all plugged into the sacred."

Where Madeline feels the most conflict is where women have bought into traditional patriarchal-oriented beliefs. She believes that some of the attitudes - towards women, sexuality, obedience to father/husband, abortion, self-sacrifice or self-diminishment - can cause difficulties in their healing process. She says that it has not come up because of the people she tends to attract to her practice. But she says, when people are:

rehashing over childhood experiences of religion and around authority and reclaiming their own authority, I find I can be very patient and objective around that process because they need to sort those pieces out.

Deborah too, tries not to get into conflict, even when women accept things blindly. She may discuss patriarchal beliefs

with the client, or the women may state them themselves. She says that she knows she cannot change people's beliefs.

### 5.9.2 Harmful Spiritualities

The women identified some spiritualities and spiritual practices which they considered to be harmful or dangerous. They described the harm caused by traditional religions which promote quick forgiveness, or try to control the lives of women, and the way we perceive the world, that almost "extends that period of childhood" (Dorilyn) when right and wrong are set by parents. Sharon is concerned about Christian churches which do not recognize or talk about abuse. She says that there are Christians whom she would never want an abused woman to see. She finds harm in those images of an abusive "patriarchal domineering God" which keeps women "out of touch with their own spiritual sources."

Sharon also has concerns about certain new age practices which may not be grounded:

That can be an even worse form of guilt than even the worst Christianity because it can make a person feel that they have the power to do everything themselves...and if they don't do it, it's their fault...It can be a new form of fundamentalism.

Dorilyn says that there is harm in "anything that's rigid, and doesn't allow for alternative views of reality." However she does not like to make judgments because, she says, that may be what the person needs at that time. Her only concern is for safety. In situations where there is a

potential for violence or "if someone had their consciousness so distorted that they had an energetic power to wound...those people are to be avoided...We need what is going to be life-enhancing."

She also sees harm in beliefs which have nothing to do with who we are inside, no matter what it is. If the spirituality is based on form rather than experienced, Dorilyn believes that it can be harmful. One example could be, as mentioned by Jean, any belief that is imposed upon people.

At least five women referred to cults, which two of them said they do not define as 'spiritual beliefs'. Nevertheless, they spoke of the difficulties of unhooking people from cults or satanic beliefs, and Peni said that she has particular concerns for people who have issues with addictions, or with deep needs for father/mother, around their vulnerability to cults.

Two women had concerns about the practice of collecting objects (like crystals, feathers, stones) for comfort. Dorilyn says that objects can be useful to provide a physical link between the "external physical world and the internal sacred world," but only if the power from the object comes from inside. She does not necessarily see it as harmful. Rather she finds it sad that often people are missing the real connection.

On the other hand, Patricia does see some harm in using

sacred objects like crystals because "When you're dealing with spirituality or spirit...there's such powerful forces that you need to be very grounded and clear in what you're doing." She is also concerned when people "go to workshops and jump into sessions right away, if it's not really grounded and the therapist isn't grounded as well."

The women have verbalized many of the same fears around the dangers of certain spiritual practices as were identified by other healers (see section 3.3.10). Their words underscore the need to be aware of the power of the spiritual, the dangers involved, and the magnitude of any decision to include it in practice.

#### *5.10 Spirituality and Feminism*

It was in linking feminism to spirituality that I encountered the most surprises. Several authors had highlighted areas of potential conflict between feminism and spirituality (Iglehart, 1982:409; King, 1989:218-222; Ruth, 1994; Spretnak, 1982:xxvii). While most of the women I interviewed considered themselves to be feminists or valued feminist contributions to society, several criticized some members of the movement for emulating men, or pointed to intolerance within feminist organizations, and the ways feminist beliefs alienated men. Some experienced periods of alienation from the movement especially during the eighties.

Taken aback by these findings, I looked at the

literature and found spiritual feminists and womanists emphasizing that constant re-evaluation is necessary if we want feminism to grow and become truly representative of all women, and dedicated to creating a world where all people will thrive (Gearhart, 1982:205; Ruth, 1994:xi-xix; King, 1989:30-31; Plaskow and Christ, 1989:1-11).

#### *5.10.1 Linking Feminism and Spirituality*

The women described their interpretations of feminism, and how they have been able to combine feminism and with their spiritual beliefs. For three women, feminism and spirituality are inseparable. Deborah and N. emphasized the relevance of connecting to women's past, and Madeline says that connecting to feminine spirituality helps to ground her feminism.

N. says that she has been asking her Buddhist teachers for some time about the connections between feminism and Buddhism. She says that Buddhism is based on equality and respect of all beings. Although she says that Buddhism, like other religions, has been influenced by men, she equates Buddhist ideas of peacefulness and living in harmony with feminist philosophy, and spoke of Kuan Yin as the female embodiment of Buddha. Several Buddhist feminists look more critically at Buddhism (Uchino, 1983; Kabilsingh, 1983).

In comparing Buddhism to feminism, Stephanie Kaza notes

that while both are based on experiential knowing, Buddhism has little gender analysis of issues such as cultural habits of objectifying women (1993:56-57). N. agrees that "we don't analyze like the feminist movement". She says that, in the Third World, women could benefit from looking at women's history as Western feminism does. She says that by nourishing our connections with our collective past, "when they talk about women [negatively]...we'll estimate ourselves much, much better."

Madeline believes that feminism and feminine spirituality are really compatible with each other, "although I know a lot of people would disagree!" She too, made connections to the past to discover ancient traditions of women, and she found it helped ground her feminist theory, so that it was not:

just women wanting to have what men have in the world but to be able to bring the wisdom and strength of women into the world - which might look very different from what the world looks like now.

Though she benefitted from archetypes in the feminine spiritual movement that helped her to reclaim the right to have all her abilities developed and be out in the world, she says that she never really thought that "the way the world was set up in terms of masculine values...had a lot going for it" in that:

only a few benefitted from, and many people suffered because of! I saw that my feminism would mean that the world would be different in the end, not just that I would get to partake in the goodies that were going around.



In other words, Madeline's feminist vision is a transformative one, similar to those described by others (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991:9,228; Kuyek, 1990:70; Ruth, 1994:5,6).

Sharon says; "I can't not be feminist, and I can't not be spiritual! They're so integrated. And I can't not be Christian." She knows that the latter is, to some people, a difficult issue, and she says: "I struggle against the abuses of Christianity as much as any radical feminist who has written off the whole thing." She has personally "chosen the path of staying in a religion" and, within the United Church:

I'm not only tolerated for my beliefs, I'm actually applauded...If I were in another kind of tradition where there wasn't any hope of movement, I would have left the church a long time ago! So I mean, I understand people who do!

She believes that if you remove the patriarchal dimension from Christianity you have a "transformational faith-filled resource."

Like her, several theologians and religious leaders believe that Christianity can be salvaged from patriarchal influences (Ruether, 1989; McFague, 1989; Thistlethwaite, 1989) whereas others felt that they needed to leave (Brown and Bohn, 1989:xiii; Spretnak, 1982:xx; Welch, 1985, 2-3). I recall Sheila Ruth's story of the Catholic feminist nun who was asked how she could stay in a church with people who were sexist. The nun answered, "It's my church...Let them

leave" (Ruth, 1994:84).

Madeline also noted that having been deeply immersed in feminine spirituality, she has come to see that many of its premises are not all that different "from a certain ilk of Christianity." She said that women who attended her series, 'Sacred Circle of the Goddess', often found that they could take much of what they learned back to their religions.

Reepa said that she was not very familiar with feminism but described how Inuit women in her community have also been controlled by men and abused.

In order for us to get out of that, we had to really start voicing ourselves...and today in our communities...there's been so much healing in women that the women are the ones that are doing the talking, the healing talk. [they've found their voice?] They've found their voice!

She says they are on committees dealing with youth issues, alcoholism, family violence, and suicide, holding healing sessions, and now the men are starting to do it. "They're following the steps of the women!" She says that she has been following feminism before really knowing what it meant.

Dorilyn says that the meaning of the word 'feminist' has become "so broad to be almost meaningless." She says: "I believe that everybody should have their basic rights respected in life and if that's what being a feminist is about, then I am a feminist." She says that she does not necessarily advertise this because "there are a lot of people - male and female - who get the wrong idea." She says that she incorporates most of the basic principles of

feminism into her work, and talks about social issues, social injustice, responsibility, and accountability.

Dorothy acknowledges the contributions of feminists in the past but feels that "it is time to disempower the label...and by disempowering it we are saying that we are equal." She says that she can call herself a traditionalist because her Aboriginal tradition is a matriarchal one. Because of this background, she does not identify with feminism, and, in fact, was critical of certain feminist practices.

Although she too acknowledged the role of feminism in highlighting the oppression of women, Jean also had some criticisms, and said: "I'm not sure that I would call myself as much of a feminist as I used to."

#### *5.10.2 Criticisms and Advice for Feminists*

Coming from a tradition where emphasis is on healing the community, Dorothy was critical of feminism for alienating men. As an example, she related an experience when she sought shelter at a transition house, and they needed to call a board meeting to decide whether to allow her seventeen year old son into the shelter. The shelter workers clearly did not understand Dorothy's tradition, and Dorothy questions if this policy serves anyone, regardless of tradition. Several authors discuss the complicated relationships between gender and culture, and criticize

feminism for ignoring these issues (see section 3.3.5).

Jean criticized feminism for the internalized oppression that often exists in feminist organizations when people have not done their own work. Colleen observed this as well, saying that often organizations try to become more collective but "it goes part way and gets into some kind of bureaucracy." She says that she respects all the different kinds of feminists, and she also understands how people can get so caught up politically and socially in their goals, that they ignore their relationship with their colleagues. But, she says, feminist methods need to be looked at because, too often, "they treat their women colleagues in a way that they would treat men that they are trying to make changes with." Colleen suggested:

In each culture we have our gifts and I think it's good for feminism to look at Aboriginal people for guidance there. Nobody has the answers to everything but [we need] to respect the gifts each race has, and incorporate them all together, and maybe there can be some kind of uniting.

There seems to be some openness to this among non-Native women healers. Several of the non-Native women referred to the value of Aboriginal teachings and healing methods, while the Aboriginal women referred to using some mainstream tools and methods to complement Aboriginal healing, pointing to some kind of exchange of ideas happening.

Deborah and Madeline both spoke of becoming disenchanted with feminism for a time. Madeline felt that

she had to contort herself to fit into the politics of becoming a "professional" and doing things "as well as men." Involved in feminine spirituality and the political movement for women's health issues, she found "a different route" to work within the movement. In the last ten years, she has sensed a "strong current of women desiring spirituality."

One area where Dorilyn saw herself differing from feminist theory was in focusing on healing individuals, rather than working at a macro level. She says that, though structures need to change, if we want lasting change, "the most essential thing is that we are, as individuals, healed and whole." Several references in the literature support Dorilyn's view regarding healing individuals if we want to end violence and oppression (hooks, 1993; Kasl, 1992; Lerner, 1986).

N. agrees with Dorilyn that we need to work in our own way, and says that we need to recognize that women work to fight injustice in different ways. She says that she respects women who are working in communities in the Third World, or working and struggling inside the system. For example, she points to women who are aware of the issues, and working in organizations like CIDA. She says that people in the movement who are demonstrating and so on, may not be aware of the women "who are silently working in different areas." She says that part of the problem is that "We're not just too well connected." However we work, N.

says that we need to support one another: "In that way, if we are in the community, we are stronger."

### 5.10.3 *Forgiveness*

One area where feminism and religion has tended to differ is on the issue of forgiveness. I asked the women for their views. Several women felt that there is a lot of confusion around the definition of forgiveness. They agreed that it does not mean saying, "That's all right" or "It doesn't matter." It is not something that can be arrived at overnight, they said, and it does not mean returning to the abuser, and allowing abuse to continue.

Jean says that it may mean helping people come to the realization that: "It's not okay that you got hurt...but you don't have to be stuck in the hate." Patricia agrees, saying that looking at it as a heart or spiritual issue may bring us to a place where we can let go of the angry and hateful feelings. This is important, she says because "it then releases the spiritual ties you have to the person."

Madeline says:

I don't think it's anything that can be jumped to...it has to be a real organic process, where people get to a place where they realize that hanging on to not forgiving is costing them more than forgiving...it may take a long time.

Deborah speaks of letting go for our own sake, as we realize that "some people may change. Some won't." She does not think that forgiveness is necessary in order to heal.

Having just been to a retreat on forgiveness, Sharon had a great deal to say on the topic. She says that, within Christianity, women have often been told that they need to forgive their abusers. She believes that telling them this can be a block to their spirituality. She says that David Ausberger talks about false forgiveness when "a wrong is not admitted, where there is no acknowledgment...that a wounding has happened, and when there's no commitment that it shouldn't happen in the future." She says that when there is a genuine sense of remorse, "you might **begin** to think about whether you will begin the process of forgiveness." But she says that cheap forgiveness is destructive. "It dishonours the pain. It dishonours the violation. It dishonours the healing."

Furthermore, she said, if women forgive "in a way that doesn't stop the abuse or acknowledge reality, I think what they're doing is something destructive to their own spirituality." Women might need to say: "I want to be released from the destructive hold you've got on me. I offer you to God...and sometimes that's all you can do."

#### *5.10.4 Social Action and Spirituality*

Is there a place for spirituality in social action? Sharon says that "there's no way of doing social action without spirituality." She says:

We cannot sustain social change and social action without a really deep spiritual source because if you

go on results alone, especially in these kinds of times, you're gonna get nowhere!

Jean agrees, saying: "I think the dearth of spirituality is what keeps us apart from one another." She sees our ability to be connected to one another as one of our strengths, but says that "where we've been hurt makes it difficult for us to do that."

Peni says; "Even if we are not aware of it, there is spirit rising through." Sharon refers, as well, to a force that's operating in the world "through us all and through creation" and how she allies her life energy to that, and connects to it wherever she sees it happening. "The energy for justice comes not from my own personal sense of outrage. It comes from the very core of my soul which rises up from the roots of the Earth!"

Deborah spoke of the changes she has seen at recent events like 'Take Back the Night' marches, with more involvement by women from different cultures and different spiritualities. In my own experience singing with a feminist spiritual group, I have observed this as well. Recently, we have been invited to take part in vigils, December 6 services, International Women's Day celebrations, Union celebrations, and political demonstrations, bringing together feminism, spirituality, and social justice.

Madeline noted that some feel that spirituality is an internal process. But for many people there is a "real innate desire to have their spirituality external and to



have expression for it in community and society." She points to the connection between women's spirituality and the environmental movement with its links to Mother Earth, saying "the whole interconnectedness of beings - It's a pretty direct relation!" Madeline also notes that, for Christians, social action is in line with the teachings of Jesus, whom she sees as a social activist and a radical.

Throughout their interviews, Colleen, Dorothy, and N. referred to how their particular spiritual traditions emphasize a spirituality that is connected to all things. N. speaks of the necessity to see that we need to heal the whole earth. Connecting spirituality and community action is a natural expression of a lived experience.

Patricia says that spirituality and feminism can be combined in social action but recognizes some areas of potential conflict. One special area of interest for Patricia is exploring how "the infant experiences life and has a spiritual presence." She felt that this could be a sensitive issue to rally around because it deals with the area of rights and freedom pertaining to women's bodies.

Many other authors support the observations of the women I interviewed, connecting social action with many spiritual traditions (see section 3.3.12).

### *5.11 Spirituality and the Curriculum*

The women felt that spirituality could be incorporated

into the curricula of universities and training facilities. Two women said that spirituality is already being included in schools of nursing. The women said that it needs to be more than a workshop, or one class. But two women wondered how it could be done saying: "You either have it or you don't" and "It has to come from the heart."

Suggestions included a course introducing various spiritualities and philosophies, looking at where they're coming from for women specifically, and how they've evolved over the years. It might involve making people aware of spirituality as a resource, and "having an understanding of the significance spirituality might play in people's lives." Deborah says "it should be introduced as a course but also within the school itself." The women agreed that it cannot be forced on people.

Patricia suggests looking at traditions such as Goddess tradition to see how the tradition continues in the twentieth century, how we can work with that, and the possible impact of these traditions in counselling sessions. She said that we could look at the pros and cons, when to use and when not to use, and what it means for yourself as a client, or when working in group settings. We could have speakers from various traditions: "It would also help you to understand where your clients are coming from." Madeline says that when working with women from different cultures and spiritualities, it is disrespectful not to learn about

that culture and its spiritual traditions.

Dorilyn suggested an undisciplined space to allow people to discuss what they feel about spirituality. She says that "if you're really trying to teach someone how to communicate on a spiritual level, curriculum isn't gonna do it!" So she could see a course that is like a group, with a facilitator who had a broad perspective and a real sense of spirituality to "eliminate the problem of university attitudes." What Dorilyn described was very close to an independent study group we held during my own graduate studies where we explored our spirituality within the setting of a talking circle, and which has influenced the direction of this work!

Sharon says that people tend to see Christianity as abusive, telling people to forgive or stay with an abuser, but "they don't see the power of transformation." She says that it could be helpful to people to be aware of some of the possibilities, as well as the use of specific tools such as ritual.

Jean says that, in many programs, people are afraid of feelings, their own and others', so there will not be a spiritual component until "people are actually prepared to do the work."

N. finds that fields have become so specialized, cut into pieces and compartmentalized that "we see more of the pieces than the whole." Especially in the West, without

philosophy classes in our early schooling, children lose "the wisdom of thousands of years." Because we cannot see the whole, we are more destructive.

Colleen found that, in university, what helped her were the Aboriginal-specific courses: "That's the kind of courses I'd like to see for our people at university, and not just for Native people - for everybody!"

Madeline said that historically, spirituality and healing have been connected. "People are really limited if they think people are going to work in the healing professions and they don't have some understanding of that."

#### *5.12 Spirituality and Services for Abused Women*

The women felt that more services are needed for abused women and they had many ideas about how those services should look. Dorilyn believes that everyone should be provided with the resources to be whole and healed but that is not going to happen. Sharon says that we need "tons more money." She says that we need to recognize that "a lot of the people who are in psychiatric hospitals are there because of abuse." She would like to see us take money from the psychiatric model and use it to look at the core problem of abuse, and healing from abuse. She feels that we are dealing with too many separate issues, like alcoholism, food addictions, pornographic behaviour, and depression, "and they're all connected!" Sharon would like to see many

healing houses, where women could go to heal and "get connected to themselves." She says the people who understand the core issues are women's groups, often operating on a shoestring budget. Patricia says that we need more groups with a feminist approach, which "will really have a lot more influence and power for women."

Jean is concerned about the amount of internalized sexism in many agencies, and she would like to see people go in and start doing workshops for people in existing services, to address it "in a way that really connects us to our goodness, because it's coming out of that place...where we've lost touch with that divinity." Jean also feels that we need to work with perpetrators in ways that are not just punitive, if we want to stop abuse from spreading. Spirituality would come into this work as well.

Some women said that they left agency work because of the rigidity, and because they could not do what they do best, including working from a spiritual perspective. Dorilyn says that if an agency is not giving you growth, you may need to go "where your soul takes you" because she says, "what's nourishing for me is gonna nourish others."

Madeline would like to see an element of spirituality "woven right into the places like Amethyst and Interval House." She says that she would like to run workshops for service givers. She said, counsellors at some centres were "hungry to know how they could weave it into their practice

but they didn't have a lot of concrete tools or ideas." She says that she would work with them to understand their own spirituality, offer some tools that she uses, and help them to "embody their own spirituality so it just would flow organically into their work with survivors or abused women." She says that it is places like shelters where the whole idea of the sacred in everyday life is really important. "I think about how the staff in those kinds of places so badly need nurturing and need...a cosmology to put all that they hear every day into."

Dorothy is presently working on the development of an Aboriginal Health Centre which will meet the needs of the forty thousand Aboriginal people in the Ottawa area in a wholistic way. She says that existing centres refuse to even acknowledge the barriers to Aboriginal people going there - with no Aboriginal staff or education about Aboriginal values, ethics, and beliefs.

She says that one way to improve existing services is to include in their assessments, open-ended questions regarding where a person is at spiritually. Once mainstream agencies start asking spiritual questions, she believes it will make a difference. She emphasizes that it is important that the person asking the questions has a spiritual grounding herself. She said that shelters are a good thing, but if we want to end violence, we need to focus on services for children of abused women.

Several Non-Native women felt that we could take some lessons from Aboriginal women regarding the structure of services. Deborah pointed to the healing circles, and the idea of respecting people's background and culture. She hopes that more agencies will start respecting and encouraging difference. Sharon says: "I think the Aboriginal healing circles are just so wonderful and I wish that every woman would have an opportunity when they were able, to do that." Patricia also pointed to the work that Aboriginal people are doing in the area of abuse.

Colleen says that agencies could benefit from hiring Aboriginal staff who could assist women to work together in a truly collective way.

It can be hard but it can be done...if you hire enough Aboriginal women, and there are enough different races in there, then you can probably do a lot of sharing...it's a difficult road to walk but at least it's starting.

She also said that white communities need to look more to their grandmothers, and make them part of their organizations, so they feel valued and can pass on to the spirit world in a healthier way. Referring to the many problems within mainstream services, Colleen referred to the Hoop dancer in her culture, who "can really bring the circle together really strong in a way that's...more collective!"

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

My goal in this study was to learn more about how healers see the relationship between abuse, and spiritual healing, and how they have incorporated spirituality into their practice.

### 6.1 *Answering the Research Questions*

The women described how spiritual healing helps women who have been abused. Their descriptions of the effects of abuse are an indication of why women may need to heal spiritually. The women's personal healing stories showed how a strong spirituality can also protect women from the effects of abuse, violence, or trauma.

I found that a healing spirituality is one that encourages women to go inside themselves and redefine the sacred in a way that has meaning for them. Feminist practice with women who have experienced the controlling behaviour of an abusive parent, partner, or religious institution, often involves helping women to reconnect with their own needs and desires. A healing spirituality can nurture a woman's right to find her own vision and her own meaning to life.

The women also had strong opinions about what constitutes a harmful spirituality. I had expected the women to emphasize the harm of abusive satanic cults and extreme practices, and some women did refer to these.



Others dismissed these extremes from discussion, saying that they are *not* to be considered spiritual practices. What was interesting was how several women focused on the abuses of Christianity and New Age practices. While we generally are able to recognize the harm of extremely abusive cults, many abuses come under the guise of accepted practices.

The results suggest that women need a spirituality which is personally meaningful and life-enhancing, one which speaks to our heart. What we do not need is to reproduce in our spirituality the same kinds of abusive controlling relationships that we have been subjected to in our lives.

Through personal stories, descriptions of approaches, tools, and practices, and advice to practitioners, the women generously shared information which can help practitioners in their work with women to reconnect them with spirit.

## 6.2 *Testing My Assumptions*

Does living in a patriarchal society wound women's spirit? The interview participants described ways that abuse harms women, causing them to withdraw, disconnect from self, become numb or mechanical, self-injure, lose their self-esteem, and become depressed or suicidal. The women said that abuse diminishes the ability of women to live fully and creatively in the world, and to experience hope, and remain in touch with their spirit, or connection to the divine.

While some women felt that abuse can almost kill the spirit, others felt that abuse suppresses the spirit, causing it to be diminished or withdraw. Some women felt that the spirit may go into hiding but it remains safe and whole. Either way, the women indicated that abuse affects women's spirit profoundly. It is interesting that the same women believed that experiencing abuse or trauma may strengthen the spirit, and some said that their spirituality helped them survive abuse. It seems that if a woman is able to gather her resources, find support, and heal from the abuse, her spirit may emerge stronger than before.

Some women believe that healing is more of a process of freeing the spirit from the effects of abuse, a process that involves spiritual healing as well as healing the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of the self. The women described the process of reconnecting with a desire to be truly alive, and a sense of who we are, as a spiritual connection.

They gave examples, such as: the work of Aboriginal communities to help people reconnect to spirit, restore pride and dignity, and heal from abuses; the act of connecting to a tradition like Buddhism which sees all things as valued; and the connection a survivor makes to a moment when she felt hope. The women described how conventional therapy only takes people so far.

Women emphasized that spirituality needs to be

personally meaningful, connecting women to the sacred in all creation. Yet, in a patriarchal society, finding a meaningful spirituality can be problematic for women, who have been forced to fit into particular ways of being that may not resonate for us. I recall Madeline's comments regarding her discomfort with feminist philosophies which had us join the 'boys' club' rather than change the face of society.

In her work as a minister, Sharon spoke of having to unhook women from destructive patriarchal images of God, and how she struggles against the abuses of Christianity "as much as any radical feminist who has written off the whole thing". N. referred to the influence of patriarchy on Buddhist thought, and Dorilyn pointed to the problems that survivors may experience in twelve-step programs based on Christian theology, where they are forced to submit to a higher power. Dorothy and Colleen referred to struggles of Aboriginal people within a mainstream belief system which negates or ignores their wholistic, women-positive, communal values and traditions.

Dorothy's description of the impact of religious and secular opinion on her attempts to change an abusive relationship and make it work, and Sharon's story of a client, controlled by father, husband, and fundamentalist beliefs, indicate how patriarchal influences and mainstream views, reinforce the right of men to control women, and

often cause women to stay in abusive situations. The women's descriptions of harmful spiritualities emphasize the damage that can be caused by beliefs which do not recognize women's equality. The women's views were also supported by theologians who indicated that women's experience of the world is different from men, and religions based on self-effacement and subservience are particularly harmful to women (Finson, 1995; Saiving, 1979:25-42; Thistlethwaite, 1989:311).

At the same time, the fact that women are able to work from within a variety of belief systems indicates that possibilities for change and healing are present within many spiritual traditions. Traditions such as Buddhism, Aboriginal tradition, Christian Liberation Theology, Wicca, and Goddess religions have the potential to complement feminist philosophy.

The interviews validated my fourth assumption by indicating several ways that spiritual healing enriches feminist practice. Not only does it open the door for deeper healing to occur, it removes some of the ethnocentric bias that Western therapy has built into its basic philosophies.

### *6.3 Surprises and Unanticipated Learning*

Controversy in the interviews about whether abuse harms, wounds, kills, or suppresses the spirit and sends it

into hiding, motivated me to thinking more about what spirit is. I realized that I was falling into the same trap as Orenstein in the literature, of seeing spirit as metaphor, and disregarding that in many cultures and spiritualities, spirit is an entity which remains whole. Though it may separate or lose its way, it is always there waiting to be reclaimed. I learned to allow for different interpretations of spirit.

I also learned a great deal about how a strong spirituality helps women to survive and heal from abuse. I began with a realization of the ways that our spirit is harmed by patriarchy and the need to reclaim it. I had not thought as much about how a strong spirituality can support us through future hurts. We are still living in a patriarchal society, and we will continue to experience hurts. But the women's personal stories helped me to see what a gift spiritual healing is to women. As N. described it; "it's just like a gem that I forgot, and then when I look into it...I recover like a sick person recovers!"

I was surprised by the degree of criticism of Christianity and feminism by the women I interviewed, considering that some were Christian and most were feminist. I was not disturbed that women looked critically at traditional Christianity. In fact, having come from a Christian background myself, I was pleased to see women's efforts to rid Christianity of the patriarchal/stern/

father/God that I grew up with.

I was less pleased initially with the criticism of a philosophy as dear to me as feminism. Where women spoke of spirituality carrying them through years of abuse and oppression, I could say the same for feminism. When nobody else heard me, Ms. magazine told me that I was not crazy! I recognized my spirituality much later in my life.

Nevertheless, as I worked my way through the data, this criticism became a symbol for me of the way that we may need to open ourselves, and the things we hold dearest, to criticism, if we want to heal and grow. Speaking of Buddhist beliefs, N. said that she was taught not to become too firmly entrenched in believing that the Buddhist Way is the only way. Whenever we think we have the answer, we stop looking.

I learned a great deal from listening to women from wholistic cultures, both in the interviews and the literature. Accepting spiritual healing as an integral part of the healing process may mean dropping our ethnocentric Western reliance on certain methods and skills, and becoming more open and accepting of healing methods used in other cultures.

In this process of interviewing, listening to the tapes, transcribing, and organizing data, I was repeatedly touched by the material. The women's words opened my heart, and I often found myself responding with tears, laughter,

and awe. Through their willingness to share their approaches and their feelings, thoughts, and ideas, came my greatest learning. What a gift!

#### *6.4 Implications for Feminist Social Work Practice*

The research indicates that feminist practice can be opened to include ways to help women heal spiritually, and provides ideas for ways to begin. Several healers indicated that their spiritual approach to practice evolved out of their own healing. They described how certain practices such as meditation, prayer, meaningful ritual, and imagery can open the heart to spiritual healing. For women healing from abuse who may have numbed their feelings in order to survive, reaching for the buried hurts is a valuable part of the healing process. It may take more than 'talk therapy' to reach those suppressed emotions.

One piece of advice the women shared is that the motivation and direction of a spiritually-based practice needs to come from within ourselves, as we adopt practices which are congruent with our basic beliefs. The women described a deep, authentic relationship between client and healer.

While I see the depth of the therapeutic relationship as one of the major benefits in spiritual work for women who have been abused, I believe that it can also be an area with the greatest potential to seriously harm the client, which

is why it is crucial for the therapist to do her own healing work. The women themselves referred to these issues, saying that the therapist needs to have very clear boundaries around the work, and a high level of self-awareness.

As well, in such an intense relationship, attention would need to be paid to the possibility of fostering a dependence on the therapist which could keep the client stuck. Women who have been abused have experienced the control and manipulation of the abuser. The last thing they need is to replace the abuser's authority with that of the therapist.

The data suggests that women will bring their spiritual issues to us. Those who feel uncomfortable dealing with these issues can refer clients. Some women emphasized that, when working with spiritual issues, part of the role of the therapist is to become familiar with clients' traditions, beliefs, and culture, especially when working outside of our own culture and beliefs. In cultures where spirituality is a part of everyday life, healing fully will involve spiritual healing.

I do not believe that spiritual work can be undertaken on a 'brief therapy' basis if, as the women described, we are accompanying women on a healing journey. Yet, even if agencies begin to allow spiritually-based work, Jean mentioned how agencies often limit the number of sessions. Unfortunately, as one practitioner noted, the gaps in our



health system often makes their private services inaccessible to many people, even with sliding scales.

The interview findings suggest that working with spiritual issues may require a deeper commitment to the therapeutic process, a willingness to work from the heart, less reliance on skills and interventions, and more emphasis on intuition and connection. Working in this manner, the women I interviewed model self-awareness, and have developed their own supports, methods of self-care, and healing communities.

As well, the results indicate that spiritual therapists also need to maintain an analysis of oppression and power relations, have some understanding of what constitutes a healing spirituality, and an awareness of when spiritual practices can be harmful.

The goal of spiritually-based work involves connecting women to spirit, to hope, to enlivenment, and to joy. It involves helping them to release the pain, unhook themselves from negative stereotypes, and become fully alive. As counsellors, we can learn to recognize the sacredness present in everyday life, for instance, in our work in shelters. Women may work in communities and organizations, or with individuals. I agree with Dorilyn who indicated that people need to heal individually in order to change our institutions. At the same time, I have seen how changes in institutions can send a powerful message to survivors that

can help them to heal. An example of this is Sharon's reference to the powerful messages the Church sends with public recognition of abuse. Perhaps, as several women indicated, each of us needs to work in our own way. As Dorilyn said, we need to hear what our soul is saying.

One thing that I learned from the study is that perhaps we need to approach both the tools and the work with caution and move slowly, integrating spirituality into our life and our work in a way that is meaningful for us.

#### *6.5 Feminism, Spiritual Work, and Services for Abused Women*

The women had criticisms of feminist organizations and agencies. Several chose private practice not only because it freed them from the bureaucracy of agencies, but because it allowed them to work in more wholistic ways, and to make the best use of their particular talents and interests. It also was a way to avoid the internalized oppression which some of them experienced in feminist agencies and organizations.

By becoming more self-critical and respectful of the variety of ways that women have chosen to work for change, feminist organizations can become more inclusive and less ethnocentric. We need to become more open to other ways of being and not just pay lip service to inclusivity. For example, Colleen suggests that feminists might look to Native women for ways to operate more collectively. This

respectfulness also needs to extend to the ways that women choose to connect with the spiritual. We may need to ask ourselves if we are representing women of all cultures, backgrounds, and education levels, or just white educated women, as some criticism indicates.

Colleen gave several suggestions to feminist agencies for ways to work together. N. said that we need to recognize that women work in different ways and each needs to be valued. We may need to become less entrenched in our thinking, and look at the ways that patriarchal capitalistic philosophies have invaded our organizations. A feminism that is alive and growing, needs to look critically at itself, examining our own internalized oppression which may cause us to show a lack of respect for co-workers in agencies and organizations.

The women described how we need more services for abused women, including healing houses, and healing circles; how women can create healing communities to support one another; and how spiritually-based practices need to be recognized within agencies. I liked Sharon's idea of diverting funds from medical models of practice into looking at the core problem of abuse. They also spoke of working within agencies to help women find ways to get in touch with their own spirituality.

## 6.6 Curriculum

The women believe that curricula of professional schools such as nursing, psychology, and social work could benefit from the inclusion of spirituality. A study of two hundred and eighty social work educators in twenty-five schools of social work in the United States, showed that 82.5 per cent of educators supported the inclusion of spirituality in social work programs (Sheridan et al, 1994). A debate on the issue raised the possibility that spirituality in social work practice might make our work more difficult as we grapple with religious questions. On the other side of the debate, the point was made that the more we know, the better-equipped we are to handle issues that arise in sessions (Amato Von-Hemert and Clark, 1994, 7-17). As Susan Thistlethwaite reminded us in the literature, women will bring their spiritual issues to us (1989:303-304), and we need to be able to deal with these issues as well as any conflicts we may face.

The women provided several suggestions of ways to incorporate spirituality into the curriculum, in courses as well as informal groups. They emphasized that it needs to be more than a single workshop. Courses need to explore the significance of specific spiritualities for women, and inform students about how spirituality can be a resource. Students need room to examine their own biases and beliefs, and one woman suggested that those who teach in these

programs need to look at their own spiritual beliefs.

N. said that fields have become so specialized that we no longer see the whole. Introducing spirituality into the curriculum can help to fill in the missing pieces of our learning. In doing so, I think that we need to take care to link any study of spirituality with the struggles of oppressed people for equality. We need to examine the role of spirituality in practice as well as the dangers and conflicts involved. And it needs to be part of a process of exploring and integrating our own spiritual beliefs. The women warn that any attempt to work from a spiritual perspective must come from the heart.

### *6.7 Conclusion*

Often we can begin to see the bigger picture by looking at the small picture. The more I looked at the lives and work of a small group of women, the more I saw the common thread which wove through their stories. When I began this study, my own experiences indicated to me that spiritual healing can be part of healing from abuse. I believe that the literature I researched and the women I interviewed, provide confirmation that spiritual healing can benefit women who have been abused.

At the same time, I am aware of the dangers when spiritual healing is not tied to social and political awareness of power issues in society. I understand the

implications of a lack of political or social consciousness in many new age practices, and the resulting damage that occurs. Results also indicate the value of connecting spirituality and social action, and addressing the kinds of internalized oppression which can sabotage organizations and social action groups.

I would suggest that social work discard the kinds of dualistic polarities which cause us to argue over whether we ought to 'change' the individual or 'change' society. I believe that we can all benefit from making the connections between healing individuals, communities, societies, and the earth itself. If our long term goal is to create a society where abuse is socially unacceptable, we need to work at all levels. Though this work was about helping abused women to heal, several women spoke of how spiritual healing is also necessary for the oppressors, and for children who witness abuse. Dorothy said that if we want real change we need to work to change attitudes of the next generation. Jean spoke of her desire to work with perpetrators to help them to heal their wounds so that they will stop abusing.

I recall Reepa's story about how Inuit women are healing, finding their voice, and becoming involved in their communities, and how the men are "following the steps of the women". Because my work is with abused women, this research is focused on ways to help women heal. But we all need to heal. Everything is connected!

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APPENDIX ONE            *INTERVIEW GUIDE*

- #1. What does the word 'spirituality' mean to you?
- #2. In your opinion, in the context of woman abuse, how does abuse harm the spirit?
- #3. In your experience, how does spiritual healing help women who have been abused?
- #4. Could you provide a short description of the women who come to you for help - with regards to age, culture, diversity and so on?
- #5. In what ways have you incorporated spirituality into the healing work that you do?
- #6. How has this way of working evolved for you?
- Probes:    through your personal experience?  
              your education or training?  
              found traditional methods to be inadequate  
              always worked this way? other?
- #7. In the therapeutic relationship, how is spirituality introduced into the process? Is it part of your approach? Is it based on the woman's sense of her own spirituality?
- #8. Do you ever find yourself in conflict with a woman's own spiritual beliefs? Please explain. How do you deal with this?
- #9. Could you describe one or two specific situations in your work involving spiritual healing? (taking into account protection of confidentiality of clients and sacred

traditions)

#10. How have you been able to combine feminism with spirituality in your work with women who have been abused?

Probes: for example, in the area of validating women's feelings and perceptions in the context of sexist society  
 making connections between self-esteem and patriarchy what about the idea of forgiveness?  
 empowerment - Please define your understanding of 'empowerment'  
 the development of critical consciousness  
 social action -Is there a place for spirituality in social action?

#11. How does your own spirituality affect your interpretations, judgments, and attitudes towards, the women you work with? How does it affect your relationship with them?

#12. How have you incorporated spirituality into your own healing journey? How has it helped you in your healing process?

#13. How does your own spirituality help you to continue to work in this field? Could you give me some specific situations or examples?

#14. Do you have any suggestions for feminist healers who wish to incorporate spirituality into their practice?

Probes: ideas around how to begin  
how important are skills, attitudes, her own  
spirituality?

#15. Do you see any limitations to a spiritually-based practice, that is, are there any situations where your spiritual practices did not adequately meet the needs of women? Are you aware of any spiritual practices which could be harmful (or were harmful)?

#16. How do you think spirituality should/could be incorporated into the curriculum of social work, psychology, nursing, and other professional training? Would you elaborate?

#17. Would you describe the setting in which you work, for example, is it a government or non-governmental agency, private practice, healing centre, other?

#18. Have you encountered any difficulties or constraints in working from a feminist, spiritually-based approach in this setting? Do you see any advantages? Please elaborate.

#19. Do you have any ideas, either for changes to existing services for abused women, or for creating new services, which incorporate healing with spiritual approaches?

APPENDIX TWO      *LETTER OF INTRODUCTION*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am currently enrolled in the Master of Social Work program at the Carleton University School of Social Work. As part of the requirement for graduation, I have chosen to complete a thesis.

I am focusing my research on the subject of incorporating a spiritual element into feminist approaches in healing work with women who have experienced abuse. I am interested in healing practices that include spirituality. I believe that this is an area which has been neglected by many feminist practitioners and theorists.

I understand that you incorporate spirituality into your work with women. I appreciate your taking the time to share your experiences and knowledge with me.

Participation in this study involves an interview that would last approximately one and a half to two hours. I will ask that you allow me to tape the interview in order to facilitate accuracy in my analysis. While I will be using your words and thoughts in my report, I will take precautions such as disguising your identity if you wish, and destroying or returning the interview tapes to you after the work is completed, to ensure confidentiality. As well, I would ask that you sign a letter of consent that outlines more fully the process of the interview.

The aim of this study is to explore what a healing spirituality looks like, how spiritual healing can help women who have been abused, and how spirituality can be incorporated into feminist healing work. Ideas from this research could be helpful to feminist healers who are unsure about how to include spiritual healing in their work, and to the women they work with who may need to heal their spirit from the wounds of race, class, or gender oppression. As well, schools of social work may benefit from suggestions around how to address spiritual healing in their curriculum.

I appreciate your consideration in taking part in this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time, or my advisor, Diana Ralph.

Yours truly,

Juanita Sauve

## APPENDIX THREE

## LETTER OF CONSENT

Carleton University

School of Social Work

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the study being conducted by Juanita Sauvé of the Carleton University School of Social Work. I am aware that this study will examine my healing work with women who have been abused, and, more specifically, the ways that I incorporate spiritual healing into my work.

My participation will involve an interview of one-and-a-half to two hours. The interview will take place at a mutually-acceptable time and location. I understand that the interview will be audio-taped and the interview tape will be destroyed or returned to me.

While there are no anticipated risks involved in this study, participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time. I may refuse to answer any questions without censure, and may ask to have the tape turned off or the interview terminated at any time.

I understand that quotations from the audio tape may be used in the written report of the research and that my name and any identifying details will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified by me.

I understand that the results of the study may be published, and will be deposited in the Carleton University Library.

I \_\_\_\_\_ (agree) (do not agree) to permit my name to be used in the written report of the project.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_